

The Winning Formula for LeBron's Lakers

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Sitting on a 5-game losing streak and 7.5 games behind the 8th seed Clippers, the season appears to be all but over for the Los Angeles Lakers. As if the standings weren't enough of an indicator of this, a recent string of events seemingly put the nail in the coffin on their postseason aspirations late last week. Small Forward Brandon Ingram was diagnosed with a serious medical condition known as deep vein thrombosis, shutting him down for the rest of the season. A few days later, it was reported Point Guard Lonzo Ball will be held out with an ankle injury for the remainder of the season. Lastly and most notably, it was reported that the Lakers would reduce the minutes of their star LeBron James down to 28-32 minutes per game, as well as allowing him the choice of whether to play on the front or back end of games on back-to-back nights.

Despite not being able to forecast the injuries in advance, the culmination of this series of events shows that GM Magic Johnson and Rob Pelinka are cutting their losses for this season and hoping to start building for next year. Rightfully so, the front office needs to shift gears and start focusing on the upcoming draft, as well as scoping out the free agency market in hopes to land more star power to surround LeBron. Although there are too many unknowns to realistically predict how the NBA Draft will shake out in late June, I will analyze how the Lakers should approach each of the big-name players on their radar in the 2019 offseason.

Anthony Davis



The 6'10" Big man out of Kentucky is unquestionably one of the best talents the NBA has ever seen when he can stay healthy. Landing him on the roster will provide an instant upgrade at the center position that has been anything but consistent during the last season. Many will immediately shake their heads at this possibility, citing that Davis isn't even a free agent until 2020, and that the demands of the Pelicans are too high to consider a trade to be feasible. Though this is certainly a valid argument, the team shouldn't necessarily pull out of their pursuit to land Anthony Davis entirely.

One recent development that has definitely hindered the Laker's trade capabilities is the health concern surrounding Brandon Ingram. Drawing comparisons to Chris Bosh with lingering concerns regarding blood clots in his shoulder, Ingram is said to be virtually untradeable due to the uncertainty regarding his timetable to return. This news significantly dulls the luster of the Laker's trade package that was declined in the weeks leading up to the trade deadline earlier in the season. However, with GM Dell Demps being fired after the AD trade fiasco turned into a 'dumpster fire', the Lakers might have a better chance doing business with his replacement.

After all, with Davis stating his intentions to move on to a short list of new teams once he becomes a free agent in 2020, the Pelicans might have to scramble to receive at least some compensation before, yet another star leaves the franchise. Although AD isn't the elite shooter the Los Angeles Lakers desperately need, he will provide an instant impact on both sides of the ball and pose as a second all star level threat alongside LeBron. His presence will elevate the team into a surefire playoff team in the crowded Western Conference, but will likely need the addition of one more star player to contend with the Golden State Warriors.

Kawhi Leonard



Before getting shipped north of the border by the Spurs in the summer of 2018, it almost looked like Kawhi was going to return to LA to play for one of his hometown teams. Instead, the Raptors had one of the most controversial offseasons around the league coming off their best season in franchise history, by firing coach Dwane Casey and trading away their best player DeMar DeRozan. Even after making these pivotal moves, the team finds itself comfortably sitting in the 2 seed slot in the Eastern Conference standings. The biggest concern for the team at this point is if their gamble on a superstar on the last year of his contract will stick around in Toronto or choose his next destination in another city.

Hitting the free agency market in 2019, Kawhi can virtually hand pick his next team given his efforts to distinguish himself as arguably the best two-way player in the NBA. During his one season in Toronto, Leonard has removed all doubt that he is back at full strength from his injury that held him out for the majority of the 2017-2018 season. In fact, some believe that Kawhi has hit his stride so much to the point that they don't believe he will sign with another team when he has the opportunity to test the market this summer.

Although Kawhi Leonard would be one of the best players and fits to team up with LeBron on the Lakers, it is highly unlikely that he will leave his current situation after the potential for future success in the weaker Eastern Conference. Furthermore, if Kawhi did surprise the NBA and come home to LA, it is more likely he would sign with the Clippers than play second fiddle for the Lakers. At the end of the day, the 2018 offseason was the best opportunity for the Lakers to land the Klaw, and don't find themselves very high on the list of places he would consider signing a new contract this offseason.

Jimmy Butler



Finding himself on his 3rd NBA roster in as many seasons, Jimmy Butler will be one of the most coveted free agents in 2019 should he choose not to sign an extension with the 76ers. So far in his time with the team, Butler has contributed heavily in catapulting Philadelphia into the 3rd seed in the East, 8 games behind the 1st place Milwaukee Bucks. Of course, he was only moved to the City of Brotherly Love due to the feuding with former teammates and former coach Tom Thibodeau of the Minnesota Timberwolves.

Averaging 19 points, 5 rebounds, and 4 assists per game this season, Butler has game changing abilities all across the stat sheet. Additionally, his length and perimeter defense are the best part of his game, and arguably top 10 in the entire NBA. Though he has struggled as of late from behind the arc only hitting two 3-pointers since the All-Star Break, Butler and the 76ers have won 8 of their last 13 games and will easily cruise into the playoffs as a top 5 seed in the East.

