

Culture

The Inspiring Story of the 2017 Miami Heat

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Prologue

July 15, 2016

I dreaded this day. NBA Free Agency had officially started around two weeks prior and players were moving fast. Durant signed with Golden State, the Lakers signed...Luol Deng? The Magic signed...Bismack Biyombo...well, surely there were no more bloated signings.



Figure 1: Evan Turner, Nic Batum, Timofey Mozgov, Joakim Noah, and Solomon Hill received a combined \$381 million total in free agency.

Oh. The salary cap had just taken a massive jump, leading teams to jump on this wave of ill-advised spending for mid-tier role players, and that's being generous to some of those players. The Heat themselves were active early on, as their number one priority in free agency was...Hassan Whiteside? It was actually Kevin Durant, but in regards to retaining players on their own team, Whiteside was the top priority. He just came off his best season averaging 14.2 pts, 11.8 reb, and a league-leading 3.7 blk. The diamond in the rough received a five-year \$98M contract. At the time, giving Whiteside that money made sense. However, negotiations with Dwyane Wade were turning sour. He was offended by the Heat's latest offer, and the fact that the deal wasn't done yet entering the second week of free agency was very concerning. Mr. 305 might be on the move. Indeed, he was. On July 15, 2016, Dwyane Wade signed a two-year deal with the Chicago Bulls, leaving Heat fans devastated. This was not supposed to be how Wade's NBA career ended; he was supposed to retire in a Heat uniform. Sentimentality aside, suddenly, the Heat were left scrambling. To that point, their offseason outside of bringing back Whiteside was...well, it was.

- James Johnson - role player from the Raptors

- Derrick Williams - former No. 2 pick who did not play very well with the Knicks
- Rodney McGruder - undrafted free agent
- Luke Babbitt - sharpshooter from the Blazers
- Wayne Ellington - sharpshooter and journeyman
- Willie Reed - second-year player from the Nets
- Matching the Nets' offer sheet for Tyler Johnson and resigning him to a four-year \$50M contract
- Resigning player-coach Udonis Haslem

The Heat were aiming to ideally land Durant and Wade, or just Wade, but were not at all prepared for the departure of the man who had been the face of their franchise since the day he was drafted thirteen years ago. After signing Dion Waiters on July 26, the team wasn't looking great, but not terrible either. Their potential rotation heading into training camp still had a good selection of veterans, quality role players centered around young Justise Winslow, Josh Richardson, and stars Hassan Whiteside and Chris Bo-

Chris Bosh fails Heat physical with blood clotting, no timetable for return

Medical tests have revealed continued blood clotting in Miami Heat forward Chris Bosh, making it unlikely he will be able to return to the court.

[SI Wire](#) | Sep 23, 2016

Figure 2: A gutting headline.

The Heat were expecting to have two-thirds of the Heatles, and now they have none for the 2017 season. This went from a disaster to an unmitigated tragedy.

The Season Begins

Nervous Chuckling

- PG: Goran Dragic, Tyler Johnson (???)
- SG: Dion Waiters, Josh Richardson, Wayne Ellington, Rodney McGruder
- SF: Justise Winslow, Derrick Williams
- PF: Luke Babbitt, Josh McRoberts
- C: Hassan Whiteside, Willie Reed, Udonis Haslem

To attempt to spin this in a positive way, the Heat still had a trio of very promising young players.

1. 27-year-old defensive anchor Hassan Whiteside who just led the league in blocks and averaged a double-double.

2. 20-year-old 2015 lottery pick Justise Winslow. He had a rough rookie season, but now he would be given prime opportunities on a team that (clearly) does not expect to contend this year.
3. 22-year-old 2015 2nd-round pick Josh Richardson just came off a rookie season where he shot 46.1% from distance on 2.2 attempts per game.

Surrounded by Goran Dragic, solid swingman Tyler Johnson, J.R. Smith protege Dion Waiters, sharpshooters Luke Babbitt and Wayne Ellington, and captain Udonis Haslem, this team had pieces even if it was lacking a central star. Their defensive identity wasn't going anywhere, but offense would certainly be a challenge.

Rock Bottom: The First Half of the Season

A huge shoutout to the MIAMI HEAT 365 YouTube channel. Their coverage of every game of Miami Heat basketball throughout the 2017 season made this piece possible.

