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Heart and Hustle Are Real with the Magic

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You know all the cliches.

Never watch the first half of an NBA game.

Nothing happens in an NBA game until the last two minutes.

Don't bother with the NBA until the playoffs, there are just too many teams and too many games and the players are just going through the motions.

If you saw the Orlando Magic play this season you would need to reevaluate all of these notions. Day after day and night after night Magic players gave everything they had. What began as a Magic PR slogan, "Heart and Hustle," was in fact a reality. Word spread rapidly across the NBA. You don't want to play Orlando because they play all out for forty-eight minutes.

Indeed those of us who were lucky enough to see the Magic on a daily basis, either on TV or in person, were amazed by the amount of effort expended by these players in each game. With only one or two players who would be starters on other teams, and with no one who would carry the tag of "star," the Magic finished the season with forty-one wins and an equal number of losses.

Before the season began there was no one who predicted more than a thirty win season for the Magic. This was a team that had lost all of its stars including Shaquille O'Neal and Penny Haradway, as well as nearly all its starting line-up from the previous season. It was a team composed of castoffs, CBA players, and European League players. Both the first British and first French player to start in an NBA game were starters for the Magic this season.

If you look for the secret to the Magic success you can look at effort and a willingness to play team basketball. You must also look at Glenn "Doc" Rivers, the first year coach of the team. Before the season began there were a number of raised eyebrows over the decision to bring in a coach with no NBA or College coaching experience to handle a team that had just been dismantled. Certainly this was a high-risk move by the Magic. In the end it looked brilliant.

"Doc" Rivers occasionally looked shaky in the first month or two on the job as he was obviously learning game tactics from a night by night curriculum. What was not shaky was his leadership. His players gave everything every night and he was maximizing his bench in way foreign to NBA coaches. Ten to twelve players were getting minutes each night. No one seemed to be guaranteed playing time and no one seemed to be bothered by that reality. If there were egos to be soothed, it wasn't apparent.

When Ron Mercer came to Orlando in a mid-season trade he was folded into the team quickly. After he was here a few weeks he made some interesting comments, among them being that he had never worked this hard on an NBA team. He was amazed by the energy levels and effort put out by his teammates. He was initially having trouble keeping up. It was a telling moment for both the NBA and the "Doc" Rivers led Magic.

In the age of the overpaid professional athlete who is bemoaned in newspaper columns and on radio talk shows, one would expect that the fans would come out in droves to watch the kind of team they all had said they wanted. In the previous couple of years discontented fans at the O-rena had grumbled about the lack of hustle and the lack of effort. Penny Hardaway had become a major target of such criticism.

Now all of that was gone. Hustle, effort, blue-collar players, underpaid over-achievers could be seen every night wearing a Magic uniform. Unfortunately the fans did not come out in droves. Attendance declined sharply with a full house being as rare as an Orlando snowfall.

Perhaps all this talk about overpaid stars had only been talk. Perhaps fans don't care about hustle and effort, and only want stars and winners. Perhaps the hypocrisy of fans is a match for that of their political leaders and self-appointed moral leaders after all. Perhaps we have a secret admiration for wealth and greed. Perhaps winning is the only thing. Perhaps we all just want to be millionaires.

After the Magic go out into the free agent market and sign some big money players in the off-season we will see what happens with the fans. If winning follows and the fans again fill the O-rena, it will be clear what they really

want. Once again they can denounce the overpaid superstars they come out to see but their call for hustle and hard work will be hollow.

On the other hand maybe the high point of the NBA in Orlando has simply past. Maybe the decline in interest will continue not only in Orlando but nationwide. Maybe all those empty seats around the league have a deeper meaning. If so David Stern better get his marketing genius in gear.

Meanwhile John Gabriel, Magic GM, can test his genius to see if putting together a contender is as easy as putting together a group of hustling hardworking over achievers.

Whatever happens, we know two things. It was a great year especially if you love good basketball. In addition "heart and hustle" are not enough to put Magic fans in the seats.

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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