

Houston, We Have a Problem

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Following a devastating defeat in Game 6 of the Western Conference Semi-Finals against Golden State, the Rockets find themselves ‘Gone fishin’ as the TNT broadcast crew likes to put it. Making matters worse, this might have been the best opportunity for the Rockets to prevail over the Warriors dynasty given the injury to Kevin Durant and the toll of aging on many key players for the Rockets. As the Golden State Warriors send this team home early for the 4th time in the last 5 years, the question on the mind of everyone in this organization is ‘What’s next?’

Contrary to popular belief, this team is not in as bad of a position as the media portrays them regarding their future. The crazy offensive system of coach Mike D’Antoni combined with the group of core players on their roster over the last few years have been the closest thing to an answer for the dominant Warriors. They’ve been the only team to push Golden State to 7 games since the addition of Kevin Durant in 2016 and managed to only lose by single digits without their 2nd best player in Chris Paul as well as missing a staggering 27 3-point attempts in a row. Though I’m certain most players and fans will enter the summer hanging their heads low, I see bounds of hope for this Rockets team to improve in many ways and even bring a title home for this first time since the Olajuwon days. Doing so however will take an aggressive offseason of activity of Daryl Morey, which he has proven he is capable of in the past. If handled correctly, he should be heavily injected into many trade conversations, opening up opportunities to throw their names in the mix to sign one of the many coveted free agents of this year’s class.

Win Now Mode



It's been very clear what the intentions of the Houston Rockets organization have been since the trade for James Harden in 2012. Slowly but surely (and not without many mistakes along the way), GM Daryl Morey and the front office has constructed a roster capable of contending on a yearly basis. However, this veteran heavy roster has not been composed without the sacrifice of many future draft picks along the way. In fact, the team has traded away both of its picks for the 2019 NBA Draft, meaning they will not be participating at all barring an unexpected trade. Because of this, the team has put all of its chips in on winning in the immediate future and it's too late to fold their hand. Whether the fans agree with it or not, the Rockets must expend all of their resources and options in order to capitalize on the few years left James Harden has in his prime. This will be increasingly challenging considering the virtually non-existent cap space the team is currently facing going into free agency. This status will plague the Rockets from improving their roster over the summer unless they can get rid of a pair of players that aren't living up to their contracts. Unlike the NFL, NBA teams are not allowed to restructure a player's deal until the 3rd anniversary of the contract, and can only do so if they are under the salary cap. With neither of these exceptions applying in the contracts I will later discuss; the Rockets are put in a tight spot as their only option to gain any value out of these players would be to find a trade partner. As luck would have it, Houston is no stranger in the trade market as they have their aforementioned aggressive GM constantly looking for ways to improve. Doing so will not be a small task, as the team is clearly more than a 3-and-D guy away from reaching the levels of success they are striving for. Instead, the team will have to explore trading away at least one or possibly two of their three best players.

Rocket Science



All things considered, the Rockets have one more year of contender status given their current roster composition. This should be alarming for the team considering the fact that they owe Chris Paul upwards of \$120 million over the next three years, and his body of work this last season displayed the troubling reality that he is well removed from his prime. The all too frightening reality of the situation is that the long term signing of a second star has actually come back to bite the Rockets by tying their hands financially throughout the rest of James Harden's prime. Another startling cell on the payroll of the Houston Rockets is the contract of Clint Capela, which seemed like a steal at the time of his signing. Capela is set to earn \$72 million over the next four years, quite a hefty sum for a player who quite frankly was a liability on both sides of the ball in this year's playoffs.

Going forward, the Rockets have a very strenuous decision regarding the direction of the franchise. The first option the team has is to continue with the core of Harden-Paul-Capela and try to surround them with the best 3-and-D free agents that their limited remaining payroll can afford. Doing so will give the team one more realistic shot at taking down the Splash Brother Warriors should Paul be able to stay healthy. I say this due to the fact that the team showed just how close they were to knocking off the defending champs despite their inconsistent play and lack of ball movement in the final stretch of their season. Given the fact that the Rockets were the oldest team in the league last year (average age being nearly 29 years old), I feel that they will have one more valiant swing to throw at the juggernaut of the Warriors. The odds will still be heavily stacked against Houston as in the past, but I believe this to be the best and most realistic option for the team's immediate future.

If anything has been learned in the modern era of the NBA, it's that you need three stars to make a championship run. Putting all of the team's chips in on next year would mean Finals or bust, and the aftermath of failure would likely strain the team for the next few years. The monstrous contract of Chris Paul would essentially restrain any future playoff runs for Clutch City due to the inability for the team to sign another star to compliment the likes of James Harden leading the charge. Leaning on a 35 year old CP3 and an inconsistent Clint Capela as support to Harden will unquestionably lead to second round playoff exits unless the remainder of the roster can get hot from the 3-point line throughout the duration of the playoffs. Relying on such an unlikely formula can't help but stray my mind to potential trades that could help the team's chances going forward.

As I alluded to earlier, no small trade or low profile free agent signing will carry the Rockets over the hump. A new coach's system and philosophy will not elevate this Rockets team to new heights or squeeze greater levels of play out of the guys in this locker room. In order to truly maximize their window of opportunity known as James Harden's prime, they must explore moving on from two of the most integral pieces of their past successes. Unfortunately, the injury history and age of CP3 deters most if not any trade partners from consideration of taking on his max contract. Even if the front office miraculously finds a trade partner to relieve them of his contract, they will receive a minimal package in return due to the burden of Paul's contract. Thus, the only scenario where a Chris Paul trade would be logical would be if the team felt it was a lock to sign one of the coveted free agents that will hit the market this season. To be clear, the players I believe fit this distinguishment are Kevin Durant, Kawhi Leonard, Klay Thompson, and Jimmy Butler. Other high caliber names such as Kyrie Irving and Kemba Walker will not pair well with James Harden and will hinder the offensive system the team has heavily subscribed to. All other presumed free agents do not make great enough of an individual impact to elevate this team to the heights necessary to contend for a title.

