

Washington Wizards

You have to give Ernie Grunfeld credit. Not so long after he was seemingly headed for the NBA gallows, the president of basketball operations has put the Washington Wizards in a good place. The recipe for Washington's progress has been an equal mix of smart decision-making and some good, old-fashioned luck.

Let's start with the latter. Some teams end up stuck in the quagmire of mediocrity for years on end. No matter how well they plan, they just can't catch a break on lottery night. In the very first season after Grunfeld's reset of the Wizards, the franchise struck gold in landing the top pick of the 2010 draft. Washington nabbed point guard John Wall and in doing so acquired the most precious of all franchise building blocks--the cornerstone.

Wall's rookie season wasn't perfect, but it was awfully good. Despite battling health problems all season and playing on a roster that was in flux, he posted one of the best rookie assist rates of the last 30 years. If not for Blake Griffin's deferred rookie status, Wall would have almost certainly been a unanimous choice for Rookie of the Year. His first NBA head coach, Flip Saunders, has long favored point guard-centric schemes. The first year of this player-coach collaboration seemed to be smooth.

Grunfeld and the Wizards also got lucky because of the timing of the NBA's labor crisis. Owner Ted Leonsis, who had his wrists slapped by David Stern last fall for shooting his mouth off about a hard salary cap,

was almost certainly in the camp of hardline owners who felt like greater cost certainty was essential to future competitive balance. He'd fought that battle before in the NHL as owner of the Capitals. While the ultimate outcome of the labor stalemate fell short of what Leonsis and the other hockey owners achieved in 2006, it did create a system by which it should be easier for the Wizards to retain Wall in a few seasons. In the short term, there was an even greater benefit

to the franchise: the amnesty clause.

Some shrewd dealing by Grunfeld set the stage for that bit of good fortune. Last fall, he reportedly engaged Orlando general manager Otis Smith in talks to swap bad contracts--Gilbert Arenas for Vince Carter. Those talks fell through, but a few weeks later Arenas went to the Magic anyway, in exchange for hobbled and overpaid forward Rashard Lewis. True, Arenas would have been amnestied by the Wizards had he not been traded. However, Leonsis would have had to eat much more money. Coming into this season, Arenas was still owed \$62.3 over the last three years

of the contract Grunfeld gave him not so long ago. Lewis has two years and \$43.8 million left on his own bloated deal--a nifty bit of cash savings for Leonsis. You also have to figure there were ancillary benefits to getting Arenas as far away from Wall as possible.

As for Lewis, the Wizards have not sent him the amnesty way just yet. They can't, really. Washington was already in the position of having to spend its way up

WIZARDS IN A BOX

Last year's record	23-59
Last year's Offensive Rating	103.7 (28)
Last year's Defensive Rating	111.6 (23)
Last year's point differential	-7.4 (29)
Team Pace	93.1 (7)
SCHOENE projection	18-48 (15)
Projected Offensive Rating	105.0 (29)
Projected Defensive Rating	112.2 (29)
Projected team weighted age	25.1 (29)
Projected '11-12 payroll	\$56.4 (21)
Likely payroll obligations, '12-13	\$48.6 (20)

Head coach: Flip Saunders

Last year was a tough season for Saunders, who coached both the worst offense and worst defense of his 15-year career. The Wizards' rebuilding plan seems to be going the right direction, but it remains to be seen if Saunders is the right guy to lead it. Washington projects as the worst team in the NBA this season, so there is a golden opportunity for Saunders to exceed expectations. Last year, he allowed his squad to pick up the tempo. With a good group of young athletes around dynamic point guard John Wall, Saunders may really press the pedal to the metal this season.

to the new salary floor of \$49 million for this season. Waiving Lewis would have forced the team to overpay for free agents it doesn't need at this stage of the rebuilding process. If Lewis' knees improve, he can help on the court and serve as a veteran presence. He's not worth anything close to the \$21.1 million he'll be paid this year but, again, the Wizards have to spend that money on someone. The two years left on Lewis' deal give Grunfeld time to build his roster in other ways and the flexibility to extend JaVale McGee. Lewis can be waived next summer.

