

Billy Donovan redux

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Billy Donovan redux
JUNE 6, 2007

Billy Donovan, who accepted the Orlando Magic head coaching position for the cool sum of \$27.5M last Friday, has backed out of his contract. Is there anything to learn from this not very unusual turn of events? The idea that Billy Donovan has broken a contract carries very little meaning in sport, that is if you are an owner, general manager, or coach of a team.

It carries no meaning if you are a coach in intercollegiate athletics where such niceties as commitment and contract apply to players only. If a coach recruits a player and then the coach leaves and breaks his contract, the player has no recourse. Players are not allowed to leave their teams without severe penalties. Players are told they have made a commitment to the university not to the coach, a distinction that is not made in the recruiting process.

At any moment, a coach may walk away from his team without penalty, unless there is a specific buyout clause in the coach's contract, and even then, the coach's new team is likely to pay the cost of the buyout. This happens with total abandon in intercollegiate athletics. Billy Donovan, for example, was under contract with the University of Florida. He had just recruited a very strong group of players, and one can rest assured that he did not tell them he was thinking about going to the Magic but they should come to the University of Florida whether he was there or not.

In March, Bill Gillispie signed a new and lucrative contract with Texas A&M University. He talked about the commitment the school had made to him, and how much he loved Texas A&M and how embarrassing it was "to be compensated so well to perform my passion for a school I love." Within a week, despite the passion and the love, Bill Gillispie walked out the door and went off to become head basketball coach at the University of Kentucky. Less than a year after Kansas State had pulled Bob Huggins off the trash pile of college coaches he expressed his gratitude by leaving for West Virginia.

This goes on and on. The coaches and athletic directors preach commitment and loyalty to the players, they refuse to release them from commitments when coaches bail out of a position, and

do so telling the players with a straight face that they have contractual obligations to remain at Enormous State University.

So when Billy Donovan bailed out on his contract of \$27.5M with the Orlando Magic no one should have been surprised. In fact, Billy walked out on two contracts in a matter of days. This is the nature of the beast. This is the meaning of commitment and loyalty in the world of intercollegiate athletics in particular and much of the rest of professional sport in general. I am sure Billy must be surprised that some people think he should live up to his contract. After all, who would ever think or do such a thing in the intercollegiate world from which he came.

As for the Orlando Magic, this little fiasco has other meanings. In a fit of hysteria, the Magic was ready to fork over \$27.5M to a coach who had no experience in professional basketball beyond warming the bench as a player. Such foolishness is understandable to those of us here in Central Florida because we know the desperation that grips this organization.

Unable to draft wisely, build wisely, retain and develop good players and great players, the Magic were desperate to find a way to create some excitement. In a community filled with Florida Gator alumni, what easier way to create the illusion of progress than hiring Billy Donovan, the miracle worker of Gainesville. What better way to create false excitement to lure fans and local politicians who are working on a deal to build a new arena?

It was a nice quick fix, but unfortunately, Billy Donovan was not the man he seemed to be. After regaling those at his press conference with lofty goals and visions, and speaking with a level of excitement worthy of some "motivational guru," Billy Donovan rode off up I-75 and disappeared into the mist. Only his empty words and false excitement were left echoing through the halls at One Magic Place for the Amway salesmen to ponder.

It is clear now that the Curse of Shaquille O'Neal is a reality. Since Shaq was low-balled by the Magic and trashed by the local sportswriters serving up the party line, this franchise has moved inexorably from one disaster to another. The downward slide has had few breaks in trajectory. Coaches come and go, some twice. One bad draft choice follows another, rock bottom having been hit in 2005 when first round pick Fran Vazquez opted to stay in Spain rather than come to the City Beautiful. Bad trades have become a staple. Injuries have turned hope into hopelessness. Stars and would-be stars leave when they can no

longer carry the load alone and are hounded by the local press and fans.

Since Shaq left town the sign in front of the O-rena has become permanent. It reads "Plenty of good seats still available." No need to take it down just yet.

Gee Whiz, Billy! We hardly knew you!

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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