

# It's Danny Ainge's World, We Are Just Living In It

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It was a quiet day in Trenton, New Jersey when my friend Kareem texted the group chat. Kyrie for Isaiah, Crowder, and picks is a good deal the message read, followed by would you do that if you were Boston/Cleveland. Over the past four years, I have grown accustomed to hate the Celtics; it felt as if they robbed the Nets at gunpoint when they dealt away Kevin Garnett, Paul Pierce, Jason Terry, and DJ White for a bunch of borderline d-leaguers and what would turn out to be four first round draft picks. Yet, Ive also had nothing but respect for the business acumen of the Cs front office. Over the years, they managed to build a team consistently contending for the Eastern Conference at little to no cost. The addition of Gordon Hayward this offseason only strengthened my position on the genius of the Celtics as an organization. Naturally, my reply to the message was something along the lines of F\*ck no. Irving and Thomas averaged similar production numbers last year, Jae Crowder has been a solid piece for the Celtics and the Nets 2018 first-round pick was likely going to be a lottery pick in a class stacked at the top. It was a no-brainer for me: if Im the Celtics front office Im not making this trade happen.

An hour later, the Celtics made the trade happen. Irving to Boston for Isaiah Thomas, Jae Crowder, Ante Zizic, and the Nets 2018 first-round pick. Initially, I was shocked: I saw this trade as foolish, unnecessary, and downright harmful to the Celtics. Then I thought about it, thought about it some more, and concluded that Danny Ainge is pretty good at this whole NBA executive thing. The first thought that would cross anybodys mind, including mine, would be that the Celtics moved a lot of pieces, perhaps too many pieces to make this trade happen. However, every one of these moves made sense for the Celtics. Kyrie Irving is a younger, more dynamic, and more physical point guard than Isaiah Thomas. The latter would become a free agent next year and could have been eligible for a super max deal in Boston. Crowder was a very solid piece in the Cs rotation but had to go in favor of Gordon Hayward and Jayson Tatum playing at his position. The Nets 2018 first round pick and Ante Zizic simply sweetened the deal for Cleveland. All in all, this was a good trade for the Celtics, however the Cavs were the ones to come out on top of it.

Everything is fine as long as you are winning. This was certainly the case for the Cavs last summer after they secured a historic championship for Cleveland.

Irving was the knight in shining armor virtually every narrative on the Cavaliers championship run and for a while everything was peachy in the Rock and Roll capital of the world. Then KD joined the Warriors, terrorized the league, killed parity, and made a case for being the best player on the planet en route to a 4-1 trashing of the Cavs in the Finals. The events that followed in Cleveland were eclectic: rumors broke that Kyrie wanted to leave Cleveland, then there were allegations that LeBrons camp started the rumors, and rumors that LeBron wanted to beat [Kyries] ass. Whether or not you believed all, some, or none of the rumors it was evident that the duos relationship was reaching the sunken place. Clevelands front office had to do something, and while trading LeBron would have been the more logical solution, trading the hometown kid whos widely regarded as the best player in the world and lead the Cavaliers to their first title in franchise history is the closest thing to professional suicide I can think of. So, Kyrie it was.

The pressure on the Cavs front office was to deal with the Kyrie situation and to do so adequately enough to compel James to stay in Cleveland next year when he becomes a free agent. The execution of this mega-trade, along with the acquisition of Derrick Rose puts the Cavaliers in prime position to not only contend for next years league title but also to start rebuilding should things really fall apart in Cleveland. Isaiah Thomas is coming off a season where his production numbers were awfully similar to Irvings. However, the acquisition of the all-star point guard raised some concerned eyebrows. Thomas is technically eligible for a super max next year; however, he would have to reproduce the production he put up last season to be in a position to negotiate for one. Realistically, he wont come anywhere close to last years numbers in Cleveland. Thomas was the undisputed superstar for that Celtics squad as he enjoyed the fifth-highest usage percentage in the league (34.0-percent) while in Boston. In Cleveland, he will most likely become the second option behind LeBron and if so his usage numbers will see a hit. Thomas will probably see a decrease in his playing time as well. The seven-year veteran needed to play significant minutes at the point for lack a reliable backup point guard in Boston last season. Terry Rozier showed good upside as a backup point guard for the Celtics, but Derrick Rose will be a significantly better option off the bench for the Cavaliers next season. Considering all this, Thomas is highly unlikely to match his numbers from his 2016-2017 wonder season and consequently he would have much less of a basis to demand a super max. The addition of Jae Crowder and Ante Zizic to the trade, while insignificant to the Celtics, was certainly a deal sweetener for the Cavs. Crowder should be an upgrade from the aging Richard Jefferson, while Zizic has shown a good motor and plenty of upside in the summer league for any team willing to commit to his development. The Nets 2018 pick, however, is what makes a good trade a great one for Cleveland.

