

# C's Big Three hoping help arrives for another title run

Having been unable to repeat as NBA world champions this past year, it would seem ideal for the Boston Celtics to reload and add real talent to a roster that, if not for the untimely injury to Kevin Garnett last season, would likely have meant facing the Los Angeles Lakers for a second consecutive year in the NBA Finals.

And we're not talking about bringing on another shadow in the form of Stephon Marbury or one in the joke of Mikki Moore.

In watching as a number of teams throughout the league upgraded at the opening of the free agent signing period, it was at first disappointing at how the Celtics seemed content to stand pat.

But as was evidenced by the rumor mill running roughshod recently with a number of purported trades of point guard Rajon Rondo, and even Ray Allen — with the Celtics so close to the salary cap ceiling — any top-notch additions by general manager Danny Ainge would also likely have to be paired with some losses as well.

Knowing that the Celtics' likeliest competitors next season in the Cleveland Cavaliers, Lakers and Orlando Magic will be even tougher with their recent moves still makes swallowing that reality tough.

Most notable among the various acquisitions across the league

was Cleveland's trade for Shaquille O'Neal. Understanding that the window for keeping King James happy in Cleveland is rapidly closing, with his having only one year left on his current contract, the Cavaliers were the first to show that another exit before the NBA Finals wasn't acceptable, in working the magic in a lopsided deal for O'Neal.

## ON THE SUBJECT OF SPORTS



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While the Cavs only shed aging center Ben Wallace, to go with a second round pick and shooting guard Sasha Pavlovic, the initial reaction in this space was that I must have missed that a half-decent "player to be named" was part of the deal as well, on their way to Phoenix, just so there would be some shred of equality in the deal.

After spending six years in Detroit, Wallace went off and signed a monster deal with Chicago for \$60 million in 2006, then disappointing many Pistons fans out of a desire that he stay in Detroit. Entering the final year of

this deal, though, it should be hard to find a Pistons fan who isn't wiping their brow in relief, knowing that Detroit was fortunate to get his best years.

Wallace, once the best defensive player in the game, has had his game slip into the nether regions, to where last season he only averaged 2.9 points, 6.4 rebounds, and 1.3 blocks while with the Cavs.

Knowing that he was on the books for \$15 million last year, Cleveland's first real attempt at providing James additional help via a 2008 trade that brought Wallace and Celtics retreads Delonte West and Wally Szczerbiak did little in achieving that ultimate goal. Nonetheless, this deal is offering a much more positive outlook, in that the 15-time All-Star in O'Neal could help James reach the promised land.

Even with virtually no risk in this deal, as Pavlovic was a spare part in averaging just 4.6 points a game last season for Cleveland, and second round picks rarely if ever become integral parts of a franchise (Rondo being one of those rare exceptions) — the loss of those three players, even for a player older than Wallace in O'Neal seems to be a worthwhile, short-term move at providing a consistent second scoring option to James. Last year with Phoenix, even while only averaging 30 minutes a game, O'Neal still amassed 17.8 points a game and

8.4 rebounds.

Cleveland, though, wasn't the only top franchise making additions to their roster last week.

Thus far, unlike in previous years when struggling franchises with plenty of salary cap space are the teams that make the biggest splashes, the Lakers and Orlando also were quick to set themselves up for an improved roster for next year.

While Orlando will likely lose Hedo Turkoglu to free agency, the team was quick to find an alternative in eight-time All-Star Vince Carter. Even at 32, Carter — who had his lowest point average in six years, but still scored 20.8 points a game last year — could still offer much of the balance that the Magic had last year. And all the Nets got in return in the deal was Rafer Alston, Courtney Lee and Tony Battie. Even in the case of an aging superstar, trading two barely average players and one who is inexplicably taking up a roster spot (Battie) doesn't make this an even trade, unless you're counting for salary cap purposes.

Not only were the Finals runners-up busy, but so too were the champion Lakers. Much like the Celtics chose to take a flier on a risky player like Marbury last season, the Lakers came to a five-year contract agreement with Ron Artest Friday, with the hope that Artest, still only 29, having shown in Houston that he actually can behave himself, could provide Kobe Bryant with even more scor-

ing options.

For the likes of Garnett, Allen and Paul Pierce, they were likely chomping at the bit, watching these moves go down, wondering if the Celtics would even make an inquiry on any of this year's top free agents. With so little cap room, though, and this year's class nowhere near the star-studded group that's expected next year — with James, Dwayne Wade and Chris Bosh — it wouldn't be hard to sit this year out.

For Ainge, though, waiting until next year didn't seem an option, particularly with Allen being in the final year of his deal, and Pierce and Garnett hardly getting any younger.

With free agent Rasheed Wallace having made \$13.68 million last year, it's clear that he'll have to take some form of a payout at 35. While he might be able to find a starting job on a rebuilding team, or even a decent team, the Celtics' "Big Three" met with Wallace, along with Ainge and managing partner Wyc Grousbeck, and sat with the longtime Piston to try to convince him to come to Boston to try to help the trio win another championship.

Those efforts appear to have been successful, as reports Sunday night indicated Wallace had committed to sign a two-year deal with Boston.

For a player that the Celtics would only be able to offer the mid-level exception, based on salary cap restrictions, Wallace

will likely earn less than half (\$5.6 million to \$5.8 million) what he earned last year. Knowing that, it shouldn't have been a shock that he didn't quickly sign on, despite that three-hour meeting, especially since Orlando (still looking to improve some more), Cleveland (likewise), San Antonio (which acquired Richard Jefferson already last month), and Charlotte (the lone big money, no-chance-to-win option on the table for Wallace) were also initially reported to have interest.

With the Pistons having opened up the bank vault in the first hours of free agency in signing former Chicago Bull Ben Gordon and Milwaukee Buck Charlie Villanueva, it's clear that the Pistons have moved in another direction, without Wallace.

Fortunately, the Celtics didn't have to sit around for the what was expected to be a week that Wallace planned to digest all offers, or look at some of the less attractive offers is anyone's guess. Considering that Leon Powe will most likely not be with the team next year, and that Glen Davis could be snapped up by another team as a restricted free agent, the Celtics evidently did their best at being aggressive in reeling in Wallace, as other "options" are hardly as palatable, among them Grant Hill, Anthony Parker or Antonio McDyess.

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