

Houston Rockets

If the Rockets were a real estate property, now would be the time to buy. Such are the consequences of low, low expectations.

How are the Rockets going to replace injured stars Yao Ming and Tracy McGrady? That seems to be the storyline in Houston this season. Never mind the fact that in the playoffs last season, the Rockets pushed the eventual-champion Lakers to a seventh game in the Western Conference semifinals *without Yao Ming and Tracy McGrady*, having already beaten Portland for the team's first playoff series win since 1997 before Yao went down. Despite that postseason success, the forecasts for 2009-10 have generally been dire.

Houston has won 50 or more games in four out of the last five seasons. The exception was 2005-06, when the Rockets limped to a 34-48 record under Jeff Van Gundy. That season, Yao and McGrady combined to miss 60 games. The only Rocket to start more than 63 games was Juwan Howard. So you can understand why these doubters are pessimistic about the Rockets sans their stars.

Are fans and analysts missing something? According to SCHOENE, they are right on the money. SCHOENE sees Houston slipping to 37-45, finishing 19th in Offensive Rating and 18th at the defensive end. However, the other system we use at Basketball Prospectus, NBAPET, tells an entirely different story. NBAPET sees the Rockets going 52-30 and capturing the fourth seed in the West. This more optimistic forecast has Houston finishing 21st in Of-

ensive Rating, but still succeeding by leading the league in Defensive Rating.

Now, we point these things out not to pit our systems against each other, but to underscore how interesting this year's Rockets are going to be. McGrady could mess all of this up by coming back, of course, and his availability--let alone his effectiveness--is very much a question mark.

However, what we know and expect right now is that the Rockets will play the bulk of this season with

\$38.8 million worth of star power watching from the sidelines. What is left is a collection of role players. Ordinarily, that would be a prescription for disaster. However, the Rockets don't just have role players. They have a roster full of *really good* role players.

That description starts with point guard Aaron Brooks, who emerged as the offense's focal point when the Rockets were short-handed during the postseason. Brooks is a blur with the ball in his hands, possessing the ability to break down almost any defense with dribble penetration. Unlike many players of his ilk, however, Brooks also

is a lethal outside shooter. His game has its rough edges and, in the new pecking order, he's going to have to become a better playmaker. That will be especially crucial if the Rockets go with a quicker pace, which has been suggested.

He'll be flanked by super-athletic wingman Trevor Ariza, who was signed away from the Lakers on the open market in a de facto swap for Ron Artest. Artest's depar-

ROCKETS IN A BOX

Last year's record	53-29
Last year's Offensive Rating	109.7 (16)
Last year's Defensive Rating	105.6 (4)
Last year's point differential	4.0 (6)
Team Pace	89.0 (19)
SCHOENE projection	37-45 (12)
Projected Offensive Rating	108.4 (19)
Projected Defensive Rating	109.8 (18)
Projected team weighted age	27.6 (13)
Projected '09-10 payroll	\$69.1 (16)
Likely payroll obligations, '10-11	\$47.3 (21)

Head coach: Rick Adelman

Rick Adelman has coached four different NBA teams over 18 seasons and missed the playoffs just twice--the two years he coached Golden State. He faces one of his biggest challenges this year as injuries to Yao Ming and Tracy McGrady have many observers forecasting a trip to the lottery for the Rockets. Known for his efficient offenses, Adelman favors a Princeton-style motion attack that relies on ball movement and player movement away from the ball. Adelman's ability to coach defense-oriented squads has been underrated due to pace-of-play issues, but some of that has been laid to rest in his time in Houston.

ture has been further fuel for those predicting gloom and doom in Houston. In fact, the Rockets should come out quite nicely in this exchange. Ariza has been one of the NBA's most underrated players for most of his career. That holds true not just for the fans and media, but also for his coaches. Despite his obvious natural ability and versatility on both ends of the floor, Ariza will be playing for his fourth team in six NBA seasons.