The more likely of the two trades I proposed earlier is the dealing of Clint Capela in return for a more versatile big with a greater shooting range. At only 24 years old, he provides a large amount of upside and quality years as a starter for plenty of teams in the league, I just don't think his old fashioned game fits well in the Rocket's system. That said, his contract holds much more value to suitors than that of Chris Paul's, so the team could likely land a talented player or assets they could utilize in a separate trade. Even if the team settles for draft stock in a Capela trade, at the very least they would give themselves a little bit of cash to play around with in free agency. This may seem like a small return for a guy many believe is the 3rd best player on the team, and his ability to catch lobs at the hoop and double digit rebounds per game would definitely be missed. Capela just doesn't seem to fit with the type of offensive system the Rockets have bought into, and I believe the team would receive many lucrative trade offers for his services. At the end of the day, the roster as currently constructed has one more year as a window of opportunity to finally break through. If they cannot make the jump in 2020 to the Finals they have been chasing since the Olajuwon days, they will be crutched through the rest of Chris Paul's contract. Even worse, that will likely fall around the same time as James Harden's prime is concluding, meaning the team will be wasting one of the NBA's highest payrolls. If one thing is for certain, it's that they need to shake things up in a big way between now and next year to position themselves favorably for the near future.

Puzzle Pieces



Should the Rockets opt towards the second course of action (and more entertaining one), I will lay out what kind of impact could be expected of each of the premier options set to hit the open market in 2019. This is unlikely due to the nature of the Chris Paul situation, though I'm sure a smaller market team would be willing to take a gamble on his veteran leadership qualities and try to capitalize on his household name to get butts in seats. It would also involve the Rockets holding an extreme amount of confidence in the fact that one of the free agent stars was a lock to sign with Houston when the new league year starts in July.

Assuming these conditions are met, I believe the best case scenario free agent signing for the Houston Rockets would be Klay Thompson for obvious reasons. Although he is not the first or even second best player that will hit the market, his game would be an ideal fit for Mike D'Antoni's radical offensive system that can turn into isoball at times. Thompson's rare ability to thrive without the ball in his hands as a sniper from behind the 3-point line would perfectly compliment James Harden's game like Filet Mignon with Cabernet Sauvignon. On top of this, Klay Thompson is sneakily one of the best defensive guards in the league, using his length at 6'7" to lock down the best player in the opposing backcourt on a nightly basis. Most importantly, the signing of Klay Thompson to the Rockets would mean their biggest competitor would be unquestionably weaker than in years past. Of course, this best case scenario would involve lots of moving parts, including the decision of KD to stay with the Warriors on a long term deal.

Next on the list of best possible free agent signings (in order) would be Kawhi Leonard, Kevin Durant, and Jimmy Butler. Again, this is a hypothetical best case scenario of the short list of guys I believe can improve this team to a championship caliber status. Despite the fact that KD is a better player than the Klaw, I believe that Durant would need the ball in his hands more than Leonard, thus making him not as good of a fit in the system. Given how unlikely the situation is that the series of events unfolded where either of these signings would take place, I will shift to the next feasible option on the table. I will admit this is sort of a fringe suggestion in that he is far less of a guaranteed game changer than the aforementioned players, however I believe Jimmy Butler could offer a lot of upside to this Rockets team. His intensity and passion for winning added with his ability to take over the end of games is exactly what the Rockets are looking to improve their roster. Plus, the fact that he is only 29 years old and is conveniently from Houston both bode well for the Rockets, as he could produce at a high level throughout the duration of any contract they offered him. As a worst case scenario, I think it is fair to say it is a safe bet that his performance over the next three years will outshine the efforts of an aging Chris Paul whose been tested with several injuries over the last two years.

Looking beyond the headliners and stars, there is still room for improvement at the role player level that would definitely bolster the depth of this squad. After cashing out in an underwhelming year in Phoenix, former Rocket Trevor Ariza is on the market again as he remains one of the best 3-and-D specialists in the league. Even at age 34, his ability to come off the bench as a solid perimeter defender and capable scorer at a discounted rate will mesh him back into this roster like he never left.

As for value guard depth behind Harden and Paul, the team should heavily consider bringing back Austin Rivers after his spectacular performance in this year's playoffs. After acquiring him midseason from waivers, he was surprisingly effective from the minute he joined the team in December and was a more than serviceable player who provided a jolt off the bench. If they are unable to bring Rivers back, the team should explore the signing of Seth Curry whose game will compliment their system perfectly. He is a 44% career 3-point shooter and can play solid minutes off the bench when the team needs to give Harden a breather.

Should the team decide to move on from Clint Capela in hopes of new direction at the position, the Rockets should consider the signing of Julius Randle, who happens to be from the Lone Star State and made huge strides in his game last year. In his 2018 breakout campaign with the Pelicans, Randle averaged a whopping 21.4 points and 8.7 rebounds per game. Due to his lack of national exposure in the abyss of the New Orleans market, his name hasn't circulated in headlines throughout the course of the season. The reality of the situation is that the former 7th overall pick is finally taking form, and no one is hearing about it due to the irrelevance of the Pelicans outside of the AD trade fiasco.

All of these moves are by no means easy decisions to make and some require moving pieces to fall into place in order for them to be possible in the first place. However, if the team wants to be relevant beyond next year, they should heavily consider at least a few of the options I have put together regarding their upcoming roster moves. After all, the current roster isn't getting any younger and it would be a shame not to capitalize on the talent of Harden before it's too late.