

ATHLETE

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The most hyped prospect in a generation brings the party to New Orleans

Text by KEITH GORDON

"Let's Dance!" That was the simple message Zion Williamson had for New Orleans Pelicans fans on draft night after the franchise made him the first pick of the 2019 NBA draft. While the city of New Orleans never needs encouragement to have a good time, the statement perfectly summarized what the long-struggling organization was getting in the 19-year-old superstar. With Zion, it's apparently not enough to just succeed; he wants to have fun while doing it, and to achieve his goals as part of a team and community.

Now, the South Carolina-raised phenomenon is embarking on the most hyped, and anticipated, rookie season since LeBron James joined the league more than a decade ago. But whereas LeBron was a household name for basketball fans during his time in high school, Zion's celebrity is at another level, thanks especially to his social media presence. By the time he arrived at Duke University in the middle of 2018, he was already famous. With more than a million Instagram followers, and numerous mixtapes that were YouTube viral sensations, Zion was the talk of the basketball world. Drake wore Zion's high school jersey and the athlete's AAU summer games became some of the hottest tickets in basketball.

All of the attention was understandable. Zion is a freak of nature, even when competing against other elite athletes. Standing at 6'7", and weighing more than 270 pounds, he looks more like an offensive tackle than a small forward. But he's able to bring the agility, footwork and body control of a much smaller human being to his game, without sacrificing any of the strength in his thick frame. Then there are the dunks—windmills, tomahawks, and 360-degree slams that risk breaking the rim, and the internet. During Duke's preseason

athletic testing he needed an extended pole just to complete the vertical jump test, such was his incredible leaping ability.

Starting with Duke's blowout victory over Kentucky in the first game of the season, Zion became the face of college basketball. Part of a Duke program that is consistently on national television and gets unmatched attention in the sport, he took the attention to new levels, becoming a household name even beyond the college basketball world after sweeping the major college basketball awards.

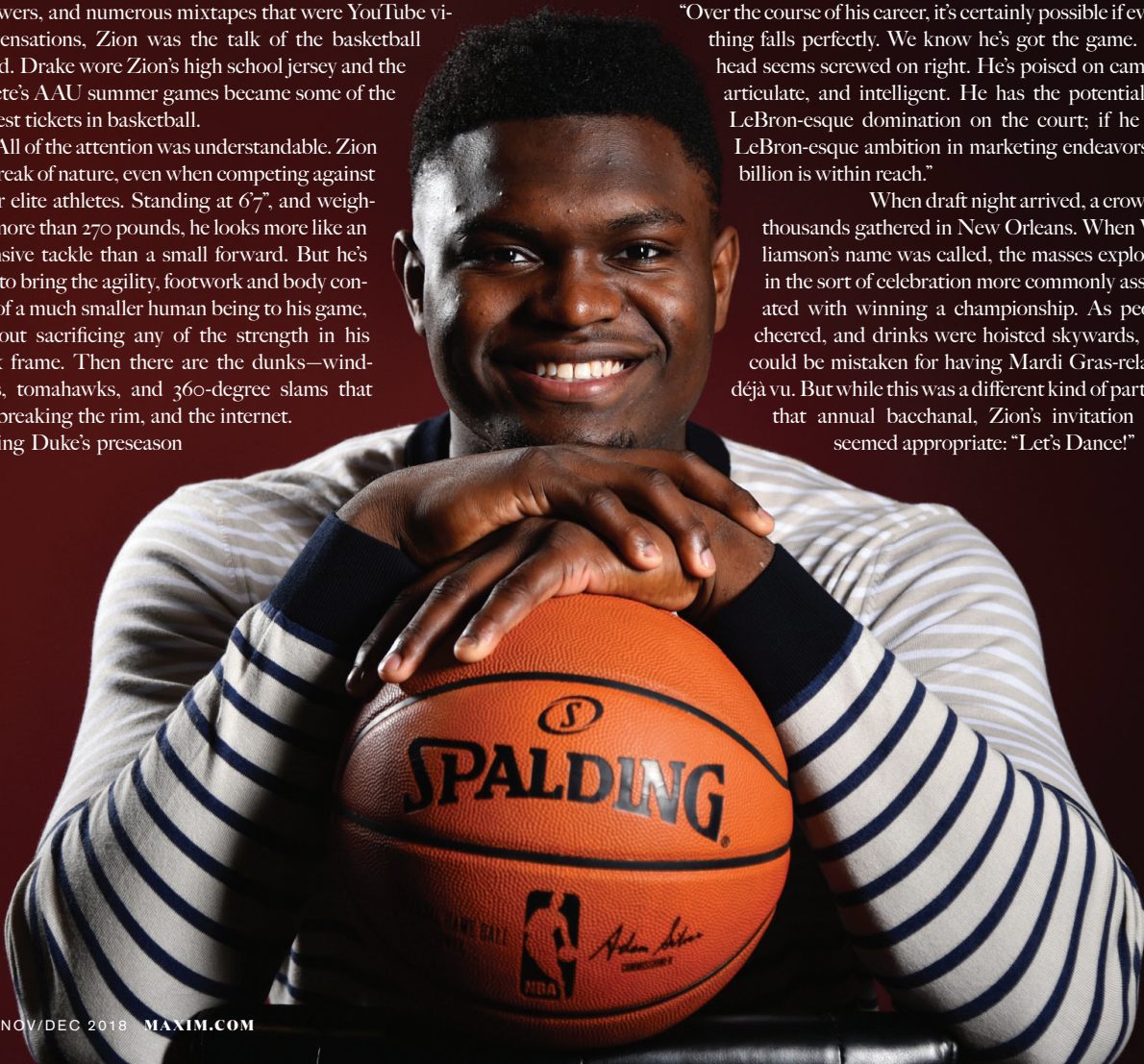
The night New Orleans won the draft lottery to select first overall, the team leadership reacted like they personally won the actual lottery. The franchise sold thousands of season tickets in the hours following the windfall. With the looming departure of superstar Anthony Davis, the Pelicans had appeared to be on the precipice of a drastic fall, with a lengthy rebuild in their future. Instantly, the franchise had energy again, and a centerpiece around whom they could build a team.

The Pelicans weren't the only organization hoping to get a piece of the Zion hype and potential. The battle between sneaker companies to sign the next big star is usually fierce, but the fight for Zion was on a different order of magnitude. Brands like Adidas and Puma as well as Chinese brands Anta and Li-Ning all reportedly entertained making him handsome offers. But in the end, it was Nike, specifically the company's Jordan Brand, that won the Zion sneaker sweepstakes, and his signature shoe may be available during his rookie season.

It's not only Zion's basketball abilities that make him so marketable. His friendly demeanor, natural smile and childlike enthusiasm make him a sponsor's dream. Some are already predicting that he could eventually earn more than a billion dollars in his career. Speaking to *Forbes*, sports marketing expert Bob Dorfman explained,

"Over the course of his career, it's certainly possible if everything falls perfectly. We know he's got the game. His head seems screwed on right. He's poised on camera, articulate, and intelligent. He has the potential for LeBron-esque domination on the court; if he has LeBron-esque ambition in marketing endeavors, \$1 billion is within reach."

When draft night arrived, a crowd of thousands gathered in New Orleans. When Williamson's name was called, the masses exploded in the sort of celebration more commonly associated with winning a championship. As people cheered, and drinks were hoisted skywards, one could be mistaken for having Mardi Gras-related déjà vu. But while this was a different kind of party to that annual bacchanal, Zion's invitation still seemed appropriate: "Let's Dance!"



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