



TRUST THE PROCESS

*Patience has been key for Joel Embiid,
the NBA's next superstar*

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Photographed by JENNIFER POTTHEISER

Philadelphia sports fans are notorious for their intensity. After all, they famously pelted Santa Claus with snowballs when things weren't going well for their Eagles. So it wasn't likely to be an easy sell for the Philadelphia 76ers' then general manager Sam Hinkie when, before the 2013-2014 season, he began a strategy to build a championship-caliber team in the City of Brotherly

Love. His solution? Be as bad as possible—as in, *terrible*—for a long time, on purpose.

The NBA is considered different from other professional sports leagues in the glacial pace at which teams improve or get worse. NFL, NHL, and MLB franchises all require time to rebuild a team in need of change, but thanks to the large, guaranteed contracts

prevalent in the NBA, and the complex salary cap in place, for some teams it can take years or even a decade to get out from under bad deals and accumulate the talent needed to win in the league. It's also arguably tougher to sign a free agent in a city like Milwaukee or Philadelphia, which lacks the draw of a Los Angeles or Miami. Sam Hinkie and the 76ers decided to stop ignoring these facts and dive in headfirst, conventional basketball wisdom be damned.

Hinkie's strategy of getting high draft picks and avoiding committing money to veteran players meant it was going to be a rough few seasons. Former Sixers guard Tony Wroten was credited with dubbing it the Process. But a funny thing happened when that process was implemented: Philly fans understood. There were horrific seasons, and for the next three years the team failed to reach 20 wins per season. But Sixers fans' patience and willingness to see the big picture is what brought us the next NBA superstar and household name.

Joel Embiid was born in Yaoundé, Cameroon, in 1994. He didn't start playing basketball until he was 15. Outside of his obvious physical gifts of size (he's now seven feet and weighs at least 250 pounds) and athleticism, the teenager could not have been further from the bright lights of the NBA. But thanks to the league's outreach programs and fellow Cameroonian NBA player Luc Mbah a Moute, Embiid was noticed, and at the age of just 17 found himself pursuing his basketball future at Florida's Montverde Academy. He quickly blossomed into a five-star recruit before playing one season for Bill Self at the University of Kansas, where he finished as the Big 12 Defensive Player of the Year. But prior to that year's conference tournament, he suffered a stress fracture in his back, the start of more than two years of injury hell. When the Sixers used their third overall pick in the 2014 draft for a big guy with potential injury red flags, fans tacitly concurred, displaying an unusual level of trust.

That was just the beginning of the Sixers' grueling wait. Granted, Embiid had gone from not playing the sport to signing a multimillion-dollar guaranteed contract in half a decade, but not long after his back issues, he broke a bone in his foot. The original four- to six-month recovery period was extended when the team chose to shut him down for the season, for rehab. But at season's end, a scan revealed that Embiid's foot hadn't healed enough, and to the dismay of Sixers fans, he required another surgery that meant missing his entire second season as well.

But while Embiid was recovering, both he and the Sixers were building the foundation of what they hoped would be future success. The Sixers were executing the Process, and one of the pieces they acquired was the phenom Ben Simmons, an Australian 6'10" point forward, who, like Embiid, is likely to become one of the league's best in the next few seasons. Meanwhile, Embiid was working on his game as much as possible, mentally when his body

wouldn't let him on the court. The 24-year-old revealed to *Sports Illustrated*, "I think a lot about what I went through and how it prepared me to be a better man. I really feel like I'm the Process; like the Process is about me."

It's important to note that the NBA itself has undergone a transformation that directly impacts Joel Embiid and his future: Big guys are largely going extinct. Or rather, big guys who can't execute a jump shot or move their feet to defend a pick-and-roll have been struggling to succeed in recent seasons (e.g., Jahlil Okafor, Alex Len, Nerlens Noel). The best circa seven-footers today are the ones who can bang bodies inside and rebound but can also be instrumental on the perimeter (think Anthony Davis, DeMarcus Cousins, Karl-Anthony Towns). Embiid knew he had a lot of work to do to expand his game, and once he got his chance at the start of the 2016-17 season, he showed he might just end up being the best big player of his generation.

If the path to his first game was the process, once Embiid stepped onto the court he showed himself to be nothing short of

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the solution. He's the epitome of the modern center, providing toughness, rebounding, and rim protection while being comfortable stepping out to the perimeter to either find his own shot or create space for his teammates. The return for his, his team's, and the fans' patience has been historic. In the modern era, Embiid matches up in production with iconic players like Shaquille O'Neal, David Robinson, Hakeem Olajuwon, and Patrick Ewing, all of whom have been elected to the Hall of Fame. The team climbed from 10 wins to 28 his first year playing, and exploded for 52 wins and a spot in the conference semifinals the next.

While last season's playoff loss to the Boston Celtics was surely difficult to accept (the young star, struggling with a facial injury, played with a protective mask), Embiid hasn't shied away from his leadership role. He has taken on

leadership responsibilities within the team, especially on the court, where his usage percentage (an estimate of how many of his team's possessions in a game are used by a player) is the highest of all time across a player's first two seasons of play (34.1%), finishing a notch ahead of none other than Michael Jordan (30.9%).

Plenty of other stats prove Embiid's impact on the floor, like the ones that showed his mastery as a half-court defender, or how much better his team plays offensively when he's on the floor. Throw in the perfect fit between Embiid and the enigmatic playmaking of Simmons, and there's a reason the Sixers are a legitimate threat to next year's presumptive favorites in the Eastern Conference, the Celtics.

But Philly fans and the Sixers, like Embiid, know this is a long game. They see a decade of basketball dynasty, not just one good playoff run. Whatever one's opinion on the Process, the opportunities ahead for Joel Embiid and the Sixers are looking huge—as in, seven feet, 250 pounds huge.

Embiid has turned his potential into productivity, and in doing so earned himself a five-year, \$148 million extension last season while turning the Sixers into legitimate championship contenders