

FISH: RON-TO-ROX TRADE ANALYSIS - VIA MAVS' ENVIOUS EYES

Contributed by Mike Fisher
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Maybe I'm being seduced by the Mavs' aggressive track record. Maybe I'm being influenced by the TOT's calm (before the storm?). Maybe I'm reading too much, or reading incorrectly, into the sights and sounds and vibes I get from team higher-ups.

Maybe you think I'm a homer, though I'm like Dirk (seen here on DallasBasketball.com) in my passive-aggressive flip-off of your once-tired skepticism.

For the record: I do not believe the Mavs will "stand pat," I do not believe they are "satisfied," and I do not believe they "love our team" as it is presently constructed.

If you are keeping score at home, put me down for at least one major roster change before training camp. . . . and maybe one more before the February trade deadline.

Fish note: I planned on writing all those words BEFORE the breaking news that Ron Artest is headed to Houston in exchange for, according to sources, Bobby Jackson and some used Popsicle sticks. Frankly, I'm still trying to believe, still writing the words. . . . but I must be drunk or emotional or something, because I type while my fingers gently weep.

OK, Fish, gather yourself. . . .

The Triangle of Trust's history strongly suggests that we stay in touch with Mavs HQ in the first couple of weeks of August. While this is a handy time for some organizations to send employees on well-deserved vacations, in Dallas this is the time to have signed Eddie Jones (Aug. 6, 2007), Devean George (Aug. 1, 2006), Doug Christie and DeSagana Diop (Aug. 19, 2005) and to have traded for Jason Terry (Aug. 4, 2004) and Erick Dampier (Aug. 24, 2004).

There will be a Dallas deal. Or two.

What will the deal (or deals) be?

Well, one of them apparently won't be for Ron Artest. And your skepticism seems less tired.

The Rockets just elevated themselves in the West Arms Race with the planned addition of Artest to a lineup that already stars Yao Ming and Tracy McGrady. That Big Three dwarfs Boston's. And yes, it dwarfs Dallas's, too. More frustrating, Houston is, it seems, acquiring the All-Star stopper for Bobby Jackson, a No. 1 pick, maybe this year's first-rounder Donte Green and cash.

Used Popsicle sticks.

(The deal can't be official until August 14, and as I write this, it could conceivably still break down. But Jackson, for one, is already acknowledging that it's on.)

Still, something is brewing in Dallas – something besides us being pissed that Houston acquired a guy we wanted, that is. In fact (Fish Positive-Spin AlertJ) allowing Artest to go on down the highway in this manner might suggest there is a more desirable targeted player.

Again, we're talking instincts and interpretations here. . . . sights and sounds and vibes. But my educated guesses right now focus mostly on eliminating rumors – in other words, deals that are UNLIKELY to happen.

That unlikelihood starts with giving up on Josh Howard.

Mavs people are saying the same things to me behind the scenes that they're saying to you in front of the microphones and notepads: They are convinced that J-Ho is "a good kid" who experienced a difficult year emotionally (deaths of people close to him) and who at the end of the season spun out of control. And now they believe he's rediscovered his axis.

"We're willing to roll the dice on Josh," says one insider. "We think he can be the player he was two seasons ago."

If Dallas is correct in that evaluation – if Howard, 28, follows the lead of new coach Rick Carlisle and strips his game back down to where it was, to where it belongs, when he was a fireball defender and an intense slasher who savored his sidekick role in an All-Star campaign – management here will deserve credit for its loyalty, its character analysis and its talent judgment. If Dallas is right, they will employ a "third-best-player-on-the-team" guy capable of averaging 19/7/2 without any of the roller-coastering that marked 2007-08.

And if Dallas is wrong? Josh, fearing shooting opportunities will dry up late, will continue to try to score early. Josh, continuing to ignore the direction of his superiors, will rely on his jumper (and then later explain, "You can't control what the ball do. It's craazy, man.") If Dallas is wrong about him, Josh Howard will deserve to be lit up. (Pun intended.)

And so will his bosses.

If the Mavs are wrong here, they deserve to have the names Luol Deng, Josh Smith, J.R. Smith and, most notably, Ron Artest, thrown in their faces. They will have "rolled the dice" on J-Ho and thus passed on doing so with any of the above.

The published suggestions that Dallas is a serious bidder for Atlanta's Smith smell bogus. Nor is there any legit J.R.-from-Denver-to-Dallas buzz. I got nothin' on Jason Richardson or Boris Diaw. (Though again, Artest slipping away in such an unchallenged manner adds some possible intrigue to these notions.) As for Deng, I was told directly, "Luol Deng isn't coming here." The Mavs have investigated those names, and dozens more,

and simply haven't yet found a way to make such swaps. … without forfeiting Howard.

Now, Deng, Richardson, Diaw, Smith and Smith are talents comparable to Howard. The Mavs can easily justify dangling appetizers such as Brandon Bass, Jerry Stackhouse and Eddie Jones in those talks.

Artest, however, is – er, was -- a different story.

Let me make this clear: I find no one in the organization unwilling to concede that Artest is superior to Josh Howard as a basketball talent. He has similar offensive skills, he brings contagious intensity, and he, in the words of one NBA scouting friend of DB.com, “is the rare shutdown defender. Josh can be a good defender. But Artest. … there just aren't many like him.’’

