

Forgotten Star

by MARK GREY4.29.09

There is no question that the one thing that drives the NBA and this year's playoffs is star power. Unlike the NFL, which tries to sell its fans on great teams, the NBA is all about great players. Every commercial you see tells you to watch Kobe Bryant and the Lakers or LeBron James and the Cavs taking on Dwyane Wade's Heat or Chris Paul's Hornets. When a dominant player's team has a great season, the star gets all the credit. With fellow 2003 draft mates James' and Wade's super star statuses at all-time highs, Carmelo Anthony has all but fallen off the super star map.

Once known as the threesome that was going to lead the NBA into the next era, LeBron, D Wade, and Melo's names were inseparable. These days, while Wade and LeBron are consensus top 3 players in the NBA, you will be hard pressed to even hear Melo's name mentioned in the top 10. While Anthony's star status off the court is light years behind James' and Wade's, his play on it is not far behind at all.

Standing at 6'8 and weighing 240 pounds, Anthony is one of the only players in the NBA who has no offensive weakness. Melo is a nightmare for opposing teams when he is facing the basket or with his back to it. His midrange jumper is one of the best in the league and he has improved his range on his jumper to where he is better than both James and Wade from behind the arc. His first step is quicker than anyone his size not named LeBron, and he does a great job finishing with either hand around the basket. In the paint, Anthony demands a double team every time he touches the ball because his combination of strength and quick feet can only be matched by a handful of players in the NBA. When it comes to putting points on the board, Anthony is as good as anyone in the NBA. Both Wade and James had much higher scoring numbers this year since they both play in offenses where they have the ball in their hands the majority of the time. Thus, they take more shots than Anthony. In 2006, Carmelo showed what kind of scoring he can bring with the ball in his hands by averaging 29 points a game while leading his team to the playoffs.

The one gaping hole in Anthony's game has always been his effort on the defensive end. While neither of his two draft mates were known as defensive stoppers going into this season, they have both recently made great leaps in their defense. Melo too has made improvements but is still far from being considered for any defensive awards anytime soon. Both Wade and James benefit from playing in defensive-minded systems with defensive-minded coaches, while Melo seems to have adopted George Karl's "just-outscore-them-on-the-other-end" defensive philosophy. Although his defense still has a long way to go to before it is thought of as elite, it is a work in progress and has already come a long way in this season alone.

This year, LeBron did a great job of leading his team to the best record in the NBA and received every bit of credit for his team's success. Wade led his team to the fifth seed in a weak Eastern Conference and has been given credit for every single Heat victory as if he plays 1 on 5 basketball every night. On the flip side, Anthony led his team to the second best record in the Western Conference and all the credit went to his teammate Chauncey Billups. There is no questioning Billups' impact since arriving in Denver, but to gauge Melo's impact on this year's team, one needs to look at Denver's record in the games he missed. In the 16 games Melo missed this year, the Nuggets went 9-7. While a 56 percent winning percentage might not seem that bad, it would only have put them 10th in this year's Western Conference. Even with the success of his team, while Wade and James will be splitting MVP votes, Anthony will be lucky to even make third team All NBA.

Since coming into the NBA in 2003 after leading Syracuse to a National Championship, Melo has never received the credit he deserves. After leading all rookies in scoring while taking his team to the playoffs, Anthony was snubbed as LeBron was named Rookie of the Year. Anthony is the only one of the three to lead his team to the playoffs every year since joining the NBA. Melo has most game winning buzzer beaters of the three, but James and Wade are the ones regarded as the best closers in the game. When all three were members of the 2006 USA Men's Basketball team, it was Carmelo who was named to the All Tournament team and team MVP after leading the team in scoring for the tournament. In the 2007 FIBA Americas Championship, Melo again led the team in scoring while Wade and James received all the spotlight.

There is no doubt that James and Wade are great and that they both deserve the praise they receive. The problem is the lack of attention Carmelo receives for his great play. Is he a game changer on both ends of the court? No. But neither is Dirk Nowitzki nor Steve Nash and they have combined to win three MVPs. Yet somehow, Anthony can't even crack second team all NBA. Yes, Carmelo has had a few off-court issues since arriving in the NBA but that should not keep him out of the debate of top 10 players in the NBA. I am not saying that Anthony is as great as his two draft classmates, I'm just saying that he is not as far behind as people think.