The 2018 draft class is ripe with rare frontcourt talents at its top. Michael Porter Jr., Marvin Bagley, DeAndre Ayton, and Miles Bridges will be the players to watch all season, but only some of the talented big men looking to emerge out of next years draft. The Nets have been abysmal for the past two seasons and while they did make some offseason moves, they have not led me to believe theyll

finish above last place in the Eastern Conference. The draft pick the Cavaliers acquired in this trade will probably be the first overall pick in next years draft. The front office in Cleveland now faces a couple of possibilities regarding what to do with the pick. The Cavs management could choose to keep the pick, hope to draft a once in a lifetime talent and leverage that talent to convince LeBron to stay in Cleveland and end his legacy in his home state while helping to groom his successor in the Land, much like David Robinson groomed Tim Duncan in the final years in the league. In this scenario, the departure of LeBron is a strong possibility, however, if it were to happen, Cleveland would already be on its good way to rebuilt without having had to tank. This is a Zach Randolph outcome: solid, but not the best. In the second scenario, the Cavaliers front office goes out and leverages the pick to land a star in Cleveland. The 2017 Finals exposed Clevelands exaggerated reliance on Irving and James; the duo ended 30.8 and 30.0 percent of offensive possessions, respectively, during the regular season. In the Finals, back-to-back subpar performances from Irving put Cleveland in a 0-2 hole, and highlighted the infinitesimal margin for error Cleveland needed to play with to contend. The acquisition of Thomas changes nothing in this dynamic, as the ex-Celtic will likely replace Irvings role as the second go-to option on the court for the Cavaliers. The addition of a third superstar would be the ideal solution to all Clevelands remaining off-season needs. This third option would reduce both Thomas and James usage numbers and increase their margin for error. In other words, a third star-caliber player would alleviate the pressure on the duo to finish offensive possessions, thus reducing their offensive production. A hit to Thomas production would hurt his case for a super-max, however the addition of a third star would make the Cavaliers serious contenders something that would make all parties involved, especially LeBron, happy.

Now take this dynamic and throw it out of the window. The alleged seriousness of Thomas hip injury complicates the trade. Boston pushed the trade through by throwing in their 2020 second-round pick to amortize Thomas potential fallout. This is where the trade goes south for the Cavaliers: real second round talent is extremely hard to come across. Thomas himself was the last pick in his draft class, but to point out how much of an anomaly his success is, the seven-year veteran has already accumulated more career points than any other 60th pick in league history combined. With the acquisition of 25-year old Irving, the Celtics are sending a message that they intend to be serious contenders for somewhat a long time. It is very unlikely, therefore, that their 2019/2020 season will see them at the bottom of the Eastern Conference, but rather it looks like the Cavaliers got handed a pick ranging somewhere between the 58th and 60th as an add-on to make up for what could be a career altering injury to a man who averaged 30 and carried his team to the Eastern Conference Finals. In a scenario where IT cannot perform at the level he did in Boston; the Cs front office would clearly be the winning party in this mega-trade. Trading a lame IT, your 3rd string SF, a raw European prospect alongside a 1st round and a 2nd round pick for a healthy Kyrie Irving in his prime is, simply put, a great move. Advantage, Danny Ainge.