

Team Review – New Orleans Hornets

The New Orleans Hornets have had a rough ride the past few seasons. First they made the flop from Eastern to Western conferences which added to the road mileage, then Hurricane Katrina came through the Gulf of Mexico to tear apart the Gulf States and finally they survived a quick location move for home from the damaged New Orleans to Oklahoma City.

Over the past four years the Hornets reached the Eastern Conference playoffs twice. Their record slid before the hiring of Byron Scott who hit the rock bottom with only 18 wins in 2004-2005 but he has brought the club back up the ladder with a 20 win improvement last season. Taking out the abysmal season of 2004-2005, the Hornets have had seasons with 47, 41 and 38 wins. They have also been stellar at whatever home floor they happen to be playing at with a record with 29, 25, 24 and even 11 wins during their brutal '04-'04 campaign.

A constantly changing roster has also dominated this team while they try to find the magic. From 2002-2003 to 2005-2006 the Hornets have played 49 different players. Even for this upcoming season there will be at least 6 new faces sporting Hornets jerseys on the bench which will bring the total to a minimum of 55 Hornet players over 5 seasons. Since the end of last season the Hornets have made two trades and signed two free agents while re-inking starting small forward Rasual Butler. David West is the longest serving player in the Hive having been with the team since the 2003 Draft. Next is Rookie of the Year Chris Paul and LSU product Brandon Bass who have survived since the 2005 Draft. Building team chemistry will be a source of major work for Coach Scott as he heads into the 2005-2006 season with a team that missed the playoffs by 6 games last year.

Team wise they improved in all major categories from 2004-2005 to the 2005-2006 except team free throw percentage where they slid back 0.8%. Points per game they made the biggest jump from 88.4 to 92.8. Team field goal percentage climbed to 44.0% from a 41.5% the year before. Three point shooting also made a solid climb up the charts as they went from 31.5% to 33.9% even without the shooting ability of Dan Dickau who was traded to Boston before the season got underway.

Breaking Down the Starting Line Up

Returning Starting Hornets

David West

Last year David West became what he was touted to be coming out of Xavier University four years ago. Coming out of the Musketeer program West was a double double man on an average night with 20.1 points per game and 11.8 rebounds per game. Heading into his first season in the NBA things were a little different. As a rookie West played in 71 games but only averaged 13 minutes per appearance. His offensive ability was corralled into a 3.9 points per game situation but his rebounding was still effective averaging 4.2 per game even in this reduced role. In his second season West battled injuries which kept him out of 52 games. The remaining 30 saw West averaging more minutes (18.4) and his

points production showed. He was still stuck behind the heavy minutes of Jamaal Magloire, PJ Brown and Rodney Rogers at various points of the season though and couldn't get everything on track. His shooting percentages dropped slightly as he took more shots than the previous year but the scoring went up to 6.2 points per game. What he needed to get back to was his inside game as his offensive rebounding went down while his overall rebounding average went up. This past season it all came together for him. West moved into the starting power forward position and spent 34.1 minutes per night on the floor. Everything across the board went up as he was nominated for the NBA Most Improved award. His scoring hit 17.1 points per game while his shooting soared to 51.2%. His 2004-2005 free throw percentage was a lowly 68.0% but that mark was erased as he improved to 84.3%. Most importantly his impact at both ends was felt on the glass. West picked up his pace with 7.4 rebounds per game and of those 2.3 were at the offensive end.

Chris Paul

What can you say about the Rookie of the Year? Paul came out of the Wake Forest program and never looked back. Everything the "experts" said he might be he was and more. He finished second on the Hornets in scoring, averaged the most minutes in 36.0, second on the team in free throw percentage with 84.7%, second on the team in rebounds with 5.1 per game and tops by far in assists with 7.8 per game. All that and he was voted Rookie of the Year by the NBA too.

