

Can The Philadelphia 76ers Put The Pieces Together?

Austen Travis (Updated 11.26.18)

As the 76ers reach the quarter point in the season when historically some semblance of a playoff picture starts to emerge, will they be able to withstand the pressure of higher expectations this season and surpass what they accomplished last year? Will they be able to meld the talents and playing styles of the players who sit on the ever-shortening bench to play unified offense and defense? Is "The Process" as we know it largely completed, and the window for potential NBA titles open now?

We see flashes of excellence and a vast potential in how the 76ers have played this season.

Joel Embiid is putting up the kinds of numbers that could arguably be the beginnings of an MVP season. His overall game improved noticeably in the offseason and his stats reflect that. Jimmy Butler, an established all-star, joins the team in a widely-publicized trade with the Timberwolves and hits crucial, game-winning shots in 2 of his first 7 games, providing immediate value to the team. Poised to likely sign a 4- or 5-year deal with the 76ers this off-season, he can provide veteran experience and high-level, two-way play, while rounding out a sort of "Big 3" in the starting lineup with Joel Embiid and Ben Simmons. Simmons has shown some flourishes of offensive aggressiveness (even without a jumpshot) in his 2nd season that indicate Butler's presence has already inspired his play as well.

Yet we can also see the abundant problems.

The lack of efficient perimeter shooting and the pattern of second-half meltdowns have both been discussed extensively, and neither is overstated. Though acquiring Butler has undoubtedly brought All-Star level play to the team, the 76ers lost two starters in Dario Saric and Robert Covington, who both showed proficiency in catch-and-shoot 3 point situations. Other than game-winning shots from Butler, the 76ers can depend only on 34-year old JJ Redick and rookie Landry Shamet to consistently hit from the perimeter. When either of those two struggle to connect, it's hard for the 76ers to maintain any sort of outside offensive threat.

This season has also seen a continuation of last year's pattern of losing (sometimes sizeable) leads in the second half. Whether they ultimately win this season, or not, seems to depend on whether they are at home or on the road. At home against the Cleveland Cavaliers on Friday night the 76ers were outscored 22 to 7 during a stretch in the 4th quarter, and were not able to come back from it, breaking a 20-game home winning streak.

When the 76ers *have* won this season, it is usually not in a dominant or decisive manner. Many could have easily ended up in the Loss column. The 76ers have won their games by an

average of only 6.8 points this season, with 5 games won by 3 points or less. The Milwaukee Bucks, by comparison, have won their games by an average of 17.8 points so far this season.

The 76ers' lack of depth is also noticeable and concerning. Brett Brown alluded to this in his post-game interview in Brooklyn on Sunday night after the dramatic Jimmy Butler last second game-winner. Brown admitted that after losing two starters (in the trade to acquire Butler) when he has to "look down the bench and find answers...it's a challenge." This is partly due to trades, partly to the long list of 76ers injuries: first-round pick Zaire Smith's foot-injury-turned-serious-food-allergy, Jonah Bolden's leg injury, the strange and ongoing Markelle Fultz saga, Mike Muscala's broken nose, and even the fact that Justin Patton (the other Timberwolves player traded with Butler) has a foot injury that will keep him out for a while. When asked about the number of injuries recently, Brown replied: "...you just get numb to it."

There are those who argue that the 76ers' problems stem from Brett Brown himself. Many have pointed out what they believe to be his unusual rotations and substitutions, as well as his tendency to let his young team play through large scoring runs by opposing teams, rather than calling a timeout. His presence is almost guaranteed, though, through the 2021-22 season.

Jimmy Butler's game-winning shots (over arguably lesser opponents) make for great highlights, but what remains to be seen is if the team can begin to play with more consistency. It will also be worth paying attention to what other roster moves GM Elton Brand and Brett Brown make this season to bolster the bench and drive more consistent, high-level play. There are certainly questions floating around about how far the 76ers can go as they are currently constructed. For the 76ers to make it further into the offseason this year than they did last, they will have to be able to not only beat teams near the bottom of the conferences decisively, but also the league's best.