

# Chicago Bulls

The madness is back on Madison, and not just because of the Blackhawks. During a crucial year in the organization's development, the Bulls charted a course, kept to it and have been rewarded with one of the brightest futures of any franchise in the NBA.

Like the Knicks, Nets and Heat, the Bulls played the 2009-10 season in a sort of limbo. Like the Heat, but unlike the New York-area franchises, the Bulls managed to set themselves up for the wild free-agent summer without punting the season. Chicago projected to a win total ranging from the high-30s to the mid-40s. Despite a couple of bad stretches and injuries that came in bunches, the Bulls closed the season with 41 wins for the third time in five years. In fact, the Bulls' composite regular-season record over that last half-decade is .500 on the nose. It's one thing to be mediocre on the downward arc--that's the time to tear down. It's also a common and undesirable NBA malady to be middling and stagnant, especially if your payroll strangles your flexibility. The Bulls were mediocre with a bullet, if that makes any sense, because of a terrific core of young talent that is only going to improve. Even better, Chicago's braintrust of general manager Gar Forman and basketball operations vice president John Paxson maneuvered the franchise into a position in which it could have landed two elite free-agent talents. In simple terms, Chicago could have signed two of the LeBron/Wade/Bosh mother lode and was one more salary-shedding move from being

able to do what Miami did: sign all three.

The Bulls turned out to be bridesmaids in the hunt for the big game in the free-agent safari, but the whiff may have been a blessing in disguise. When Plan A failed, the Bulls sidestepped the landmine Plan B, which would have been to throw max-type dollars at players that didn't deserve it. The young group of Joakim Noah, Derrick Rose, Luol Deng and Taj Gibson gave GarPax another option. Methodically, throughout the summer, the Bulls were able to piece by piece build a roster of complementary talents and establish some of the NBA's best depth. It's not a perfect roster--the team still needs to add a shooter or two--but it's a talented group with room to grow, and they haven't yet spent up to the salary cap. With a few more sound decisions, the Bulls can continue to massage the middle and back end of the roster, explore extensions with Noah and Rose and still have a financial prospectus that is sustainable after the possible harsh turns taken with the next Collective Bargaining Agreement.

How much of an advantage will Chicago's revamped depth be over most of the league? It could be significant, and let's explore the issue by comparing the projected rosters of the Heat and the Bulls (Table 1).

Right after the Heat landed LeBron James, thus locking up the greatest free-agent haul in NBA history, detractors noted that the team would have little money left to build a competitive roster around their

<b>BULLS IN A BOX</b>	
Last year's record	<b>41-41</b>
Last year's Offensive Rating	105.0 (28)
Last year's Defensive Rating	106.9 (10)
Last year's point differential	-1.6 (18)
Team pace	91.7 (12)
<b>SCHOENE projection</b>	<b>49-33 (3)</b>
Projected Offensive Rating	110.6 (13)
Projected Defensive Rating	107.5 (3)
Projected team weighted age	27.2 (17)
Projected '10-11 payroll	\$55.4 (25)
Est. payroll obligations, '11-12	\$56.3 (14)
<b>Head coach: Tom Thibodeau</b>	
One of the league's most respected assistant coaches thanks to his role as architect of the Boston Celtics' defense, Tom Thibodeau was overdue for a promotion to head coach. The Chicago Bulls will give him the opportunity, and Thibodeau has the luxury of better talent than most first-time head men. As his mentor Jeff Van Gundy has emphasized, Thibodeau is more than just a one-dimensional defensive expert. Adjusting Chicago's offensive attack may be his most important task. The Bulls have the talent to run an effective motion offense, but must compensate for a lack of shooting in the starting five.	

**Table 1: Projected Value, Starters vs. Bench, Heat vs. Bulls**

Miami Heat			Chicago Bulls		
Player	Win%	WARP2	Player	Win%	WARP2
LeBron James	.770	21.0	Carlos Boozer	.572	8.1
Dwyane Wade	.697	15.8	Joakim Noah	.551	6.2
Chris Bosh	.591	9.7	Derrick Rose	.522	6.2
<i>Stars Total</i>	--	46.6	<i>Stars Total</i>	--	20.4
Mario Chalmers	.492	3.3	Ronnie Brewer	.487	3.0
Mike Miller	.467	2.1	Luol Deng	.472	2.9
Eddie House	.412	-0.1	Kyle Korver	.495	2.8
James Jones	.410	-0.1	C.J. Watson	.505	2.4
Zydrunas Ilgauskas	.402	-0.3	Omer Asik	.662	2.0
Joel Anthony	.394	-0.7	Keith Bogans	.458	1.0
Jamaal Magloire	.316	-0.8	Taj Gibson	.437	0.8
Carlos Arroyo	.363	-1.0	James Johnson	.442	0.2
Udonis Haslem	.365	-2.2	Kurt Thomas	.380	-0.7
Da'Sean Butler	.438	-	John Lucas III	--	--
Dexter Pittman	.453	-	<i>Depth Total</i>	--	14.5
Juwan Howard	.303	-			
Kenny Hasbrouck	--	--			
Patrick Beverley	--	--			
Shavlik Randolph	--	--			
<i>Depth Total</i>	--	0.3			

