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The Orlando Magic and their Cloudy Future

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When we last left the Orlando Magic they had just completed a highly successful season of "Heart and Hustle" basketball under the leadership of novice head coach Glenn "Doc" Rivers. Magic GM John Gabriel cleaned house after Penny Hardaway took his whine and left for the desert and no one expected much from the Prestidigitators. Just barely missing the playoffs the Magic had been a highly entertaining team during the millennial season.

Magic management set up for the coming summer of free agency by clearing more cap room than the headless horseman. With three first round draft choices to go with the potential free agents the future looked quite rosy.

Magic fans dreamed of the ultimate lineup featuring Tim Duncan and Grant Hill, and it almost happened. Apparently only the eleventh hour lobbying efforts of David Robinson kept Duncan at the Alamo and away from the Mouse House. So the Magic moved on to Plan B and signed Tracy McGrady to pair with Grant Hill. Not too bad certainly, but still no free ticket to the NBA finals.

As for the draft the Magic chose not to make much use of that option and picked up Mike Miller of the Florida Gators, a strange choice for a team that needed a strong man in the middle. Miller is young, and in the long run he may turn out to be a major addition to the team.

In the last few days the Magic have resigned John Amaechi and Bo Outlaw. Amaechi is a good center capable of making the slower less athletic centers in the league look very bad, but he is no match for the good big men of the NBA. Bo Outlaw is Bo Outlaw. He brings energy, hustle, enthusiasm and some but not enough muscle. He is also a consistent fifty percent free thrower.

To add frontline muscle the Magic traded Matt Harpring, who spent most of last year on the injury list, to Cleveland for Andrew DeClercq a mediocre player who can rebound, play some defense, and apply some muscle. Harpring is as hard-nosed a player as you will ever see and that will be a minor loss. DeClercq, we are told, will bring a lot of what is needed in the front line. If he does it will be a significant addition.

The biggest loss is in the form of Ben Wallace, the tenacious strongman on defense and the boards who played much of year in pain. Less of a loss in Chucky Adkins who will be adequately

replaced by Dee Brown in the backcourt. Pat Garrity will still be coming off the bench for the three-point shooting.

Still a team leader Darryl Armstrong is the personification of heart and hustle. Michael Doleac has not yet shown his potential but is an adequate backup in the middle, and the resigned Monty Williams is a very good role player.

This is a good mix and a good team. It is not a great team. It is not an automatic contender in the Eastern Division. It may be a better team than last year and it certainly has better overall personnel.

The doubts still are many and the final judgement on GM John Gabriel's rebuilding efforts will have to wait for at least another season or two. The major questions are in three areas.

As Coach of the Year Doc Rivers had a group of marginal players fighting for their NBA careers. Whether a group of players, some of whom have long term contracts and are multi-millionaires, will play with anywhere near the intensity as last year's group remains to be seen. And if they do not, how will Rivers handle that? Rivers will have a much greater coaching challenge this time around.

On a related issue, are the questions about McGrady. He is young and he should keep developing, but no one can be sure how he will respond to his new financial status. If he becomes the dominant player it appears he can be, the Magic will be in business. If he turns out to be a spoiled 20 year-old with a bulging ego to match his bank account, well then there will be trouble in the City Beautiful.

Finally there are questions about the opposition. The Miami Heat did not stand still in the off-season and have gone a long way to improving themselves. In fact the Heat may have accomplished more without cap room or free agency than the Magic were able to do with both. The Indiana Pacers are still the Pacers although Birdless, and the Knicks are still a team of some talent, while Milwaukee and Philadelphia remain question marks. How the Magic stacks up to these teams in the East remains to be seen.

In short our local heroes appear to have helped themselves but so have others. They clearly have not helped themselves as much as they hoped to, and they have lost more players than they would have liked.

The major challenge will be Rivers' ability to bring all of this together in a way even close to what was achieved last year. NBA teams hated to play the Magic last season because they knew they had to be ready to play and play hard for all forty-eight minutes. This is not a trademark of the culture of the NBA but it must continue to be for the Magic to dominate in the East.

If the Coach can get his team to play with that intensity again, and if the egos can be contained in the new financial world of Magic basketball, this will be a playoff contending team, and it will be a team that will be as much fun to watch as last year's edition.

As for talk of a new arena that should wait until the O-rena is once again a scalpers paradise. If it does, John Gabriel will deserve the tag of "genius."

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't need to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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