Projected Starting Hornets

Tyson Chandler

Earns the starting center role in the swap for PJ Brown who was the projected incumbent for that spot. Chandler is a leaper that also has scored some timely baskets during his run as a Chicago Bull. Working hard over the last three years on his offensive production Chandler has increased his shooting percentage from a rookie season of 42.4% to last year's 56.5%. Most of the change can be summed up with increasing his offensive smarts. His average made field goals hasn't changed much over the three years but his average attempted field goals has come down. Smarter inside work results in better chances and his offensive rebounding has improved as well. While he may not be the answer to Tim Duncan in the Southwest Division Chandler is a suitable replacement for Brown in most aspects. During the Bulls playoff series with the Heat Chandler averaged over twice as many fouls per game as points. A stat that Coach Scott will not take very well this season in New Orleans. He needs to develop his disciplined defense to ensure the trade happy Hornets don't seek another replacement or push him down the line in favor of Marc Jackson.

Bobby Jackson

The final projected starter is also the most experienced Hornet on the roster. If he can stay healthy he should earn as many minutes as he wants in the shooting guard role and also spot Chris Paul at the point when he takes his breaks. However over the past three seasons he has only averaged 48 games due to injuries which raises some eyebrows to why the Hornets signed him to a multi-year deal. Last year in Memphis Jackson averaged 25.0 minutes per game which might not be enough for New Orleans but his 38.9%

shooting from beyond the arc could make up for that. Should he fall to injuries again it will be 2 guard by committee unless the Hornets push Peja Stojakovic into the role.

Peja Stojakovic

The projected sharp shooter for the Hornets will come off the bench and immediately stretch the defense. His career 39.9% from the three point line is a working number, as in Peja works it every night. Last year he averaged 5.6 three point attempts a game for the Pacers and a stunning 90.3% from the line (89.4% career). Peja isn't a one trick pony though as his 6'10" frame is also a huge boon to snagging rebounds. Last year he pulled down 5.1 rebounds per game in the defensive end and 6.3 overall. Also he draws the defenders out which allows for the inside pass and his lifetime 2.0 assists per game shows that. Most look at his 19.5 points per game last season as a nice piece of work but only playing 40 games is a worry point. They wonder if he can stay healthy enough to keep Butler from the starting role. Peja's best season came in 2003-2004 where in 81 games he averaged 24.3 points per game while playing over 40 minutes a contest. That season he averaged hitting 3 three pointers a game to help the Kings on their run. Since that season he has held his free throw percentage over 90%. Overall he'll make up for the loss of PJ Brown and Speedy Claxton on the scoreboard.

Breaking Down the Bench

Rasual Butler

The projected sixth man was picked up from Miami last summer in a 5 team swap. I'm sure he now doesn't like to think that he left a Championship club but he should become an even larger aspect to the Hornet line up this upcoming season. He finished up the season as the starter but did not average the minutes usually allocated to a starting swingman. His ball control and decisions with the ball need to improve if he is going to crack the starting line up, although Peja's recent history of injuries will give him the shot to do it with. As well Butler's shooting percentage was decent with 40.8% but his points production (8.7 PPG) likely isn't enough for Coach Scott to be content. With Desmond Mason itching for that role as well Butler will have to pick up his game this season.

Marc Jackson

Jackson is a journeyman center that has bounced around the league recently but his numbers took a nice upswing after he reached the Hornets. His points per game went up by 4.5; his rebounding and minutes played doubled. Even his free throw percentage was better in New Orleans. If he's looking to make a fresh start here with his 5th NBA team then he'll get the opportunity behind Chandler to play those 18 to 22 minutes per game. Hopefully he can maintain those second half figures all season long.

Desmond Mason

Mason finished the year as the back up to Rasual Butler but over the course of the season he averaged 30 minutes per game to Butler's 23. Acquired in the fall from Milwaukee for Jamaal Magloire Mason likely has some time to battle with Butler for the chance to back up sharp shooter Peja Stojakovic. New Orleans marks the third NBA team for the former SuperSonic draft pick. As a 6'5" swingman he gives the Hornets another option for the 2

spot however he traditionally isn't a strong three point shooter. Career wise he is only a 26.3% and his last two seasons haven't been above 17%. Last year was his lowest scoring year since his rookie season in Seattle. Look for him to battle Butler for the back up 3 spot but also fill in some time as a 2 guard when Bobby Jackson is on the bench.

