



Knicks eye sprint into playoffs

BY KYLE STACK
Special to amNewYork

Knicks fans finally have something to cheer about.

Amar'e Stoudemire, the \$100 million free-agent signing, gives the team a marquee player in Year 3 of coach **Mike D'Antoni's** tenure. These new-look Knicks will try to garner their first playoff spot since 2003-04. Here is a breakdown of Stoudemire's Knicks, who open their season tonight in Toronto:

**NBA
PREVIEW**



From left to right: Amar'e Stoudemire (driving into a defender), Danilo Gallinari, Sacramento's Tyreke Evans, and Mike D'Antoni
(PHOTOS: GETTY)

GUARD

Raymond Felton

Brings predictability — in a good way — to a position which has been a serious concern.

"He has the toughness to deal with New York fans," said NBA TV analyst Dennis Scott. "I hope they give him a fair shot."

Scott warned it will take Felton time to build chemistry with Stoudemire, and that fans can't expect Stoudemire to be as comfortable with Felton as he was with Steve Nash in Phoenix.

Shooting guard is a weak point. Rookie **Landry Fields** is expected to start tonight, with guard-forward **Wilson Chandler** leading the reserve unit. **Toney Douglas** needs to improve his 39 percent three-point shooting from his rookie season.

FORWARD

Scoring won't be a problem for Stoudemire, who has averaged 21.4 points for his career.

Rebounding is where he needs to improve. The nine-year veteran has never averaged double-digit boards for a season.

That makes it tougher for Stoudemire to statistically replace David Lee, who pulled down 10-plus rebounds in three of the past four campaigns.

Danilo Gallinari is a perfect fit in D'Antoni's offense. His deep-range shooting complements Stoudemire's presence in the post.

"As a shooter, you want to be on the same side of the floor when a guy gets double-teamed, so you can be the first option [on the pass] out of the double-team," Scott said.

CENTER

This is the team's weakest link. **Timofey Mozgov**, a 7-foot-1 Russian whose athleticism made him a preferred choice of D'Antoni, will start. Yet he didn't show a reliable nose for rebounds during the pre-season and proved to be a foul machine.

Ronny Turiaf's rebounding and shot blocking could get him starts at the pivot.

OPENING DATES

Knicks (on MSG)

- Today, at Toronto, 7 p.m.
- Fri., at Boston, 7:30 p.m.
- Sat., vs. Portland, 7:30 p.m.

Nets (on YES)

- Today, vs. Detroit, 7 p.m.
- Fri., vs. Sacramento, 7 p.m.
- Sun., vs. Miami, 1 p.m.



BENCH

Many offensive opportunities exist for Chandler if he comes off the bench. Al Harrington averaged 17.7 points last season, and he started just 15 of his 72 games. Turiaf is vital for his defense and leadership. **Roger Mason Jr.** and **Bill Walker** provide more scoring.

Anthony Randolph may be the team's wild card. He has All-Star potential but has to find his place in D'Antoni's offense. Scott said he was less than confident about Randolph's potential impact, partly because of D'Antoni.

"You've never seen D'Antoni take a guy and mold him into a great player," Scott said.

Randolph's shot-blocking ability and athleticism could turn him into a valued defender against small and power forwards.

COACH

Not much has changed with D'Antoni. He's clearly one of the best offensive minds in the sport, and now he has a few new parts to complement his style of play. The additions of Felton, Stoudemire and Randolph inject much-needed athleticism and experience to operate his scheme. D'Antoni will look even smarter if Gallinari fulfills his All-Star potential, and if Mozgov proves that he can hold his own. Both were his choices.

INTANGIBLES

This is not a rough-and-tumble Knicks group. Their speed will allow D'Antoni to more fully realize the potential of his offensive system. Still, only consistent winning will satisfy the demands of New York fans.

"If the Knicks stay healthy, and Amar'e, Felton and Gallinari have solid years, the Knicks should be competing for the eighth playoff spot," Scott said.

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