The signing of Jimmy Butler could light a spark in the young core of Lakers that were on the roster before the arrival of LeBron James. Still searching for a true team identity, the intensity of a veteran presence like Butler would unquestionably provide a boost to the team in years to come. Plus, his status as an unrestricted free agent in 2019 would allow the Lakers to hold on to their young assets and draft picks instead of landing a big-time star via trade. For Jimmy Butler, the opportunity could yield the chance to make a deep playoff run for the first time in his career with the support from a veteran superstar unlike any he's ever got to team up with. Flying under the radar going into the offseason and free agency, Jimmy Butler plus another star could quickly transform the Lakers into contenders at the flip of a switch.

Klay Thompson



Of the list of big-name free agents who seek to test the market this summer, the Lakers should most relentlessly pursue Klay Thompson. Although there are better all-around players like Durant or Kawhi who will look to sign new contracts, Thompson's skillsets would compliment LeBron's game more so than any other player in the league.

Klay Thompson takes his role as a sharpshooting specialist to the extreme, rarely taking more dribbles than shot attempts. His presence either on the wing or the corner would pair with LeBron James' ball dominant nature nicely, as he doesn't constantly need the ball in his hands to succeed. Instead, he can utilize the spacing created by LeBron's presence in the lane demanding multiple defenders and receive a high volume of open looks from three as a result. Klay's game has also proven to thrive in a secondary role as he's never been the best player on his own team yet thrived and scored at a higher level in a supporting role than many primary scorers around the NBA. In addition to his shooting abilities, he can also serve as a great perimeter defender, something the Lakers have lacked this season.

On a deeper level, the signing of Klay Thompson would end the reign of the Splash Brothers in Golden State, likely compounding on the suspected departure of Kevin Durant at the conclusion of this postseason. The best way for the team to get better would be the weakening and possibly the dismantling of the greatest modern dynasty in the NBA. Future paths towards contention and title runs would be far more feasible if the previous scenario came to fruition, as the West would be wider open than in years. If there was one move in particular that could change the course of the team the most, it would be the ability to sign an elite three-point shooter and defender, addressing the team's biggest needs.

Kevin Durant



Kevin Durant has distinguished himself as the most talented player to hit the market after back-to-back Finals MVPs in 2017 and 2018. After most likely bringing home a 3rd consecutive NBA Finals Championship and possibly another Finals MVP, many speculate that Durant will depart the Warriors and leave for another team via free agency. On the surface, this may seem shocking due to the optimal roster setup and rather unchallenging road to playoff success. After all, most any player in the league couldn't ask for a better situation combining a nice paycheck and championship rings year in and year out.

At 7 feet tall and one of the most elite scoring ranges in NBA history, there is no question Durant will be able to hand pick his next destination and land a max contract on any of the 30 teams in the league. Even at the age of 30, he will be regarded around the league as the most coveted player on the market and receive the most attention in an impressive free agency class. Going against the grain, I have a very strong feeling that 2019 will be Kevin Durant's last season teamed up with the Splash Brothers on the Warriors. Instead, he will explore a new destination on a lesser developed team and maybe even join up with another star wherever he chooses to go.

Shocking as this may sound, this is the next chapter of the legacy that KD seeks to build as a player. Early in his career on the Thunder he proved his unparalleled scoring capabilities, and with the Warriors he got his Championship rings. Next, we will try to build up his own string of playoff success with a team with less of an identity of the already established Warriors. Signing with the Lakers could enhance his window to win titles, however it would permanently lock Durant into the 2 spot of best players in his generation. For this reason, teaming up with a different star like Kyrie on the Knicks seems to be the more popular predicted destination.

Kemba Walker



Somehow managing to fly under the radar on the crowded list of free agents in 2019, Kemba Walker should be one of the most heavily pursued targets by the Lakers this summer. Coming off of a career high 25.1 points per game this season, or an impressive 38% 3-point shooting mark over his last 4 seasons, Kemba has entered his prime at age 28. With an unrestricted free agent status as well, he can easily move on from a Hornets team that has failed to win a playoff series during his 7-year career.

Kemba's emergence as a budding superstar opens the window of perfect timing to cash in on a max contract in free agency. His transformation and growth this last season alone has elevated his stock to many contenders looking to climb over the hump moving forward. The Los Angeles Lakers not only have the cap space to offer such a deal but would also embrace the opportunity to provide substantial help to their primary investment LeBron James. Adding an all-star guard who can thrive as a ball handler and shooter fills two of the holes on the disoriented Lakers roster.

For Kemba Walker, signing with the Lakers can provide the opportunity to turn the page to a new chapter of his career. First and foremost, he will be able to gain real playoff experience and endure multiple series wins in a tough Western Conference. Next, he will be able to display his game on the biggest of stages in LA, transcending his reputation into a first-tier star in the league simply by the situation he's in. Lastly, the move will serve a mutual benefit to LeBron and the Lakers organization, and to Kemba Walker. Learning and receiving mentorship from the game's greatest player (arguably ever) could elevate Kemba to levels he couldn't reach on other teams.