

FISH: The Audacity Of Mavs Hope

Contributed by Mike Fisher
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The EA NBA Live 09 simulated season predicts that Dallas will finish 54-28, and third in the West. Ah, if only the game was played on paper. Or joysticks. Or whatever. However, in an interesting parallel between Man and Machine, our Mavs Season-Opening Analysis Column – the Greatest Mavs Season-Opening Analysis Column Available Online -- is almost as optimistic, despite the thoughts of Shakespeare, Franklin and Nietzsche and due to eight scientifically valid and vetted reasons.

SCIENTIFICALLY VALID AND VETTED REASON NO. 1: Dirk Nowitzki shows no sign of decline. In fact, The UberMan may still be on the incline.

Our friend Henry Abbott of TrueHoop recently reflected on Dirk's new contribution to the NBA's marketing campaign (Where …. Happens’’) and asked if it is indeed possible for Nowitzki to be on the verge of improvement.

Well, let's check back on the last time we saw Dirk, at a time when his team was down and fragmented, when it was an underdog playoff entrant led by a Captain Queeg of a coach:

In that first-round Hornets series, Dirk averaged 26.8 points, 12 rebounds and four assists per game. He was, indeed, better than he'd been in the regular season. Those numbers are better than any collection of numbers he's ever had over the course of a regular season.

Against New Orleans, just five months ago, Dirk got better. At age 30, with a tradition of annually adding another tool to his toolbox (we don't know what it'll be this year; maybe specializing in trailing the break for 3's?), he can be better still.

Or, just be as good as he's always been. First-team All-NBA good, like he's always been. MVP-good. Like he's always been. That'd be fine, too.

The cherry on top, from The UberMan himself: “I still think my best years are in front of me.’’

SCIENTIFICALLY VALID AND VETTED REASON NO. 2: It's not just Rick Carlisle who is a coaching expert on the emotional-turnaround; the entire staff specializes in it.

First, here's Reggie Miller on what Carlisle brought to the Pacers in 1997-98: “This (Mavs) team reminds us of when Larry (Bird) and him first came to the Pacers. … Everybody kind of wrote us off that we were too old, that our best days were behind us and that's the year we should have beaten Chicago in the conference finals. … The parallels are somewhat the same. And everybody's kind of writing them off. (Dallas is) not young anymore. But there's a lot to be said of a team that has some mileage on it. I like experience. I still think they have one more run in them.’’

What did Carlisle do in Indy? He took that washed-up team and in his first season in Indiana, won 61. What had he done previously in Detroit? He'd piled up a couple of 50-win seasons, becoming the first coach since Pat Riley to record 50 wins and division championships on his first three seasons as a coach.

In short, teams he takes over get better.

But again, he's not alone in specializing in the turnaround, or in the “re-try,’’ if you will.

Terry Stotts and Dwane Casey were assistants in Seattle for a Sonics team that won three out of every four games while they were there. In 93-94, Seattle had the best record in the NBA at 63–19, but suffered a humiliating first-round loss to the Denver Nuggets, thus becoming the first No 1 seed to lose a playoff series to an 8th seed. (Sound familiar, Mavs fans?)

The run was supposed to be over. … but two years later, the Supersonics’ 1995–96 team won 64 and reached the NBA Finals.

“That absolutely played a role in the thinking’’ of hiring Stotts and Casey, says owner Mark Cuban. “This coaching staff is young and energetic, but it's also been through the NBA wars. They've got experience proving that every day is a new day, that every year is a new year – and they've got experience and success in teaching that to their players.’’

SCIENTIFICALLY VALID AND VETTED REASON NO. 3: One word. Well, actually, two words mashed together into one microwave-ready marketing slogan: KIDDIRK.

I don't want to over-analyze this. So let's just do it this way: The Mavs' roster features two Hall-of-Fame players who mesh in terms of their personalities and in terms of their games. Quarterback Kidd has rarely played with a receiver like Dirk; receiver Dirk's fondest memories are of once playing with a QB like Kidd.

They share a lot. Including a vision:

Says Nowitzki: “Our goal is not to make the playoffs. Our goal has to be a championship team. We can't be satisfied just making the playoffs. We're not that far off. If we can run this offense and stay solid defensively, we can play with anybody in this league.’’