Linton Johnson III

See Desmond Mason and Rasual Butler and you'll understand Linton Johnson the Third. Plays everywhere from the 2 to 4 spots but doesn't do any of them well enough to earn a starting role. Johnson is a true journeyman swingman, his 79 career NBA games have been split over 3 years and on 4 teams. He could return to the Hornets and be relied on for 25-30 games at 15-20 minutes per game. Might be last chance at a breakout year before heading down the system to Tulsa or elsewhere.

Brandon Bass

Bass nearly played himself off the team last year including a trip down to Tulsa of the NBA D-League. In the 29 games that he did play for the big club he only averaged 9.3 minutes per game and a pair of matching 2.3's for total rebounds and points per game. In his appearance with the 66'ers he scored 16 points and showed enough flashes to get the return call in a hurry. Look for him to continue his role as David West understudy for another year.

Jannero Pargo

Pargo is a speedy guy with the prospects of becoming a solid NBA back up point guard. At the end of the 2003-2004 season Pargo joined his hometown Chicago Bulls and put up some great numbers across the board. Averaging 26.5 minutes a game he tallied 13.5 points, 3.6 assists and 2.1 rebounds per game over those 13 games. His shooting also took a nice upswing that likely made the Raptors and Lakers wonder why he didn't get that done for their clubs earlier that season. Since then his numbers have dropped mostly due to the emergence of bonified Bulls draft picks than a lack of talent. A threat from behind the arc he is a career 35.7% shooter from out there, a talent that has gone down the family tree to his little brother playing at Gonzaga University.

Breaking Down the Draft Picks

Hilton Armstrong

The University of Connecticut grad played his four years for the Huskies with bookend starting seasons. As a freshman he started but was lost behind Denham Brown and Charlie Villaneuva for his sophomore and junior seasons. The senior year was a switch around as he started alongside Josh Boone for most of the season. Those 33 starts kicked his best college season into the forefront. He averaged 9.7 points per game in 27.7 minutes of work, his 60.8% field goal percentage was highlighted with many poster worthy dunks but he won't find his counterparts in the NBA so easy to push around underneath. His shot blocking likely was what scouts first noticed but nobody blocks 3.1 shots per game in the pros so hopefully he checks that edgy ego at the door before walking into the paint to face the likes of Shaq or Tim Duncan.

Cedric Simmons

The North Carolina State undergrad entered the draft as a junior. He started his junior year and statistically mirrors Hilton Armstrong who was taken 3 picks ahead of him. He finished second on a low scoring Wolf Pack team with 11.8 points per game. Likely faced stiffer competition in the ACC than Armstrong in the Big East but came away with decent stats. In his three college seasons he was never a projected starter by any of the major publications and was a dark horse even come close to the draft. A decent series of workouts led the Hornets to select him in the first round.

Marcus Vinicius

The Hornets second round pick is an unsigned Brazilian forward. The smallest of the three picks at a mere 6'8" Vinicius likely won't join the Hornets for at least another season. Being a young 22 years old the Hornets let him wait out the logjam at the 3 spot.

Team Needs from 2005-2006

Outside Shooting

The last two seasons the Hornets have been awful from beyond the arc. Even with the surprise shooting of Dan Dickau from two seasons ago they haven't fared well in this category. Teams get to tee off on their interior defense as they know they don't have to worry about more than 4 3's a game going in from the perimeter.

This off season they have addressed that in the trade for Peja Stojakovic. Peja shoots better from outside the arc than he does overall and will create his shots as long as super point guard Chris Paul can get him the ball. In a secondary role Jannero Pargo will also stretch defenses with his solid shooting from outside.