superstars. Then Miami went about filling out its roster with a lot of relatively familiar names. Many of those naysayers, such as ABC/ESPN commentator Jeff Van Gundy, fell over themselves lauding the supporting roster Pat Riley put together in South Beach. In reality, the initial, kneejerk reactions were probably closer to the truth. Miami's supporting cast beyond the big three is a baby's whisker above replacement level. This is key to the hopes of fans in Chicago, Orlando, Boston and other outposts in the Eastern Conference. No one is going to be able to match the star power of the Heat, but from roster spots four to 15, the competitors will be able to make up a lot of ground.

For the Bulls, it's striking to see the disparity in the WARP totals of each team's core trio, but in fact there is some good news there. Wade is a star-caliber player to be sure, but he's already had one down season due to physical problems. Given his helter-skelter style and the fact that he's in his late 20s, there is no guarantee that Wade is going to remain an elite player. Bosh is an All-Star but, for a couple of years at least, isn't likely to be more than a win or two better than Carlos Boozer. There is no real answer for James--he may

remain the NBA's best player for the next decade. But Rose is a dynamic talent still three years away from beginning his peak seasons and who is doggedly smoothing out the rough edges in his game.

There remains a disconnect between the way you evaluate Rose statistically and the way you might view him through the eyes of a scout. The Bulls are banking that Rose, who is actually a lot more deferential by nature than he's given credit for, will become more efficient with better surrounding talent and in a better offensive system. Don't be surprised if Rose's metrics take a sharp turn for the better in the 2010-11 season. If that happens, the WARP gap between James and Rose will narrow. Rose will never challenge James in terms of overall value. Only Oklahoma City's Kevin Durant seems capable of that. But Rose doesn't have to be James. If he can get within hailing distance, then the ebbs and flows elsewhere on the team's respective rosters will do the rest. Chicago can, should and likely will compete with Miami and Orlando for the top spot in the East, as soon as this season, and those already planning their Miami-to-Los Angeles flights for

next spring's Finals would do well to hold off until we actually see these revamped teams in action.

In the Bulls' case, the wait will be longer than than expected. Boozer had his share of injury problems in Utah, with seasons of 31, 49 and 45 games missed over six years. Just before the Bulls started their preseason schedule, Boozer broke the fifth metacarpal in his right hand. The injury required surgery, and was expected to keep him out of action until at least early December. For a team already under the gun to integrate a lot of new parts, this was an especially unwelcome setback.

Last season went more or less as expected. The team won about as often as it lost and squeezed into the playoffs once again. Rose improved and the team not only foreswore making short-term decisions to improve its 2009-10 standing but managed to prune the payroll while remaining competitive on the court. The defense was expected to be in the top 10 and it was, just barely, while the offense projected to be near the league's bottom, and it was. It also seemed likely that raw coach Vinny Del Negro would remain on shaky ground. That certainly turned out to be the case.

On the court, the Bulls often seemed disorganized on

offense and Del Negro's substitution patterns ranged from erratic to bizarre, but to his credit, the team played hard and demonstrated a lot of resilience. With Rose slightly hobbled early in the season, the Bulls got off to a 10-17 start. Gradually, the Bulls climbed back into the playoff chase, and a 21-10 stretch put them a season-best four games over .500. Then the injuries hit. Gibson and Noah battled plantar fasciitis, with the latter's recovery and minutes eventually leading to a ballyhooed blowout between Paxson and Del Negro. Hinrich missed time. Rose missed time. On March 16 in Memphis, the Bulls started Flip Murray, Jannero Pargo and Acie Law. Chicago lost 10 straight right after its high-water mark, a slump that came not long after Forman dealt John Salmons to Milwaukee and Tyrus Thomas to Charlotte in cap-clearing deals.