Grunfeld pulled off another nifty bit of general managing by leveraging his team's improved cap position to acquire a pair of young talents. Prior to last season's draft, he took advantage of Chicago's cap-clearing frenzy by taking on Kirk Hinrich. Grunfeld's tax for doing so was the Bulls' first-round pick, which turned out to be Kevin Seraphin. Seraphin showed solid upside as an off-the-bench defender and rebounder during his rookie season. Hinrich offered plenty of on-court value, enough that Grunfeld was able to flip him to the Hawks, who fancied themselves contenders. That brought back the expiring contract of Maurice Evans, veteran point guard Mike Bibby, rookie Jordan Crawford and Atlanta's first-round pick in the most recent draft.

There were benefits aplenty from that deal. First, the lucky part. Bibby wanted to escape to Miami so badly that he forfeited the entire \$6.2 million due him in 2011-12. Just walked away from it. Meanwhile, Crawford showed explosive scoring ability and a flair for wildness that will have to be harnessed. He may wear out his welcome in short order, but he's just the sort of upside talent a team in Washington's position needs to acquire. Finally, Grunfeld used the extra draft pick to take Florida State's Chris Singleton, who has the potential to be an All-Defensive pick.

In the end, Grunfeld turned cap space and some token second-round picks into Seraphin, Crawford and Singleton. Not bad.

Grunfeld exploited his cap space again after the lockout ended by taking Ronny Turiaf off the hands of the Knicks, who were trying to clear payroll for Tyson Chandler. Turiaf's deal expires after this season, but his \$4.4 million helped get Washington closer to the payroll floor in the short term. Turiaf is useful on the court as well, a capable defender and shot blocker who has a reputation as a positive locker room presence. He can mentor McGee and Seraphin this season, perhaps beyond if things work out.

The plumb of Washington's offseason was Jan Vesely, the sixth pick of the draft. Vesely is the rare European who comes into the league with a reputation for pure athleticism. Finding athletes, shooters and defenders to put around Wall is the plan and Vesely has the potential to be his running mate for many years to come.

The only lingering bit of business for Grunfeld after camps opened was the status of restricted free agent Nick Young. Young, like Crawford, is an explosive scorer who tends to put up numbers in a vacuum. However, he's shown signs of maturing in that regard. The Wizards would hate to give up on him just as they were about to bear the fruits of their own player development. Washington wanted to bring Young back to create some competition between him and Crawford at shooting guard, but Grunfeld was waiting to see what happened in the marketplace. Young is not the kind of player worth overpaying. Young ended up signing the team's qualifying offer of \$3.7 million and will become an unrestricted free agent after the season.

Grunfeld has done a nice job digging out of the hole he created by locking up his former core of Arenas, Caron Butler and Antawn Jamison. That group had limited upside and each of those players was at or nearing the end of their respective peaks. It was perhaps another nice bit of verisimilitude that the end of the group was hastened by injuries and off-court issues. It all led to the Wizards getting to the point they are today. Not surprisingly, Leonsis has become a champion of Grunfeld's, telling reporters on media day that he and his basketball honcho "are in lock-step." That's high praise for the architect of a team that won just 23 games and dropped its first 25 on the road last season. Now that the transition year is behind them, Leonsis likely expects better on-court results this season.

The man on the spot in that area is Saunders, who came to Washington because of his past success in helping veteran squads take the proverbial next step. Instead of helping the Arenas/Butler/Jamison core finally break through, Saunders became the ringmaster in a circus of player movement. He had to switch gears from polishing a team to developing players. His results have been mixed. Forget the won-lost record. No coach could have won with the hand Saunders has been dealt during his first two years in Washington. Instead, it's important to focus on the development of Washington's young talent. Saunders gets middling

grades in that regard.

To be fair, Saunders has been given more than his share of players that have a troubling penchant for squirrelness. McGee can become so enamored of his highlight-reel dunks and blocked shots that he does things that make your jaw drop for all the wrong reasons. He's gotten better under Saunders, though. For the first time last season, the Wizards were improved defensively with McGee on the floor and his teammates less frequently had to cover for a teammate who was wildly out of position.

Andray Blatche has long been one of the more enigmatic talents in the league, but last year he appeared to make progress. After bristling about being the subject of midseason trade rumors, Blatche settled down and finished strong. He reportedly arrived in camp in shape--never a given with him--and was said to be demonstrating newfound maturity. As with all camp hyperbole, it's worth taking a wait-see-attitude on those comments. If true, is that a feather in Saunders' cap? Hard to say, but keep in mind that coaches weren't allowed to contact players during the lockout.

