

THE FREE AGENCY SWEEPSTAKES

By Michael Gerald

It is indeed that time of year again. Every summer, the NBA free agency period sparks the imagination with speculations about which players are going to which teams, and how can the different combinations fit under the salary caps.

And par for the course over the last few years, LeBron James has been atop the free agent list. The Los Angeles Lakers, Houston Rockets, Philadelphia 76ers, Washington Wizards, and Cleveland Cavaliers seem to be at the top of every pundit list of potential suitors.

But I'd like to propose a few other teams that may be a better fit in theory, but have a few more financial obstacles to overcome, which makes them a long shot. So, for the sake of conversation let's call this "Mike's List Of Those Not Likely To Land LeBron James Without A Mini-Miracle".

Los Angeles Clippers – To some, they may be considered less glamorous than the Lakers, but they are still based in Los Angeles, which is alleged to be a prime destination for LeBron James. Even though the Lakers are rumored to be at the top of the list, what can be more appealing than bringing a team their very first championship. This is the exact opportunity he would have with the Clippers, and head coach Doc Rivers.

The Clippers have also made moves to position themselves to be a contender for LeBron. They drafted 6'6" point guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander from the University of Kentucky, and 6'5" shooting guard Jerome Robinson from Boston College. They will also have Milos Teodosic, and defensive specialist Patrick Beverley back returning next season. And the recent trade of Austin Rivers for Marcin Gortat has giving them a starting center option just in case they lose Deandre Jordan this off-season.

However, the Clippers won't have much free cap space this summer, but will have a projection of \$50 million for the summer of 2019. So in order for them to land LeBron, they'd have to make some serious moves this off-season, but, even though it is a long shot, it could happen. Assuming they could lure a Paul George or Kawhi Leonard back to their native Los Angeles.

New Orleans Pelicans – LeBron James, Anthony Davis, Dru Holiday, and Rajon Rondo sounds like a fantastic core. However, if the Pelicans were to bring DeMarcus Cousins back next year, they'd be \$9 million over the tax threshold, and would endure a \$14.5 million dollar tax penalty. If they keep Rajon Rondo it balloons up to \$23.7 million. None of this sounds financially promising to land LeBron, but they do have a few player assets in Emeka Okafor, Cheick Diallo, DeAndre Liggins, and Darius Miller.

They are one of the few teams with ready-made parts, although I'm not sure if the collective sum of its trade assets equal one LeBron James, or if New Orleans is the kind of city the King would like to move the family, but they do have King Cake ready just in case.

Utah Jazz – I know, I know, but hear me out first. Derrick Favors is expected to explore the free agency market, and they also have other potential trade pieces like Dante Exum and Raul Neto. They could potentially free up over \$26 million in cap space to help pay LeBron James a king's ransom, which would leave a core group of Ricky Rubio, Donovan Mitchell, Joe Ingles, and Rudy Gorbert.

Utah also has a strong group of role players with Alec Burks, Royce O'Neale, and Jay Crowder, whom which LeBron is already familiar from his time with the Cleveland Cavaliers. Is Utah the kind of destination LeBron James would want to move his family? Maybe, maybe not, but at least it is closer to Los Angeles.

Other teams like the San Antonio Spurs who can free up \$32 million in cap space by trading Pau Gasol and Danny Green, and the Sacramento Kings, who already have \$17 million in cap room available, and the Phoenix Suns who can free up \$23 million in cap space by trading Tyson Chandler and Jared Dudley. The Orlando Magic also falls into a similar category.

All in all, moves made by other top tier free agents like the aforementioned Paul George, Kawhi Leonard, and Derrick Favors in addition to Chris Paul, could ultimately decide how these free agency dominos will fall. Stay tuned.