In L.A., Ariza was utilized as a perimeter stopper, a role which he filled quite well. On offense, he was used primarily as a spot-up shooter. Over a quarter of Ariza's shot attempts came from behind the arc last season, a huge jump over his established tendencies. He hit just under 32 percent on treys, so despite hot shooting in the playoffs, clearly the Lakers were not getting the most out of his talent. In Houston, Ariza can still work on that outside shot, but he will have much more freedom to attack the basket, create offense for himself and teammates and draw fouls. Given the Rockets' need for scoring and likely style of play, Ariza should emerge as an All-Star candidate this season.

Further, he's a better defender than Artest at this point in their respective careers. Artest is obviously stronger and more physical, but he can only dream of Ariza's lateral movement. Last season, the Rockets featured one of the best perimeter defenses in the league thanks to the combined talents of Artest and stopper extraordinaire Shane Battier. This season, the perimeter 'D' should be even better.

One of the reasons that SCHOENE is pessimistic about the Rockets' defensive outlook is because of a dearth of shot-blocking on the team. That is a void created by Yao's absence and Dikembe Mutombo's retirement. The recent signing of Pops Mensah-Bonsu does give the Rockets a shot-blocking presence, but let's face it, if Houston has to resort to giving Pops heavy minutes to get the occasional swat, then the Rockets really are in trouble. What will be worth noting about the Rockets' defense this season is to what degree, if any, Yao's and Mutombo's presence inflated the individual defensive metrics of the players around them.

Is this one of the league's best defensive teams? Whether this is true will determine the course of the Rockets' season. That said, there are some serious questions that have to be answered on the offensive end. Just little things like, "Where is the offense going to come from?"

As interesting as the Rockets are on defense, they will be exponentially more fascinating on offense. Up

and down the roster, efficiency abounds, but where is the usage?

The relationship between efficiency and usage is really at the crux of modern basketball analysis. Many objective systems overrate efficiency because they don't model a realistic interaction between the players on the court. Meanwhile, many subjective observers overrate usage, i.e., a player's ability to use possessions, because high usage can often result in impressive-looking per-game scoring numbers. The truth of the matter is that teams need a healthy balance of both for their offense to produce at an optimum level. You can have the most efficient group of players in NBA history on the floor; it's not going to matter if they're all standing around waiting for someone else to create the opportunity that they are so effective at converting. Conversely, when you think about it, any player in the league can theoretically post a high usage rate just by chucking the ball towards the basket and turn-

Inside View

"We're going to have to get more offense from transition and more from (Rick Adelman's) offense, which means a lot of motion and cutting. (There) won't really be a focal point, but I guess Aaron (Brooks) and (Luis) Scola will probably be the ones that will be asked to do more than most."

Daryl Morey, on where the offense will come from this year

"We brought him in mostly for his defense, but we do think he can expand his offensive game as well. Coach Adelman feels good about his (fit) in his offense. We didn't bring Trevor in to be a big offensive force for us."

Daryl Morey, on Trevor Ariza carrying more of an offensive load

"Yao (Ming) is a very good defender. People think of him as an offensive player, but his biggest impact for us last year was on the defensive end. We do expect our defense to fall off a bit without him back there and we're going to have to compensate by being more aggressive on (defense)."

Daryl Morey, on the team's lack of shot blocking

Daryl Morey is the Rockets' general manager.

From the Blogosphere

Who: Jason Friedman

What: Rockets.com

Where: www.rockets.com/

The Rockets aren't scheduled to make an appearance on national TV this season, no surprise given their current lack of star power. But someone figures to burst forth from the shadows and perhaps no Rocket is better positioned to do so than Luis Scola. Offensively, he'll be the primary option in the post, putting his plethora of spins, shakes and shimmies to good use. Scola also has an uncanny knack for reading the ball's trajectory off the rim, which helps explain his exceptional rebound rate. And few big men get up and down the floor as well as he does, a valuable asset as the Rockets attempt to play more up-tempo. The hirsute Argentinean is coming off an MVP performance at the FIBA Americas tournament this summer. A slight boost in his postseason numbers (more than 14 ppg and 11 rpg after Yao Ming's injury) could make him a dark horse All-Star candidate.

ing it over to the other team. That's not going to win you games, either.