Offensive Rebounding

Last season was the Hornets worst over the past 5 years for grabbing the loose ball at the offensive end. Tyson Chandler should help out at this aspect as long as he can handle a jump in floor time and keep himself on the floor. Last year in Chicago he had problems keeping himself in games due to an abundance of fouls. David West and Marc Jackson should complete a stronger front court than the Hornets have had for years.

Team Depth

When you come off of an 18 win season it's tough to get quality folks to come play for you. Along with the constant turn over of Hornet players (at least 50% the past three years) it's been hard for them to build a solid bench. This year there's a three way logjam just to be the back up small forward to Peja Stojakovic. There should be three options to run the point in Chris Paul, Bobby Jackson and Jannero Pargo. The front court doesn't look too much different as they merely replaced PJ Brown with Tyson Chandler, but they did draft two big bodies that could fill minutes there too.

Team NBA Draft 2006

The Hornets had three picks this year. Two first round picks at #12 and #15 were used on Hilton Armstrong from University of Connecticut and Cedric Simmons from North Carolina State. Without the advantage of being at the team meetings and hearing their responses in the interviews neither of these two were picks that I would have made if put into the shoes of GM Jeff Bower. I don't feel that either can step in and help the team from day one. Seeing that they took three players that were 6'8", 6'9" and 6'11" in height leads me to believe that big guys were what they were looking for and guards were something they would sign later. Their third pick was a future prospect pick for a small forward from Brazil, which you can't fault a team on. Building for the future is very important and with the short benches that most NBA teams run with using a pick for the team two or three years down the road isn't a bad idea. Seeing that the Hornets signed Bobby Jackson and Jannero Pargo after the draft makes me wonder why they didn't look to drafting a guard, either point guard or shooting guard with one of those three picks. I have come up with a list of 5 players that I would've had on my draft board in the war room of the Hornets.

My Draft Board

1. Taquan Dean (G, Louisville) solid knock down lights out shooter. Hit 38.2% of his three point shots his senior year good enough to place him 11th in the conference. Led the Cardinals in scoring and a 21-13 record. The team leader was also third in rebounding and led them with 3.5 assists per game. Would've been a nice 2 guard alongside Chris Paul.
2. Gerry McNamara (PG, Syracuse) another solid shooter and big game performer. Likely a better defender and passer than Dean but doesn't fly to the rebounds like Dean can. Led the Orange in scoring and was 12th for the Big East. Finished second in the Big East for Free Throw percentage and 4th in steals. I believe he could make the transition to a 2 guard and also spot Paul for minutes at the 1.
3. Josh Boone (C, UConn) I have no idea why the Hornets didn't take Boone instead of Armstrong. Boone slipped to 23rd overall and would've been there for either of their first round picks. Since they were looking at the Huskies anyhow I'm at a loss for how they determined that Armstrong would be the better pro of these two. Boone was ahead of Armstrong in rebounding and scoring but I think will be a better fit at the NBA level where neither Huskie will get 5 dunk chances a game.
4. Paul Davis (PF, Mich St) Davis was a major factor in the Big Ten this year. Nearly averaged a double double for the 22-12 Spartans. Also able to swing out to the three point line which made him very difficult to guard as a true big man. His free throw shooting was also above average for a big man at 87%. His draft stock dropped to 34th but all season long was projected as a mid-first rounder. Wouldn't have been a surprise pick at 15.

5. Chris Quinn (PG, Notre Dame) Quinn drops to 5 on my list solely because I am unsure of how well he could adjust to being a 2 guard and I do not think he would overtake Chris Paul as a point guard. Stellar numbers on an underachieving Irish squad. Averaged 17.7 points and 6.4 assists per game. His most remarkable stat was shooting 41.9% from the three point line and 45.0% overall. Not your typical numbers for a guard that takes a lot of shots. Good defender too which the Hornets could really use out on the perimeter.