

GOOD SPORT

# The Justise League

*After a stellar rookie season, an injury cut short Justise Winslow's sophomore effort. This year, can the Miami Heat's rising star move into the ranks of the NBA elite?*

*Text by* KEITH GORDON

*Photographed by* NICK GARCIA



It's the second game of the 2015-16 NBA season and the Miami Heat are in Cleveland to play the reigning Eastern Conference Champion Cavaliers. Heat rookie forward Justise Winslow, fresh off a college national championship at Duke, checks into the game midway through the first quarter. The Heat players pick up their defensive assignments, and Winslow is faced with a borderline impossible task: In only his second NBA game, the young guard finds himself face-to-face with one of the greatest players of all time, LeBron James.

"I got in around the six-minute mark and immediately match up with LeBron, and I'm guarding him well and he's hitting tough shots," Winslow remembers. "That's when it triggered in my brain that these guys are *really* talented, and sometimes you just got to give it your best. Sometimes that's good enough, and sometimes it's not."

The rookie held his own, and before long became his team's top perimeter defender. His success on the defensive end of the floor helped him stay on the court while his offensive game developed, and it gave him the confidence to thrive at the NBA level. "This is where I was meant to be," Winslow says. "I take pride in matching up against the other team's best players...It was LeBron, then it was James Harden, then it was Derrick Rose. I was thrown in the gauntlet early."

Winslow's defensive skills earned him NBA All-Rookie Second Team honors. Then last year, Winslow upped his scoring from 6.4 points per game to 10.9 and more than doubled his assists per game before requiring season-ending surgery in January. Now entering his third NBA season, the versatile small forward is determined to become the two-way superstar the Heat were hoping for when they selected him with the 10<sup>th</sup> pick in the 2015 NBA draft. If the team is to develop into a legitimate threat, they will need Winslow to develop into a legitimate star.

An All-American, five-star prospect in high school, the 21-year-old Houston native played for coach Mike Krzyzewski at Duke, where he won a national championship in his only season. After defeating Wisconsin in the 2015 title game, Winslow had a tough decision to make: keep playing for the Blue Devils, or declare himself eligible for the NBA draft. "Once we won, I didn't want to leave at all. It took until the day before the deadline for me to decide to leave. Ultimately, winning that national championship did play a major part, and as a competitor I wanted that next challenge and that was the NBA."

During the 2015 NBA draft, the Boston Celtics reportedly offered the Charlotte Hornets four first-round draft picks to trade up for the chance to grab the 6'7" Winslow with the ninth pick. He had considerable attributes that could make him a formidable NBA player: A two-way small forward, he could guard the opposition's best attacker, rebound, run the floor, and finish at the rim. The Hornets refused Boston's overture and passed on Winslow, leaving the Heat, picking 10<sup>th</sup>. They were rewarded with a player who showed flashes of brilliance as a key member of a new core of young players. The Heat were in transition, having experienced the breakup of the Big Three of LeBron James, Dwyane Wade, and Chris Bosh—a nexus that appeared in four consecutive championship series, winning

## "WHEN MY GAME'S ALL SAID AND DONE, I FEEL LIKE I'LL BE AN MVP CANDIDATE."

two—and needed wing players who could fill the enormous shoes James left behind when he returned to Cleveland. Winslow was, and still is, a big part of that transition.

Immediately, Winslow established himself as one of the league's top rookies and a fearsome defensive stopper. But his offensive numbers showed enormous room for improvement, as he was shooting just 40 percent from the field and 25 percent from the three-point line. A bigger concern was his low usage rate: He was attempting just 5.9 field goals per game. (By comparison, James, who is as prolific a passer as he is a scorer, recorded 17.6 field goal attempts per game in his last season in Miami.)

Entering his second year, Winslow's points per game reached double digits, and he more than doubled his shot attempts. After Winslow's season ended with a torn labrum, the Heat showed promise down the stretch, going a stellar 30-11 in the second half of the season, but missed the playoffs.

"I tried to find a silver lining [in the injury] and just get better," Winslow says. "Find a way to improve even while injured, and that's what I did. It teaches you a lot going through an injury like that, about yourself as a person, about discipline, about paying attention to details."

This year's Heat hold a lot of promise. Hassan Whiteside provides a legitimate interior threat on both ends of the floor, and Goran Dragic is capable of leading the offense after averaging 20.3 points per game last season. Winslow is optimistic. "Our goal is to get home court in the first round and go on from there. We definitely want to be a top-four team in the East, and I feel the way we ended last year, we were a top team in the league, and that was without me...We're gonna try to keep that momentum going in the right direction."

As he enters this pivotal season, Winslow appears poised to make the leap to stardom. "As my offensive game grows, it's just gonna help my game and my teammates around me," Winslow says. "Once my jumper gets consistent, I feel like there's just not going to be really anything I can't do on the floor. This year my goal is to win Most Improved Player. I feel like when my game's all said and done, maybe seven, eight years from now, I feel like I'll be an MVP candidate."

