Pete Rose and Jim Gray Damage the All Century Team

10-31-1999

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Pete Rose and Jim Gray Damage the All Century Team" (1999). On Sport and Society. 541.
http://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/541

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The release of "The Blair Witch Project" on video has once again brought the attention of the Orlando community and film fans everywhere to the blockbuster surprise of the summer. It has also focused local attention on the University of Central Florida film program where the filmmakers began their work.

The question now is what they will do for an encore. Rumors locally are that the UCF students have already begun work on their next project, a documentary. Tentatively titled, "The Bare Bench Project," it will explore the massive turnover of personnel on the Orlando Magic and follow them through the terror filled months of the upcoming NBA season.

After a decade of success and a trip to the NBA finals the Orlando Magic go into the 1999-2000 season with Y2K problems of a massive nature, looking very much like the first expansion team of the new millennium.

During the off season four of the starting five from last year were dealt to other locations, and in return the Magic accumulated scores of players, many of whom never put on a Magic uniform. There were twenty-one deals moving thirty-one players. The new roster is a cast of strangers with Armstrong, Doleac, Harpring, Outlaw and Strong the only remaining familiar faces. The veteran head coach, Chuck Daly is also gone, replaced by Glenn "Doc" Rivers in his first head coaching assignment.

What has been accomplished in the off-season is a sharp reduction in payroll, a freeing of $15M in cap money, the accumulation of first round draft choices (three next year, nine in the next five years), and the construction of a team that will almost certainly make Orlando a front-runner in the NBA draft lottery next season.

What has been done is NOT a gamble. It is a necessary move by the organization which realizes, perhaps one season too late, that the departure of Shaquille O'Neal was a major disaster after all. John Gabriel, the boy-genius general manager is no longer a boy and he will now be tested as never before to prove his "genius." He has made an excellent beginning.
In the first decade of their existence the Orlando Magic was one of those rare expansion franchises in the NBA able to parlay a great deal of luck in the draft lottery into major success quite early in franchise history. Getting O'Neal and then Hardaway in back to back years, adding Grant to the solid mix which included Anderson and Scott and a number of fine role players, brought the Magic to the playoffs, to a playoff victory over the Bulls, and then to the NBA finals. It was way too easy and it spoiled the fans who came quickly to think of the NBA finals as the norm, and to demand excellence even after O'Neal left town.

Magic fans will now be taken back to the early days of the franchise. Those were the days when a victory at home was a major achievement and a victory on the road a rare treat. Those were the days that you went to the O-rena to watch whoever was in town that night. The Magic marketed the opposition and that was enough. The question that awaits an answer is whether the fans having tasted so much success so fast can lower their expectations. And if they can, how long will they be able to do it?

The lottery is not likely to produce number one picks two years in a row. This rebuilding process will be much slower than the first building project. John Gabriel has just been given a four-year extension to his contract with the Magic. He will need every one of his five-years, and then some, to put a team on the floor that will perform at the level of Shaq's team.

Fans over the last two years complained about overpaid and selfish players who didn't perform up to expectations. The level of discontent in the upper bowl at the O-rena was at times extreme and vocal. Will these fans now find hustle without wins more attractive than last year's Eastern Division winners? This will be a good test of the sincerity of their claims over the past two years that all they wanted was effort. My guess is that over the course of the next few years the fans will let the Magic know that winning still matters. How much time they will give the franchise before demanding winning is the only mystery.

As to the owners themselves, how will they deal with adversity? Already the season-ticket base is shrinking. This season between ten and eleven thousand season tickets have been sold, compared to the previous norm of 15,000
plus. The automatic sellout is a thing of the past. Magic merchandise sales have plummeted and the stores opened in the malls as well as the large Magic Fanatic Store near the O-rena will all close. There has been a change in the television station carrying the road games, and no doubt there were economic consequences accompanying that change. Ticket prices were not raised this year for the first time in memory. Less fans means less concession revenue. The downward spiral goes on and on. How will Boss DeVos feel about this?

So as the NBA and Orlando Magic season opens there are many things to watch and many questions to be answered. The most important question here in Orlando is whether or not the "Bare Bench Project" will turn out to be another horror flick.

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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