

Around the NBA

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Following an NBA Finals plagued by devastating injuries, the storylines around the league have done anything but slow down after the conclusion of the postseason. With the draft approaching this Thursday and free agency opening ten days later, we are about to enter the most exciting part of the year for the NBA. More so than the playoffs or even the Finals series, this two week span draws the eyes of fans from all 30 teams as hopes soar that their team will score big in the offseason. For the first time in the last five years, I feel that the result of the season is not predetermined and that as many as ten teams will have a realistic shot of claiming a title next season. Looking ahead, I will analyze the chaos on the horizon and try to make sense of the inevitable madness yet to come.

From the Toronto Raptors' first Championship in franchise history to the Anthony Davis trade to the Lakers, there is plenty to be discussed in the most highly anticipated summer in the history of basketball. On top of this, there are many questions looming about the impact of Kevin Durant and Klay Thompson's catastrophic injuries. After a day to collect my thoughts on what's happened thus far, I will evaluate how this affects the free agency dominoes that are not far behind.

Jurassic Champions



In a 6-game series that was somehow less interesting (for the most part) than watching LeBron's Cavs get worked in the Finals, the Toronto Raptors bested a very hobbled Warriors squad. Nonetheless, the team put together a very impressive playoff run led by Kawhi Leonard, who won Finals MVP and put together one of the best individual playoff performances of all time. Dominating an injury rattled Golden State team, he averaged a staggering 29 points, 10 rebounds, and 4 assists, and swept the Warriors in all 3 games in Oracle arena. Most significantly, he is the man not only responsible for denying the Big Three Miami Heat a 3-peat but can now say the same for the Splash Brother Warriors.

As for the rest of the team, their winning effort would not be possible without the clutch performances from Fred VanVleet and Pascal Siakam. Coming off the bench, VanVleet averaged 14 points per game and shot 40% from the 3-point line in the Finals Series. In addition, he gave Steph Curry all he could handle on the offensive side of the ball in game 6 by knocking down 5 three pointers in the closeout game at Oracle Arena. Stepping up equally as big in this series was the big man from Cameroon Pascal Siakam. Up to this point, there was no questioning his game and development as a player the last 3 seasons, but the Finals marked a quantum leap in his performance no one saw coming. On the biggest of stages, he put up huge numbers by averaging 20 points and 8 boards per game. His biggest games came in the bookends of the series, scoring 32 to open in game 1 and 26 to close out in game 6. Even if this marks the end of Kawhi Leonard in those hideous Raptors uniforms, the team has a bright future with their young core with invaluable experience from their historic run.

Another Star in Los Angeles



Sparking fireworks before free agency beings at the end of the month, the Lakers have silenced the criticism that has bombarded their management the last several months. As predicted, the team acquired another star to pair next to LeBron in Anthony Davis, immediately uplifting their sights for next season on a Championship. In fact, Vegas has the Lakers as betting favorites to win the Finals next season and rightfully so after this blockbuster deal. Though it cost them a hefty price to trade for a star rather than signing one in free agency, I believe this move was a no brainer for the Los Angeles Lakers, who easily won this deal.

The Pelicans may have appeared to strong arm the Lakers earlier this year after toying with a potential trade leading up to the NBA trade deadline, but their front office's shining moment is over. Proving how poorly run of a team they are to the world, their owner released a statement declaring that the team would refuse to do business with the Lakers, only to contradict that claim a month later. Lucrative as their haul may seem, the package of players and picks New Orleans received will not combine to amount for the success that Anthony Davis alone will endure going forward. Outlandish as this may sound, it is actually a very simple matter upon further review.

Brandon Ingram and Lonzo Ball are both young talents on their rookie deals but have struggled with injuries throughout the entirety of their young careers, and I don't expect that to all of a sudden change. On top of this, the presence of Lonzo brings the unbearable nonsense of Lavar Ball with him, which usually spells no good for anyone. I do really like the addition of Josh Hart in this deal and believe he will pan out to be the most productive piece they landed in

this trade. Sprinkling three future first round picks on top of the package of young players looks more attractive now than what will result from it, as the picks will likely be no better than 20th overall. As a general rule of thumb, non-lottery picks are a gamble (no pun intended) on a player that most likely won't be around the NBA long enough to sign a second contract.

Shifting towards the near future of the Lakers, they have successfully found the next big man to catalyze title runs as legends like Wilt, Kareem, Shaq, and Pau Gasol have in years past. LeBron plus AD alone will be enough to make a push to the conference championship at the very least, and the signing of another star in free agency will only help their efforts to restore greatness to an organization that has been a laughing stock the last 6 years. Names like Kyrie Irving, Kemba Walker, Jimmy Butler, and even Kawhi Leonard are circulating as candidates to round out a new version of a Big Three for LeBron to team up with. Regardless of which they land (if any) the instant impact of a versatile big in Anthony Davis will elevate the Lakers to a top seed in the West for many years to come.

