

ANALYSIS

How Nets can build around Brook, Deron

BY KYLE STACK
Special to amNewYork

The financial parameters under which the NBA operates are ripe for change with a new collective bargaining agreement (CBA) expected to look far different than the current one, which expires July 1. That makes it difficult to predict with confidence how the New Jersey Nets can adjust their roster following their 24-win season. amNewYork spoke with two NBA front-office executives to collect their thoughts on where the Nets need to upgrade.



IMPROVE THE WINGS

Anthony Morrow and **Sasha Vujacic** lack the offensive firepower to complement 26-year-old All-Star point guard **Deron Williams** in the backcourt. "They have good shooting, but they certainly don't have guys who can create off the dribble," said one Eastern Conference general manager, who requested anonymity out of respect for the team's matters.

An Eastern Conference basketball official wrote in an email message that a team needs 25 to 30 points per game from its wing players. "[The Nets] don't have that on most nights," wrote the official, who didn't wish to comment publicly about another team.

Given that Morrow doesn't appear to be starter material and that 23-year-old guard **Damion James** hasn't set the Nets on fire, **Travis Outlaw** — who signed a five-year, \$35 million deal last summer and then averaged just 9.2 points on career-low 37.5 percent shooting — might be the team's best shot at improved wing production.

HUMPHRIES: TO RE-SIGN OR NOT?

One of six players to average double-digit points and rebounds this season (10 and 10.4, respectively), **Kris Humphries** played with a \$3.2 million salary that was affordable by NBA standards. The Nets likely won't be so fortunate to get him on the cheap if they opt to re-sign him — which could pose a problem.

"He seems like one of those guys that, when his contract is reasonable, he plays well ... but if he gets good money, then things go south," the official wrote. "We'll see."

Humphries is an unselfish power forward who sets the physical tone for his team on defense — "not an All-Star," said the GM, "but he's a really good, hard-working, diligent energy guy. I think he's a guy they'll try to sign."

Yet Humphries could hold more value to the Nets by playing less.

"To be a really good team, you might need better as a starter," the official said.

A REBOUND FOR LOPEZ

Most teams would love to have a 7-foot, 23-year-old center with exemplary character, a 20.4-point average and a manageable \$3.08 million salary next season. So why is there skepticism about the long-term value of **Brook Lopez**?

"He has to get stronger, rebound better and become more of a presence defensively," the GM said, pointing to Lopez's anemic 6.0-rebound average in 2010-11.

The basketball official cited a reactive, rather than proactive, attitude from Lopez on the boards and defense that may be the result of slow instincts or a lack of desire. Still, the official said a trade isn't likely given how well Lopez and Williams work together offensively.

"The only thing that makes sense is if you trade him for a young, high-scoring wing and get a rotational big man back in return," he wrote.

For now, Williams and Lopez lead the Nets, who will likely search for ways to maximize that duo's potential.



Clockwise from left: **Kris Humphries, Deron Williams and Brook Lopez.** (GETTY)



New Meadowlands Stadium remains dormant while the NFL works out its ongoing labor issues. (GETTY)

Judge lifts lockout, wrangling not over

BY ERNIE PALLADINO
Special to amNewYork

U.S. District Court Judge Susan Nelson ruled with the players and lifted the NFL lockout yesterday, but that doesn't translate into an immediate flurry of free agency and other business that has been put off.

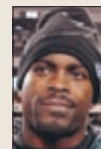
The owners will undoubtedly file an appeal with the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals in St. Louis and also ask for an immediate stay of Nelson's injunction. Unless the owners are denied a stay — highly unlikely — the league's free agent veterans and drafted rookies, starting with Thursday's first round,

will remain in limbo. The slew of undrafted talent that would normally get snapped up in the hours after Saturday's seventh round will also go unsigned.

The owners expected Nelson to rule for the players because most major decisions have fallen that way since the last collective bargaining agreement was hammered out in 1994. The only mild surprise was that Nelson did not issue a stay pending appeal.

The appeals court could take a more cautious view of things, however, and stay the injunction, effective immediately, until it hears the case months from now.

Vick eyes a 2nd Madden cover



Vick (AMNY)

Michael Vick, the NFL's Comeback Player of the Year and a convicted dogfighting conspirator, will learn tomorrow whether fans selected him to appear on the cover of the Madden video game franchise ahead of the Browns' Peyton Hillis. "I appreciated it," Vick told The Philadelphia Inquirer of his previous appearance on the cover in 2004. "But this time around I think I will appreciate it so much more." (AMNY)

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