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## Orlando Magic

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With the NFL having concluded its annual business in Hawaii, the pitchers and catchers about to report to spring training, and the Winter Olympics ready to open in Lillehammer, I want to pause this week and take a look at the Orlando Magic.

For the Magic it has been a year of great change. Brian Hill has replaced Matty Goukas and the style of play is certainly different. Substitution patterns are considerably less random, and Brian Hill appears to be conscious at courtside. The big difference on the floor is the arrival of Anfernee Hardaway who brings artistry and style, along with tremendous athletic skills. Clearly Penny has great potential, and could become the straw that stirs the Magic offense as it moves to championship levels.

But his arrival has presented a number of new challenges and the continuation of an old problem. Hardaway is a point guard and that leaves Scott Skiles on the bench, and Scott does not play at the highest level unless he is getting his forty-plus minutes. If Skiles is getting his forty-plus minutes, then Penny is at shooting guard, and Nick Anderson is forced out of position to small forward, and Scott sits on the bench. Hill is still trying to work this out.

In addition the persistent problem at power forward remains. All last season Magic officials bemoaned this deficiency, dreamed about getting a lottery pick, and adding Chris Webber to the Magic front line. Then they got the number one pick, got Webber, and traded him. This is still a puzzling move and one that may never be vindicated regardless of how great Penney becomes. What was most astounding was to hear Magic coaches and officials once again crying about the power forward problem when this season was only a few weeks old. So this remains a key shortcoming for the Magic, along with a thin bench.

It was clear last spring that the Goukas departure and the Hardaway deal signaled the ascendancy of John Gabriel in management circles. Now that has been confirmed by organizational changes which clearly make Gabriel the point man in the front office. Pat Williams no longer has meaningful power and remains in charge of the dog and pony show. He has some value left there, especially as the Magic move toward the demand for a new arena, or arena expansion. As mastermind of the

Hardaway deal Gabriel now needs to find a solution to the power forward problem.

On the court the Magic are playing well, and mathmatically on course to win fifty games and make the playoffs. The fans have clearly been excited by the new style of play engendered by the arrival of Hardaway, who is no longer greeted with boos. But it is a long season and in fact four separate seasons, and Magic fans still seem to not understand the rigors and consequences of this fact of NBA life.

Here we are in early February and the NBA is just arriving at the All-Star break. In number of games the schedule has just passed the mid-point. Think about that. Over three months of Magic regular season games have rolled by, and it is just past mid-season.

The Magic had a good first half, and the expectations are that things will get better. But already there are warning signs. The Magic have just gone through a short slump in which they have played lacklustre basketball. A week ago they were booed on the home court when they lost to Milwaukee. Hey, lighten up Magic fans. Every team in the NBA goes through these slumps sometime in late December, January, or early February. They are part of the landscape. Worry instead about the long term.

There are four NBA seasons, and the second one is just coming to an end. In the first season in November and December teams are tuning up. Then in January and February they lift their game ever so slightly and settle into their patterns. Then comes the third season which begins some time in March. In this phase the level of play takes a significant jump, as making the playoffs becomes the key motivational force. Finally comes the fourth season, when the level of play is elevated one more time for the playoffs when every game is critical.

Last year when the Magic had to take their game to level three they fell short. It will be interesting to see if they can this year, and then to see what happens if they find themselves in the fourth season. It is a very difficult process, and no one should think that success at level one or two, means anything at level three and four.

The Magic are an improving team but not a great one. It is still an expansion team with many holes to fill. Relax, watch the growth and development, and lighten up. It could be fun.

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

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