Last season, McGee and Blatche got in a fight outside a nightclub. Wall, the team's young leader, served a suspension for fighting renowned NBA good guy Zydrunas Ilgauskas. Crawford and Young often played as if they'd learned basketball from watching old highlight films of Freeman Williams. Eliminating these kind of problems is Saunders' task; his ability to complete it will determine if the Wizards can evolve from a collection of talent into a basketball team.

The Wizards are going to try to play more up-tempo this season. Given the number of young athletes on the roster playing alongside Wall, that only makes sense. Saunders has been all over the map in terms of coaching a team's speed. He's had squads that have ranked anywhere from third to 30th in pace. In general, his most efficient offenses have been the more methodical ones. Last season, Washington jumped from 19th to seventh in pace, but finished 28th in Offensive Rating. The Wizards are making the right play

From the Blogosphere

Who: Mike Prada

What: Bullets Forever

Where: <http://www.bulletsforever.com/>

John Wall, who was supposed to take the NBA by storm as a rookie, didn't because he was not 100 percent healthy. Wall battled knee tendinitis all year and also had a foot injury. It was defensively where the injuries seemed to hurt him most. Billed as an impressive defender (Flip Saunders compared him to Gary Payton several times), Wall was a step slow. In one eight-game stretch in February, when his injuries were most severe, Wall surrendered an average of 18.5 points and 8.5 assists on 58 percent shooting to the likes of Darren Collison, Jrue Holiday, Devin Harris, Beno Udrih, D.J. Augustin, Luke Ridnour and Jose Calderon. Part of that was inexperience guarding the pick-and-roll, but a lot was injuries. Wall has said he was embarrassed by how many opponents took advantage of him. With a clean bill of health, he's hoping he can achieve his defensive potential this season.

by going up-tempo, but Grunfeld will have to make the call whether Saunders is the appropriate coach to manage that style.

Grunfeld has put this a once-proud franchise in a much better position than they were a year and a half ago. Really, it's fairly miraculous. Fittingly, as the rising Wizards search for a new identity, they've offered a nod to their glorious past by going back to the franchise's beloved American flag-style uniforms. That seems appropriate for a team that once again appears to be climbing the NBA's flagpole.

Bradford Doolittle

WASHINGTON WIZARDS

WIZARDS FIVE-YEAR TRENDS

Season	AGE	W-L	POW	PYTH	SEED	ORTG	DRTG	PT DIFF	PACE
06-07	26.8	41-41	39.2 (16)	39.6	7	111.1 (5)	112.5 (28)	-0.5 (15)	92.9 (5)
07-08	27.5	43-39	40.4 (16)	40.0	5	111.1 (12)	111.9 (23)	-0.3 (15)	87.7 (27)
08-09	26.9	19-63	19.9 (28)	21.3	---	106.6 (26)	115.8 (29)	-7.5 (28)	89.6 (17)
09-10	28.7	26-56	26.6 (26)	27.6	--	105.6 (25)	111.2 (18)	-4.8 (26)	90.3 (19)
10-11	25.9	23-59	20.6 (28)	21.6	--	103.7 (28)	111.6 (23)	-7.4 (29)	93.1 (7)

		OFFENSE				DEFENSE			
Season	PAY	eFG	oREB	FT/FGA	TO	eFG	oREB	FT/FGA	TO
06-07	\$61.9	.491 (18)	.281 (13)	.272 (6)	.148 (3)	.517 (28)	.710 (24)	.249 (18)	.168 (13)
07-08	\$61.1	.489 (19)	.289 (9)	.233 (11)	.142 (8)	.514 (27)	.728 (20)	.217 (12)	.152 (11)
08-09	\$70.6	.480 (29)	.277 (10)	.224 (22)	.155 (17)	.533 (30)	.714 (26)	.227 (13)	.155 (11)
09-10	\$73.6	.481 (26)	.276 (8)	.216 (22)	.163 (25)	.502 (18)	.724 (25)	.239 (20)	.149 (22)
10-11	\$57.5	.471 (29)	.280 (9)	.216 (23)	.164 (25)	.512 (24)	.705 (29)	.249 (25)	.168 (6)

(league rankings in parentheses)