Hell, just consider how Houston lines up next season: In clutch time, they can play McGrady at the point, Artest and another ace defender, Shane Battier, on the wings, with Yao getting help from toughs like Luis Scola and Carl Landry. Rafer Alston starts at the point, they just signed Brent Barry, Dikembe Mutombo returns as the backup center. And then way down there at the end of the bench there's Luther Head and Joey Dorsey and Steve Francis.

That's a pretty “wow’’ collection of talent.

What if Dallas had caved to Sacramento and given up Howard for Artest, and then it DIDN'T work – that is, Artest didn't fit in, Artest didn't play nice in future contract negotiations, Artest didn't avoid causing this Carlisle team to implode in the way he did with Carlisle's last team back in Indiana – the Dallas Mavericks would have blown themselves up.

They would have an expiring Artest at low value, an expiring Kidd with no promises, and no Josh Howard. They would be on course for the “40-win treadmill,’’ one of owner Mark Cuban's worst nightmares.

They would be “Dirk and the Merry Minimums,’’ to paraphrase Cuban's long-ago dig at a (temporarily) struggling Lakers franchise.

That was reason enough to never include J-Ho.

However. …

If the Mavs could've acquired Artest (or can still acquire something akin to him) WITHOUT sacrificing Josh Howard, they have an armored roster that can survive implosions. And more important than that – and by the way, I find no one in the organization unwilling to concede this, either – the Dallas Mavericks will have a team fully capable of winning an NBA title.

Dirk and Diop starting upfront, Artest and Howard on the wings, Kidd running the show. That would've been a starting five, backed by Jason Terry as a microwave and Dampier as the backup center, that rivals anyone's.

Instead, it is Houston and Artest who now, on paper, rival anyone.

Take my word on this: The Mavs's TOT had mulled over that lineup. A lot.

But the Howard part of the equation is moot. It didn't take a Josh Howard. It didn't even take a Larry, a Moe or a Curly, but just a Shemp Howard?

Interestingly, when I talked recently to one Mavs higher-up, he talked of Jet as “the sixth man,’’ as if Terry was already locked in to a backup job. How could that be? Isn't it too early to concede the 2-guard job to the likes of All-Rocky-Mountain-Review-Teamer Gerald Green?

It is. So maybe there is some cross-your-fingers good news: The Mavs aren't conceding that fifth starting job to a person presently on the roster.

GM Donnie Nelson is saying the right things about filling the 15-man roster by talking up summer-leaguers Green and James Singleton (who are among the 13 with contracts) and by noting that three more S-league guys, JuJuan Smith, Charles Rhodes and Keith McLeod (with a make-good contract) will likely be invited to camp.

The season is a long way off, and filling the south end of the bench with guys with “hunger’’ is important. But if anybody thinks hopes for JuJuan or Rhodes or Shan Foster or Reyshawn Terry represents Mavs management's plan to remain elite, they simply haven't been paying attention to the way the Mavs really end up working.

I think.

Troubling Fact 1: The Mavs, wringing their hands over Josh-for-Artest, did so needlessly. … and yet somehow their reported Bass/Stackhouse offer was needless as well. (Is the B-Jax package better than the Bass/Stack package? Does that speak to the value of a No. 1 pick, or the lack of perceived value of Jerry Stackhouse?)

Troubling Fact 2: Some in the Mavs TOT were pretty sure Sacto wouldn't pull the trigger on an Artest deal until the February deadline was nearer. Boy, were they off – by, like, seven months. You will not get slapped down by me if you wonder whether all the TOT's other duties this summer, from Chicago to China, created an information/action vacuum. I don't want to think that; technology makes most such worries obsolete. But I won't slap you down for wondering.

Troubling Fact 3: While my colleague David Lord accurately points out that the Rockets shouldn't be too feared just yet because somehow, someday, the T-Mac/Yao Rockets always manage to underachieve, that's not enough for me to hang my hat of dismissal on. Unless you believe the Rox have been voodoo'ed or something, the reason they are better now than they were then is because. … well, with Ron-Ron, they are BETTER now.

We have to admit that, in fairness. Because we would've said it had Artest joined the Mavs.

And the Mavs would've chest-puffed their way to the same proclamation.

Really, check out the Southwest Division: While it's possible that the Mavs might be the fourth-best team in the NBA, or might be the fourth-best team in the West, most unbiased observers could claim that in a grouping with New Orleans, San Antonio and Houston, the Mavs might be the fourth-best team in their division.

Nevertheless, I disagree with any suggestion that Dallas “doesn't have the guts to take risks.’’ In the course of four months, at great expense in every sense, they traded for Jason Kidd and fired

Avery Johnson. How is that not "gutsy" and "risky"?

Either way they turn now — and that includes deciding to rely on Howard — represents "gutsy" and "risk."

I believe one Mavs voice when he says they "are not done" reloading. I believe another insider who replies to my trade-idea questions by saying, "Hang in there." As August approaches, I believe in what this management team usually tries to get done at this time of year.

I believe that the Mavs' wish list includes some names that have not leaked out to the public AND one that had. I believe that second name was "Ron Artest," and that the dream was to play him alongside the safety net of Josh Howard.

I still believe in their mindset, and that their mindset assumes a coming move.

Or two.

But as I type that, my fingers gently weep. ... and I think my knuckles are on the verge of a nervous breakdown.