

# Pelicans Hit the Jackpot?

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After a season the organization would like to forget, all eyes are on the New Orleans Pelicans as they steal the headlines from the NBA Draft Lottery. With only a 6% chance of obtaining the first pick, the team finally caught a break by hitting the lottery (literally) after a laughable 2018 campaign. What this really means is that the team secured the rights to Duke superstar Zion Williamson, who has been widely referenced as the best prospect of the last decade. Though many thought last night's lottery would reveal what team could start stitching Williamson jerseys, I believe that his NBA destination remains unknown contrary to popular belief.

In the age of player empowerment, I believe the draft has lost the power it once provided to poorly run franchises. As seen in the past with stars such as Kawhi Leonard and Kobe Bryant, I think it is clear that Zion will express his lack of desire to play for the team that drafts him. That is of course the Pelicans trade away their selection before next month, however I don't believe they will do so until draft night. After the draft order was revealed last night, it was obvious in an ESPN interview that Zion Williamson wants no part of the disastrous Pelicans organization. For the first time in his brief exposures with the media, Zion appeared to lose his jubilant aura and was overcome by the fear that he might end up with a deadbeat organization.

No offense to the city of New Orleans, but I don't know why any great player would want to be part of a part of the organization as it is currently constructed. Shockingly enough, the team actually has an above average roster from top to bottom, however the problems with this team are not confined in the locker room. Instead, the poor management of this organization has dulled the reputation of the team to a laughing stock. This has been put on display firsthand in recent years with the departure of Chris Paul and the trade demands this past season of Anthony Davis. Rightfully so, if I was a young star in their position I would realize the restrained ability to shine in a city that steers most of its focus to the gridiron for the Saints and LSU Tigers.

Swallowing this reality might seem like a slap in the face to the New Orleans Pelicans, yet there are many ways they can chalk up a victory in spite of his desire to play elsewhere. Even though the freak of nature Williamson might not want to suit up in a Pelicans uniform, the simple fact that they landed the first pick means the team holds one of the most valuable assets in the entire NBA. In fact, I can guarantee that a slew of teams will line up to compete in a bidding war, offering lucrative trade packages for the most hyped phenom in modern NBA history. The haul they receive for the first overall pick combined with the elusive trade package Anthony Davis would provide could establish a solid foundation and new direction for a team that has failed to find one for so long. Although it might not be with the star power they were expecting, the team still has lots to gain by winning the Zion Williamson sweepstakes even if he never plays a game for their team.

Encapsulated in the disaster that was the Anthony Davis trade fiasco that took place shortly before the trade deadline last season, the Pelicans (along with the Lakers) put on full display how poorly run each of their respective front offices are run. After demanding a ridiculous price of Lonzo Ball, Kyle Kuzma, Brandon Ingram, Rajon Rondo, Lance Stephenson, and two future first round draft picks, former GM Dell Demps whiffed in securing a prized return on an injury prone Anthony Davis by toying with the Lakers and asking for even more from them. The fact that an irrational spite towards the domination of the Lakers brand prevented the Pelicans from landing an unprecedentedly huge trade package goes to show why the team often draws the perception of a bottom feeder franchise by players. Such a despicable act would never take place in the front office of a respectable organization like the San Antonio Spurs or Miami Heat who have with the departure of stars.

In a Utopian scenario for New Orleans, the script would flip where AD magically revokes his trade demands, thus inclining Zion to see the Pelicans in a brighter light than before. Despite the unlikelihood of the situation, the team's new GM David Griffin has stated the team is devoted in convincing Anthony Davis to stay with the team that drafted him first overall in 2012. Given the past efforts of Davis' agent Rich Paul to land his client in a major market, I just can't see a way where the Pelicans can provide an enticing enough offer to convince him to stay in such a dysfunctional system. Following the example of Davis, I believe Zion Williamson has generated a permanently shattered stigma towards the thought of growing in his career with the New Orleans Pelicans. For this reason, I believe he should set his intentions straight with the Pelicans brass in order for the team to start fielding calls in hopes of finding a trade that with mutually benefit both parties.

