

Shaq Attack comes to Boston, aiming to dethrone Lakers

While teams throughout the NBA have been making moves to shore up their rosters this off-season, the Boston Celtics instead talked of making another run with “our guys,” including convincing coach Doc Rivers to come back for at least next season, along with resigning both Paul Pierce and Ray Allen.

Whether the team as constituted will find itself in another Game 7 in the NBA Finals next season is a whole other story, as the Eastern Conference became significantly stronger with Miami adding LeBron James and Chris Bosh, along with resigning Dwyane Wade. By comparison, the Celts first added Jermaine O’Neal, who will try to fill center Kendrick Perkins’ shoes while he recuperates from surgery on a torn anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee for the first few months of the season.

That move, though, was hardly hailed in most corners as significant. Many Celtics watchers pointed to O’Neal’s invisible performance with the Heat against Boston in last year’s playoffs, when we went 9-of-44 in the series, finishing with an anemic two points each in Games 2, 3 and 4.

Celtics management, recognizing that the team needed more to contend with the likes of Miami, made a move Thursday that will likely cause their radio and television announcers to have sleepless nights — by adding another O’Neal.

While Jermaine once was a

top player with Indiana — particularly during a five-year run from 2002-03 to 2006-07 when he averaged anywhere from 19.0 to 24.3 points a game in a season — Shaquille has had a long, productive career, winning four rings. For someone once considered the most dominant player in the league — scoring more than 20 points a game in a season for his first 14 years in the league, and even winning scoring titles in 1994-95 with 29.3 points a game and 29.7 points a game in 1999-2000 — plenty of excitement comes with his addition.

ON THE SUBJECT OF SPORTS



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Almost immediately after Shaq signed the two-year, veteran minimum pact with Boston, talk of what he should have for a nickname ensued.

Those doing play-by-play next season will likely need that crutch given the strong chance that Rivers will often send both O’Neals out onto the floor, and it would only leave listeners scratching their heads if they had to hear, “O’Neal passes to O’Neal ...”

At the same, time, though, the excitement tied to Shaq’s signing

might best be tempered to some degree. As great as Shaq was in his first 14 years, upon reaching 34, his numbers began to slip below 20 points a game, as the 325-pound center scored 17.3, 13.6, 17.8 and 12 points a game his last four seasons. Entering the next two seasons with the Celtics, at the not-so-young ages of 38 and 39, one can dream he’ll recapture his youth and become a force, but being a valuable contributor is reasonable place to start.

Considering how well Rivers paced the playing time of his aging veteran core of Pierce, Allen and Kevin Garnett last season, adding Jermaine (who will 32 next season) and Shaquille will hardly make his job any easier.

While the team made youthful additions this offseason by drafting Avery Bradley, Luke Harangody and Semih Erden (from the 2008 draft), along with the free agent signing of Von Wafer, it’s unrealistic to expect significant contributions from this group next season.

With the ongoing effort to finalize next year’s roster, forward Brian Scalabrine has made it clear he would like to return to the Celts, or at least continue playing in the NBA.

For as much as the Boston Garden faithful often would oddly become abuzz when “Scal” would ditch his warmups for a few minutes on the floor, such a sideshow — with the rather high hurdle that Miami has erected — does little in helping the Celtics in achieving success in trying to win their 18th title the next couple of years, before the “Big Three” head off

into the sunset.

While some might inexplicably look at Scalabrine as some sort of good luck charm, the fact that he didn’t step onto the floor during the 2008 playoffs, when the Celtics won the title, should otherwise debunk such a comical idea.

In other words, good riddance.

Particularly since Scalabrine was the last remaining piece on last year’s roster left from the dark days when Chris Wallace almost singlehandedly derailed the franchise as the team’s GM.

For as much as the critics jumped all over GM Danny Ainge during his first year on the job, with the Celtics earning the most ping-pong balls for having the worst record in the league, that was before the luck of those balls ironically went against Ainge, denying him a chance to draft either Greg Oden (what has he ever done in an NBA uniform?) or Kevin Durant (who, while extremely talented, has just begun to lift his Thunder to being a decent playoff team). In spite of that, Ainge forged ahead to acquire Allen and Garnett to create the “Big Three,” instantly making them a championship contender each of the last three years, to go with one title.

To the Celtics’ detriment, Scalabrine’s signing in 2005 was just one of many warts on Wallace’s résumé with respect to trades. Another eye-wincing deal that imploded on the Celts involved a current NBA superstar, who this offseason re-signed with Atlanta for a max deal, at \$119 million over six years.

In moving a player the same year they had drafted at 10th overall in 2001, Wallace pulled the trigger faster than even Rick “Trader” Pitino (who preceded Wallace), who was also prone to rid the team of young talent sooner than later. Pitino at least waited a season and a half before ditching Ron Mercer, the sixth overall selection in 1997, even after Mercer scored 15.3 and 17 points a game the two seasons as a Celtic.

Wallace could only hold out for 48 games before sending away Joe Johnson in a trade.

One would think that for a player drafted in the same slot that Pierce fell to three years earlier, plenty would come back in return to Boston.

Instead, the Celtics ended up renting Rodney Rogers for the remainder of the season, along with grabbing one of the many overhyped Duke prodigies to never amount to much in an NBA uniform — Tony Delk. Thanks largely to the exposure gained for playing with the Blue Devils, Delk was drafted 16th overall in 1996, but bounced around to eight teams in 10 seasons, spending just a year and a half in Boston.

At first glance of the deal, one hoped Rogers would resign at the end of the season, when he was to become a free agent. As a big body, the power forward then seemed like a worthwhile addition.

Those benefits disappeared instantly when Rogers decided to sign with New Jersey.

And it only got worse from there. The lesser piece in Delk

was gone soon after that, while Johnson grew into one of the better offensive players in the league, first finishing with 16.7 and 17.1 points per game in his final two years in Phoenix before moving onto Atlanta, where his game escalated to averaging 20.2 to 25 points a game each of the last five seasons.

As ugly as that deal was, another ugly chapter in Celtics history was Wallace trading for Vin Baker. Once a valuable player for six years in split between Milwaukee and Seattle, Baker was awarded a seven-year, \$87 million deal while with the Sonics.

What really stung the Celts was that Baker still had a massive \$50 million and four years left on his contract when Boston acquired him, and after averaging just 5.2 points a game in his first season with the Celts, playing in 52 games, and starting just nine, the calls for jettisoning him began in earnest.

Even after all those horrific examples of holding a team down with ineffective acquisitions, Wallace has been allowed to continue his act of devastating franchises in another NBA city, this time in Memphis.

Since Wallace’s hiring in June 2007, the Grizzlies have yet to have a winning season, with his shining moment being his trade of Pau Gasol to the Los Angeles Lakers, largely credited for providing the talent to win their last two titles.

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