Based on past career numbers, the only one of the Rockets' probable starters that has a sure-fire projection for an above-average usage rate is Brooks. Luis Scola, who shouldered an increased offensive load during the Rockets' playoff run last spring, is about average in projected usage. New center David Andersen is a little better than that, but his projection is based on Euroleague statistics. Ariza may look like a player that can take on a much bigger role than he has in the past, but the fact of the matter is that he's never even used an average percentage of possessions during his career. Battier, of course, is the epitome of a high-efficiency, low-usage performer.

So someone in this group is going to take on a significantly bigger role than he's accustomed to on the offensive end. The most likely candidate for that would seem to be Ariza. If Brooks starts using even more possessions, he could end up leaving Rockets fans longing for the generous ways of Steve Francis. Scola, too, will be in a more featured role. Invariably, with the increased responsibility on the offensive end, the efficiency of these players is going to dip. Howev-

er, the good news is that the per-possession numbers for Ariza and Scola are so strong that they can afford a little hit in efficiency without hurting the Rockets much, if at all.

The wild card in all of this may be Andersen, who is expected to start at center. Casual NBA observers almost certainly know nothing about Andersen, a 7'0" Australian who has continued playing overseas since being drafted by Atlanta in the second round in 2002. He enters the NBA after an accomplished career in the Euroleague, where he ranks No. 8 in career scoring. (Scola is sixth--both players also crack the top 10 in career rebounds.)

Andersen's arsenal is classically European; he has three-point range on his jumper but is not much of an athlete. That could mean an adjustment for Andersen during his rookie season. He will be a very different kind of center than Yao, but one can envision the high pick-and-pop between Brooks and Andersen becoming a go-to play for head coach Rick Adelman this season.

The other player to watch is Jermaine Taylor, a rookie shooting guard from Central Florida. Taylor was an explosive scorer as a collegian, leading the nation in percentage of his team's shots taken but still posting a fine .556 eFG%. SCHOENE sees him as being a high-volume shooter at the NBA level, a forecast that his ATH translation supports. Taylor has ample opportunity to be a source of instant offense off the Rockets' bench this season, filling the role that departed Von Wafer did a year ago.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the Rockets have so many players who sparkle in the glare of advanced metrics. No basketball-operations person has embraced, or embodied, the analytical sides of scouting and team building with quite the gusto of Houston general manager Daryl Morey. To put it in a baseball context, most personnel people in the league sound like baseball general managers circa 1995. Morey sounds like Theo Epstein, circa 2009.

But don't let Morey fool you--he hasn't let the cold realities of quantitative analysis sap the fun out of the game for Rockets fans, nor have his new-school methods stood in the way of him crafting a good working relationship with long-time NBA coach Adelman. He gives his coach good players with which to work and the results have been sterling. What else is there?

Morey also has the Rockets on solid financial footing. Getting zero production out of players with two massive contracts such as the ones attached to Yao and

McGrady would cripple most teams. However, Morey has managed to piece together a workable roster around those two salary sinkholes, keeping the Rockets competitive while remaining under the luxury-tax threshold. Next summer, McGrady finally comes off the books, and by then Houston should know a lot more about Yao's prognosis. Then the fun begins, as Houston will have more flexibility than most teams around the league. Morey may want to use it to lock up some of his current players, or he may want to

make a splash. The key is that he'll have the ability to choose and will have solid, objective reasons for whatever path he decides to follow.