At that point, no one would really have been too worked up about the Bulls missing the postseason, as they were clearly positioning themselves for the future. Instead, Chicago finished 10-4, got back to break-even and passed the tanking Raptors to earn a first-round matchup against James' Cavaliers. As in 2009, the Bulls were competitive in their first-round series, but eventually fell to Cleveland in five games. In the grand scheme of things, it might seem like the playoff appearance didn't mean much and, probably, it didn't. However, the manner in which the Bulls got to the postseason derby spoke volumes about the competitiveness of its young talent and caught the attention of free agents like Boozer once the offseason kicked into high gear. The Bulls went 23-18 in the games when Deng, Gibson, Rose and Noah were all in the starting lineup. That 46-win pace was more indicative of the roster's quality than its actual final record. And it's that foundation from which Forman set out to build upon.

When the Bulls made the crucial decision to cut bait on Thomas, the team's direction became clear. Entering last season, it was still uncertain whether Thomas was going to be part of the team's future. Thomas remained as unreliable as ever, regularly flopping between the spectacular and the grotesque. He became a problem in the locker room and few tears were shed at the United Center when he was ultimately unloaded on the Bobcats. It's not easy to give up on such a talented player who still may yet turn out to be something. However, the Bulls assessed the odds of that happening and pulled the plug when they had the chance. After the summer played out, it was clear that Forman and Paxson made the right decision.

All of this talk of roster reshaping ignores what could

## From the Blogosphere

**Who:** Matt Bernhardt

**What:** Blog a Bull

**Where:** <http://www.blogabull.com/>

Derrick Rose has superlative quickness and plays his game near (and often above) the rim. So why can't he get to the line more? With his average of four free throw attempts a game, Rose lags behind other star guards in that department, which suppresses his overall offensive efficiency. Rose's stock should be rising to where he gets more 'star' treatment from officials, but there's more to getting to the free throw line than reputation. Rose is almost too fast and athletic; he can dance through the lane and adjust in midair, but that can lead to a difficult layup attempt (or his favorite finish, the floater) instead of two free throws. Rose expanded his game last season by dramatically improving his midrange shooting, and there's the tease of an improved three-point shot to come, but also look to see if he unleashes his inner Dwyane Wade to become even more unstoppable.

turn out to be just as big of an upgrade as anything done with the playing roster. Del Negro often seemed overmatched and there was obviously a disconnect between the coaching staff and the front office. Rumors of Del Negro's impending demise first surfaced in December, which makes the team's late-season turnaround that much more impressive. You can't pick at Del Negro's game and roster management without giving him credit for the fact that his players played hard and overcame long odds just to get into the playoffs when it would have been so easy to cruise into an early offseason. It's likely that the Bulls' perceived overachievement landed Del Negro a second chance at coaching long before anyone thought possible. Of course, he took the Clippers' job, so it's anyone's guess what led to that decision.

In any event, Bulls fans generally rejoiced when Del Negro was fired and rejoiced anew when his replacement turned out to be longtime NBA assistant Tom Thibodeau. Thibodeau was one of the league's best-known assistants by the time he took the Chicago job. If you can believe the reports about the Bulls' recruiting strategy during free agency, it sounds as if Thibodeau's presence was a strong selling point, not some-

thing typical of a first-time NBA head coach. Fans are familiar with Thibodeau as the architect of the great Celtics defenses of the last three years, but he was just as successful prior to that when working under Jeff Van Gundy in Houston. There is no easy way to quantify how much of an uptick in wins a team can expect from changing a subpar coach to an above-average coach. It's not even clear that Thibodeau is really an upgrade. After all, he's never sat in the big chair. Perhaps Del Negro has been underrated and Thibodeau doesn't have the qualities it takes to be the top guy on an NBA bench. We don't know--there isn't enough to go on. However, heading into the season, the consensus is that the Bulls have improved themselves more than a little at the head coaching position.

The first challenge for Thibodeau will be to find a workable offensive system for the new roster. Last year's attack was far too reliant on long two-point jumpers and maintained an inconsistent tempo. Del Negro was hesitant to go all-out in pushing the pace, though he coached the league's fastest player in Rose. After this summer's acquisitions, the Bulls have the pieces to be a premier running team, but will Thibodeau let them play fast? He initially hinted at a drive-and-kick attack that would take full advantage of Rose's talents, but the Bulls don't have the shooters to make that style work as a base offense. Boozer is a great pick-and-roll and pick-and-pop player and there will likely be a lot of two-man action going on between him and Rose. Thibodeau also has athletic, active talents filling out his starting lineup in Deng, Noah and Ronnie Brewer, which would suggest a Jerry Sloan-style offense with a lot of movement, back screening and cuts along the baseline. Kyle Korver, signed away from Utah, gives the Bulls the NBA's top three-point shooter and will help spread the floor. Rose continues to work on his perimeter game, but his strength will remain working in the lane. Deng's ability as a mid-range jump shooter has often hindered his efficiency and he's not reliable from beyond the arc and, anyway, would be wasted as a stand-in-the-corner three-point shooter. Noah is excellent diving to the hoop on the pick-and-roll and even developed a not-horrible midrange shot last season, but Boozer's presence may limit his opportunities to further develop his offensive arsenal. So there are a lot of pieces here, but also a lot of questions, and it's a big challenge for a first-time head coach to make it all work.