Averaging 24 points and 11 rebounds throughout the course of his seven year career, Davis has dominated both sides of the ball and will only continue to improve in a purple and gold uniform. At only 26 years old and the intent to re-sign with the team when his contract expires next offseason, he will spend at least the next 6 years in his prime putting up a double-double and holding down the back end on defense for a long time in basketball years. As an added incentive, he will be able to mentor the bright young Kyle Kuzma who the Lakers were very fortunate to hold on to after shipping away the rest of the farm.

Looking ahead to the 2019 season, it comes as no surprise that this team is favored to win the Western Conference after the brutal injuries to KD and Klay Thompson, as well as the Rockets turmoil which I will talk more on later. Unless Kawhi Leonard signs somewhere in the West like the Clippers, you could even make the case that the Los Angeles Lakers will have a relatively easy road to winning the Conference Finals. With two of the top eight players in the league joining forces in the biggest market in the NBA, I have no doubts that free agents of all magnitudes will be lining up to make history despite the front office concerns.

Big names like Kyrie Irving and Kemba Walker will headline their Plan A targets in order to recreate a new version of a Big 3 around LeBron, but even if it's not logistically possible, the team will have somewhere between \$23-\$32 million to round out the rest of their roster. Surrounding LeBron with high level shooters will obviously be the topping the narrative of their priorities, however I believe they should not ignore the need for depth as well. One name in particular I would set my sights on as the Lakers would be Seth Curry, who proved to be a more than serviceable backup point guard who can shoot threes at a high percentage and play solid minutes. Another name the Lakers should heavily consider is DeAndre Jordan, who is a veteran with great rim protecting and rebounding abilities with the desire to win as he climbs in age. Earning \$130 million over 11 seasons and having never made a Conference Finals, I don't doubt that his priorities at this point are strictly on winning, which will likely cause him to take a team friendly deal. Last and certainly not least, a dark horse player the team should consider bringing in is the sharpshooting JJ Reddick, who is essentially a younger and more athletic version of Kyle Korver.

Troubles at the Launch Pad



2019 resulted in another disappointing playoff exit courtesy of the Golden State Warriors, but the Rockets now face bigger issues entering the offseason. The first issue that crossed their desk was the contract extension of Mike D'Antoni, whose future is in limbo after talks have stalled for a second time this month. As if this wasn't enough controversy for the team to deal with, it was reported last week that the relationship of Chris Paul and James Harden is tarnished to the point where it is now "unsalvageable". Though CP3 was quick to deny this claim on Instagram, I'm a firm believer that where there's smoke there's fire.

To me, it is very clear that this team's current roster construction has one more year remaining in their window of realistic championship pursuit. However, their chances of doing so have significantly decreased after the Anthony Davis trade instantly elevating the Lakers into a juggernaut in the West for at least the next 3 years. All this taken into consideration, I believe the next move the franchise should make has been decided for them, being that they must move on from Chris Paul. Between him and Harden, it should be a no brainer to keep last year's MVP and arguably the best scorer in the NBA and move on from a 34 year old guard on a bad contract. Although his contract is so hefty it is almost inevitable that Houston will receive negligible compensation for Paul, it is a necessary move for the team to create cap space to capitalize on the remaining years of James Harden's prime.

After moving on from Chris Paul, the next step this team should take is re-signing Mike D'Antoni in order to provide continuity for the veterans on the team who heavily buy into his coaching. Another big move GM Daryl Morey should focus on is the signing of Jimmy Butler, who has expressed interest to play for his hometown team. Should the team follow this plan, I believe the only hurdle in their way for winning it all in 2019 is the Los Angeles Lakers.

In Other News



Around the rest of the league, there has been no shortage of storylines ahead of the draft and free agency. Among this news was the trade of Mike Conley to the Utah Jazz, who will provide an improvement to their backcourt and the leadership abilities to foster the growth of young star Donovan Mitchell. The team had to part ways with a couple of young players and draft picks in order to pull this off, but the reality of their situation is that stars are not lining up to play in Salt Lake City, so a trade was the only way to immediately improve their team.

In other news, early timetables have been released on the major injuries of Kevin Durant, who is expected to miss all of next season, and Klay Thompson, who is expected to be out until after the All Star break next season. With that being said, I believe KD will opt into his player option with the Warriors for \$31 million, and rehab with the team he has grown close with the last 3 seasons. From there, I believe the team might utilize a sign and trade deal knowing Durant's aspirations to win on his own and send him off with a supermax that only they can provide him, while receiving considerable compensation in return.

Earlier this week, it was reported that Kyrie Irving is definitely out of Boston and it appears Al Horford is not far behind him as he pursues a long term deal elsewhere. This news combined with the unfortunate injuries taking a toll on Gordon Hayward definitely dampens the future that looked so bright for the Celtics leading up to last season. Also considering the reality that the team is unlikely to land any of the A-list free agents in the coveted 2019 class, the future of the franchise could be in limbo going forward. I believe the pressure will be loaded on Jayson Tatum next season, and he could face massive ramifications if he doesn't develop into the star they've been expecting him to transform into.