Says Kidd: “I agree with Dirk. We don't talk about making the playoffs. We talk about winning a championship. If

you talk about it and see it, it helps it become reality. If you get in that position, you have to take advantage of it. And we're going to try to take advantage of it."

SCIENTIFICALLY VALID AND VETTED REASON NO. 4: Simple odds suggest that somebody among the LIBB will break out.

The LIBB — "Lightning-In-A-Bottle Boys" — is made up predominantly of Antoine Wright, Gerald Green and Shawne Williams, all barely old enough to shave.

The Mavs have three former mid-first-round picks, none of whom have yet blossomed. The downside: Green (drafted 18th in 2005) is with his fourth team since August 2007; Williams (17th in 2006) was weighed down by off-court problems in Indiana, which traded him to Dallas on Oct. 10; and Wright (15th in 2005) was considered a throw-in to last year's Kidd trade.

The upside: All three have NBA size (Williams, at 6-9 and 225, is freakish in this area). All three are jump-through-the-gym types (Green, the former Slam-Dunk champ, is freakish in this area). All three are physically capable of playing defense (Wright is the only one who has displayed the propensity to excel in this area).

And all the Mavs need to do here is bat .333.

Dallas has a solid track record in young reclamation projects and come-from-nowhere success stories. DeSagana Diop and Brandon Bass (and JJB, to a lesser degree) are reason enough to think the Mavs can do it one more time.

If you were a team that selected three middle-of-the-first-round kids within 13 draft months — and then all three of them proved worthy of being on NBA rosters — wouldn't you assume that eventually, one or more of them would develop into lightning?

It can happen with Antoine Wright immediately; he is best-suited to winning legit time at the 2 right now, and has in fact won the starting 2 job. It can happen with Green (who seems on the edge of the rotation) and/or Williams (right now no more than the 12th man) at later points this season, or at later points in their careers.

The Mavs are no longer in the business of collecting Doug Christies to sit at the end of the bench. They have shifted gears to collecting lightning to stash in the bottle. The philosophy is sound. The odds suggest the philosophy will be a success.

All the personnel dept. has to do is bat .333.

SCIENTIFICALLY VALID AND VETTED REASON NO. 5: 8X50.

Six out of Dallas' top seven players from the 67-win team from two seasons ago remain on this roster. Even last season — in a supposed down year — this group won 51, scored over 100 points per game, played sound-enough defense to finish fourth in the NBA in FG-against percentage, were not turnover-prone, were a near-dominant rebounding team and endured a huge trade and a Dirk injury to finish seventh in the toughest sports conference in the history of ever. …

And they suddenly suck?

Eight straight years, they've won 50-plus.

GM Donnie Nelson tells DallasBasketball.com that it would be "silly" to tear up "the blueprint" that has become the foundation of one of sports' most successful franchises.

That doesn't mean 8X50 is enough to pacify the increasingly demanding fan base. But it is an impressive foundation, one that suggests that the Mavs have developed a knack for being in the Tournament. … the only position from which to have a grab at the brass ring.

They are there every year. Talking to Cuban and Donnie and everybody on down, they expect to be there again.

By the way: While it seemed to be a foregone conclusion to some last year that the Lakers were the best in the West, Dallas finished just six games behind them in the regular season. Six games.

A six-game difference between a "great" team and a team that "sucks" —

SCIENTIFICALLY VALID AND VETTED REASON NO. 6: The Lil' Johnson is gone.

It is completely unfair to blame every single 2007-08 failing on Avery. It is completely unfair for Dirk to characterize Cliché'ry Johnson's term as a "little dictatorship." It is completely unfair for Kidd to label the coach "crazy." It is completely unfair for Mark Cuban to say life with Johnson was "death by a million little cuts."

It is completely unfair. … unless the Mavs themselves believe it.

Let's pretend it isn't true. Let's pretend the Mavs just THINK it's true.

Isn't that enough?

If you believe you've been harassed for years by a nasty neighbor. … and then he finally moves away, never to torment you again. … does it matter if he was really a tormentor? All you know is that YOU believe a dark cloud has cleared.

You've heard of a "self-fulfilling prophecy"? Even if you think it WASN'T Avery's fault, the Mavs' reaction to his departure is at worst a "self-fulfilling revision of history."

It doesn't matter if you think the dark cloud wasn't all Avery's fault. They believe it. And either way, the dark cloud has cleared.