The Rockets will be terrific fun to watch this season for many reasons. Rockets fans aren't likely interested in the fact that their team may serve as a great case study; they want to win. The way it's shaping up, though, it's possible that Rockets fans and basketball students alike will be happy by the time the 2009-10 season comes to an end. *Bradford Doolittle*

ROCKETS FIVE-YEAR TRENDS

Season	AGE	W-L	POW	PYTH	SEED	ORTG	DRTG	PT DIFF	PACE
04-05	29.7	51-31	53.3 (5)	53.1	5	107.5 (15)	102.9 (4)	4.0 (5)	88.4 (22)
05-06	28.8	34-48	35.9 (19)	36.0	---	103.9 (28)	105.8 (9)	-1.6 (20)	86.7 (28)
06-07	28.2	52-30	55.1 (4)	55.1	4	107.6 (15)	102.2 (3)	4.9 (5)	90.1 (21)
07-08	28.1	55-27	56.8 (7)	54.7	5	108.8 (17)	103.6 (2)	4.7 (9)	88.9 (22)
08-09	27.9	53-29	53.1 (6)	52.6	5	109.9 (15)	105.5 (4)	4.0 (6)	89.5 (20)

Season	PAY	OFFENSE				DEFENSE			
		eFG	oREB	FT/FGA	TO	eFG	oREB	FT/FGA	TO
04-05	\$ 57.8	.486 (11)	.263 (27)	.242 (19)	.157 (13)	.459 (3)	.210 (1)	.245 (15)	.150 (24)
05-06	\$ 52.4	.471 (27)	.283 (11)	.240 (21)	.168 (23)	.472 (6)	.209 (7)	.247 (16)	.154 (24)
06-07	\$ 62.6	.499 (15)	.257 (22)	.220 (26)	.157 (8)	.466 (1)	.190 (1)	.230 (8)	.157 (24)
07-08	\$ 77.6	.492 (17)	.291 (7)	.200 (27)	.147 (12)	.465 (2)	.211 (7)	.214 (10)	.146 (18)
08-09	\$ 68.8	.501 (13)	.264 (17)	.235 (16)	.158 (20)	.479 (4)	.209 (5)	.192 (2)	.138 (27)

(league rankings in parentheses)

C	David Andersen	Hght: 7'0"	Exp: R	Salary: \$2.4 million	SKILL RATINGS																	
		Wght: 245	From: Australia		TOT	OFF	DEF	REB	PAS	HND	SHT	ATH										
13		2010-11 status: veteran contract for \$2.4 million			+2	-4	+5	-2	+3	+1	-2	-3										
Year	Team	Age	G	MPG	Usg	3PA%	FTA%	INS	2P%	3P%	FT%	TS%	Reb%	Ast%	TO%	BLK%	STL%	PF%	oRTG	dRTG	Win%	WARP
09-10p	HOU	29.8	76	19.0	.224	.152	.070	.919	.451	.378	.820	.508	.125	.026	.119	.009	.007	.045	104.3	106.0	.445	0.9
Most similar to: Terry Mills (98.0), Tom McMillen, Jerome Whitehead, Dwight Jones																		IMP: 54%	BRK: 5%	COP: 5%		

David Andersen was signed to be Yao Ming's backup, even though Yao almost certainly won't play in the coming season. Like many of Daryl Morey's moves this summer, Andersen was signed not only to be a part of a serviceable Rockets center rotation but also to be a key piece for a big push next year. Andersen is a sweet-shooting, face-up center with the kind of passing skills that should allow him to excel in Rick Adelman's motion offense.

Andersen is highly motivated. After being drafted by Atlanta in the second round way back in 2002, he has been itching to take a shot at the NBA for several years. According to Andersen, the Hawks would neither make an offer to bring him over, nor would they make a trade to free him up to play with someone else. His patience should be well rewarded as he steps into an ideal situation in Houston. Andersen's translated defensive skills are strong, though the reliability of those translations is very much in doubt.