Thibodeau will need to craft a defense that is again greater than the sum of its parts. It's easy to note that

the Bulls finished 10th in the league in Defensive Rating and then went out and hired one of the league's best defensive minds as its head coach. However, the drop-off in defense from Gibson to Boozer as the full-time power forward is significant, and while Brewer works hard as a perimeter defender and holds his own, he's a clear downgrade from Kirk Hinrich, the longtime Bulls combo guard dealt to Washington just before the draft to clear cap space. Deng is underrated--he may be one of the league's five best defensive small forwards--but there is a distinct possibility that the Bulls' best lineup will include Korver, whose defense isn't as bad as its reputation but is a couple of notches below Deng. If Thibodeau could deploy NFL-style platoons, he'd be in good shape. As it is, the Bulls will try to leverage Noah, Brewer, an improving Rose and Thibodeau's tactical skills to hold down opposing first units.

There are other questions for Thibodeau to work through. How big of a factor can Omer Asik become in his first stateside season? The Bulls won't have a very deep big-man rotation. Given the injury histories of Noah and Boozer, as well as the age of Kurt Thomas, it's likely that Asik is going to be counted on for extended stretches this season. He's a skilled, mobile big man with a long reach that could make him a quality help defender. He's also underweight and was easily bounced out of position in international play. In the NBA, he may spend much of his first season laying on the laps of the patrons sitting courtside. Ideally, Asik would spend a year learning the NBA game, putting on weight and gaining strength, but he'll probably have to do all of that while also making regular contributions on the court. SCHOENE is really excited about his translated Euroleague production, so perhaps he'll prove to be more league ready than he appeared during the FIBA World Championship in late summer.

The Bulls might not have hit the jackpot this summer, but they nevertheless enjoyed the best offseason of any team this side of Miami and are extremely well positioned for the future. While Chicago fans would have embraced the LeBron/Wade superstar combo at the United Center, they may come to love this group just as much as they build a rivalry with the potential dynasty in Miami. The projections for this season are optimistic, and they only promise to get better from here. If the Heat is to become the league's biggest villains, the Bulls may become the team that everybody wants to topple them.

**BULLS FIVE-YEAR TRENDS**

Season	AGE	W-L	POW	PYTH	SEED	ORTG	DRTG	PT DIFF	PACE
05-06	24.1	41-41	41.0 (15)	42.9	7	105.5 (23)	104.4 (6)	0.6 (14)	91.8 (5)
06-07	26.0	49-33	51.3 (7)	55.3	5	106.7 (20)	101.1 (1)	5.0 (4)	92.2 (6)
07-08	25.1	33-49	31.4 (21)	32.2	---	105.8 (26)	109.3 (13)	-3.1 (21)	91.3 (10)
08-09	24.9	41-41	40.6 (16)	40.2	7	109.5 (19)	110.3 (18)	-0.3 (16)	91.9 (9)
09-10	26.9	41-41	38.5 (18)	36.2	8	105.0 (28)	106.9 (10)	-1.6 (18)	91.7 (12)

Season	OFFENSE					DEFENSE			
	PAY	eFG	oREB	FT/FGA	TO	eFG	oREB	FT/FGA	TO
05-06	\$37.7	.487 (16)	.263 (19)	.216 (27)	.161 (18)	.464 (3)	.747 (5)	.295 (29)	.161 (12)
06-07	\$54.7	.493 (17)	.286 (9)	.229 (22)	.172 (24)	.473 (3)	.743 (10)	.252 (19)	.188 (2)
07-08	\$62.8	.470 (28)	.289 (8)	.223 (19)	.153 (19)	.496 (12)	.731 (17)	.258 (26)	.159 (5)
08-09	\$67.7	.493 (21)	.280 (6)	.239 (12)	.156 (18)	.493 (9)	.709 (28)	.238 (18)	.154 (13)
09-10	\$67.0	.477 (28)	.266 (16)	.217 (21)	.154 (15)	.484 (7)	.748 (8)	.212 (9)	.143 (24)

(league rankings in parenthesis)