Mark Cuban says "half the roster" wanted out if Avery returned as coach. Give Tony Cubes some room for gray, some room for hyperbole, some room for exaggeration. … it's still bad. No way The Lil' Johnson could've been allowed back through the AAC doors.

Maybe it's not about who is a better coach (though Avery's fine on-paper accomplishments are largely matched by Carlisle and his 281-211 career record and his five playoff appearances). Maybe it's just about who the players THINK is a better coach. And who is a better coach for these people at this time.

Some of it is X’s-and-O’s, about Carlisle having installed a new offense that stresses transition, motion and running (it was mindless and suicidal for Avery to stubbornly not hand over the reins, philosophically and otherwise, to Kidd in this same way).

But some of it is what the Mavs THINK is being accomplished here.

“It,’’ Josh Howard says, “is new life.’’

And if under the old life you won 51. …

SCIENTIFICALLY VALID AND VETTED REASON NO. 7: Redemption.

The US Olympic Team, led by elder statesman Kidd, was the “Redeem Team.’’ But it doesn’t have much on this group.

Let’s start with Kidd. During the time J-Kidd spent with the Mavs last season, he finished with less than 10 points per game for the first time in a decade. You say he’s not a points guy? Fine. Before the trade, he had a dozen triple-doubles for NJ. After, he had ONE for Dallas.

Kidd looked inferior to an entire new wave of young PG faces, led by Paul and Deron. Beyond just pride, Kidd’s got \$20 mil worth of motivation to prove something here.

Now to The UberMan. Does he really want the NBA’s last memory of his face to be one that has David West’s hand attached to it?

Now to Carlisle. Is he something more than just a same-song/different-voice, something more than “Ivory Johnson’’? BallDon’tLie makes a great point of Rick’s history of being “risk-adverse,’’ but isn’t he already demonstrating an ability to be a different version of himself?

How about the LIBBs? Won’t they be putting out, knowing this might be their last rodeo?

And maybe most of all, to Josh Howard.

“We need him to play big,’’ Carlisle says. “He needs to get back to Western Conference All-Star-caliber level of play for 82 games, which he did a couple of years ago.’’

All fall signs point to J-Ho putting behind him five months worth of missteps: the public marijuana confession, the late-night birthday party during the first-round series against the Hornets, playing horribly (shooting 29 percent) during that series, the arrest on drag-racing charges, the National Anthem fiasco. All that followed Howard’s sadness over two deaths in his family; Josh must now use all of that as motivation rather than as a flock of albatrosses.

Says Nowitzki: “I think he’s going to have a fun year. He’s going to have a big impact for us.’’

For Josh Howard, “fun’’ could lead to the path to redemption.

SCIENTIFICALLY VALID AND VETTED REASON NO. 8:

There are age issues. Dirk is 30. Josh is approaching 29. (He’ll have a birthday – if not a party -- to start the start the playoffs). Jason Kidd is 35. Damp is 33. Jet is 31. Stack turns 34 in November.

There are recent-record issues. The Mavs are 3-12 over their last 15 playoff games. That, sir, is a trend.

There are Western Conference issues. On paper, the Lakers are better than Dallas. On the court, San Antonio and New Orleans can argue that they’re better than Dallas. Utah, Phoenix, Houston are in the mix. The Blazers and Clippers and Nuggets think they are. The Mavs could conceivably finish up there with that first group, or. … not. (Geez. … before the Mavs figure out how to finish, say, in the top three in the West, they’ll need to figure out how to even finish in the top three in their own division.)

There are image issues. Deadspin says the centers are weak as the “90-pound physicist getting sand kicked in his face at the beach.’’ Nevermind that Dallas’ two centers weigh a combined 530 pounds. There are obviously image issues.

But you know what else there is? Hope.

There is legitimate hope that Dallas wins 50-plus and enters the final week of the season jousting for, say, a place among the top five teams in the West. Then you get to the Tournament, and you get to hope some more.

Yeah, yeah, I’m familiar with Shakespeare (“The miserable have no other medicine

but only hope’’) and I’m familiar with Ben Franklin (“He that lives upon hope will die fasting’’) and I’m familiar with Nietzsche (“In reality, hope is the worst of all evils, because it prolongs man's torments’’).

Back the hell off. Roll over, Shakespeare, Franklin and Nietzsche, and tell the other cynical corpses the news. It’s the beginning of another Mavs season.

And I like hope.