## Potential Trade Partners



Despite the fact that Zion's stepdad stated in an interview that he would be willing to play in New Orleans should he get drafted there, I will not back down in my belief that he aspires to play for a larger market franchise. Though miraculous talks have stirred in recent days of a blockbuster trade to bring in young stars in to NOLA to play alongside Zion, I have no faith in the Pelicans management to pull this off due to their spotty track record. For this reason, the team would be better off making phone calls with the following teams in order to make the most of their unfortunate standing.

**Philadelphia 76ers-** After years of dedication to tanking known as 'The Process', Philadelphia finds itself with a laundry list of assets, yet still can't break through as a force to be reckoned with in the Eastern Conference. They do however have some very fascinating trade pieces that should interest the Pelicans for the long term future of their franchise. The centerpiece of the package the 76ers could offer would be former number one overall pick Ben Simmons, who is a jump shot away from being one of the most dynamic all around players in the league. Simmons actually played his lone college season down the road from New Orleans at LSU and would pair nicely in the backcourt with a volume scorer in Jrue Holiday. Also included in this trade package would be a rising star in Tobias Harris, who the team could sign and trade on a long term deal he will be seeking this offseason. On top of this, the Pelicans would demand a 1<sup>st</sup> round pick or two for good measure in order to address the immediate future of their roster as well as keeping the future in mind.



**Los Angeles Clippers-** Even after letting their version of a Big 3 dismantle a in 2017, the Clippers have stunned the league and proven they will not participate in the fad of tanking. Instead, the team has made a handful of clever trades and signings over the last two seasons to build a deep roster of grinders that even clinched a playoff berth this season. Loaded with young talent now with playoff experience, the team holds many valuable trade pieces led by Montrezl Harrell and Shai Gilgeous-Alexander both on rookie level deals. In addition, the team would likely have to throw in guard Landry Shamet as well as two or three future first round picks in order to have a fighting chance against the offers of other teams. Such a move would be very uncharacteristic for the frugal Steve Ballmer but could also be a rub in the face to their struggling arena mates who appear to uncover more chaos on a weekly basis. Having the two most polarizing stars in the game in the same city on opposing teams could be a very interesting storyline for the future, and the Clippers should not be counted out in the list of trade suitors.

**Boston Celtics-** Centering around a young stud in Jayson Tatum, the Celtics have the ability to go head to head with any team's trade offers with the load of assets Danny Ainge has acquired over the years. Chief among these are a handful of other team's first round picks, including Memphis' 2020 pick that is likely to end up as a lottery pick if the franchise remains along their current direction. The combination of Tatum, Jaylen Brown, and a pair of future first rounders would be a very interesting consideration for the Pelicans, though many speculate Boston has their eyes fixed on Anthony Davis rather than Zion. Nonetheless, the Celtics are very much in the mix to place a substantial bid in the Zion sweepstakes if they seek to bring in the biggest phenomenon to the franchise since Kevin Garnett.

**Los Angeles Lakers-** Spite and immaturity held back an AD blockbuster trade from occurring before the trade deadline on the part of the Pelicans front office, however they would be foolish not to revisit the team as a future trade partner. Unlike most other teams, the Lakers have proven they will trade away the house in order to land a superstar power to pair with LeBron James. A package of Lonzo Ball, Kyle Kuzma, Brandon Ingram, and three future first round draft picks is quite a hefty haul for the likes of one player who has never played a minute in the NBA. With all three of the aforementioned players still on their rookie deals, the Pelicans would be receiving not only the gargantuan upside of the package but would also benefit from the value of the contracts through 2021.

**New York Knicks-** Once again, it is being reported that this poorly run team is more interested in Anthony Davis than anything else, yet the Knicks should not be counted out of this conversation. After all, what would be a better way to uplift the morale of a disastrous Knicks organization and generate a positive buzz around the future than to bring in the most coveted prospect since LeBron James in 2003. As for their trade offer, the team's package would center on the 3<sup>rd</sup> overall pick, plus rising talent Kevin Knox and Mitchell Robinson. On top of this, the Pelicans would likely demand either their 2020 1<sup>st</sup> round pick or the Mavericks 2021 pick that was acquired in the Kristaps Porzingis trade last season. Maybe Zion settles on playing through his first contract in the Crescent City, but I just don't buy it despite his grateful nature. Something about Zion in a Pels jersey just doesn't seem right, and the team doesn't necessarily have to lose even if he desires to play elsewhere.