January 13, 2017

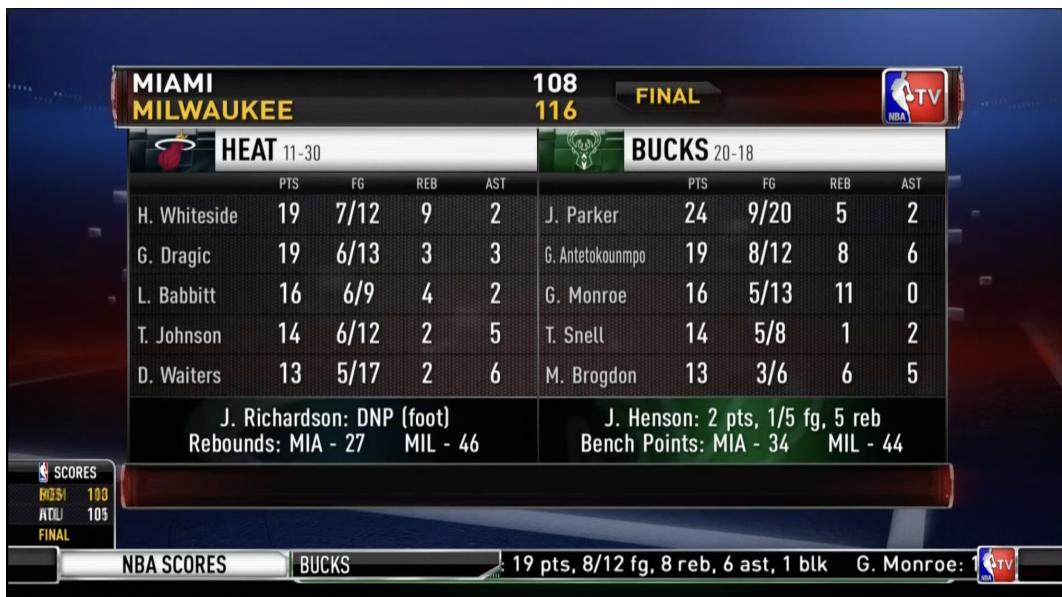


Figure 3: NBA GameTime after Miami's loss to Milwaukee

Team Stats

| Stat | Value | Rank |
|-------------------|--------------|-------------|
| Record | 11-30 | 29th |
| ORtg | 102.9 | 28th |
| DRtg | 107.6 | 14th |
| Net Rating | -4.7 | 25th |

Figure 4: The Big Picture

| Stat | Value | Rank |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| FT% | .676 | 30th |
| TS% | .516 | 30th |
| 3P% | .338 | 26th |
| eFG% | .489 | 28th |

Figure 5: Shooting stats

The Heat's offense was a mess. They were at the bottom of the league in offensive rating and several shooting statistics. Their defense was average, but they simply could not score enough points to consistently win. The loss against Milwaukee that dropped Miami to 11-30 was their tenth loss in 11 games. They had several long losing skids: twice losing six games in a row and once losing five straight. Their longest winning "streak" was two, which they did three times. Let's get a close look at the people behind an 11-30 team.

Player Stats

For reference: here are the league average shooting percentages at this point of the season. These are for comparison of reported shooting percentages to see how a player is performing relatively speaking:

| Stat | <i>eFG%</i> | <i>TS%</i> | <i>3P%</i> | <i>FT%</i> | <i>FTr</i> |
|-------|-------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Value | .510 | .549 | .359 | .770 | .270 |

Table 1: League-average shooting metrics thru 41 games.

What's Been Good

- Goran Dragic
 - 19.0 pts, 6.4 ast, 3.8 reb, 0.9 stl
 - **Staying mostly healthy:** played 33/41 games
 - **Shooting efficiently:** 55.3 *TS%*, 50.5 *eFG%* (both roughly league average)
 - Also 39.7 *3P%*, but Dragic wasn't a volume three-point shooter (.251 *3PAr*¹) was below league average of .314)
 - 2.0 assist-to-turnover ratio
- James Johnson
 - 11.7 pts, 4.9 reb, 2.9 ast, 1.8 stl + blk
 - **Bench punch:** 36 games, all off the bench
 - **Shooting well?:** 38.4 *3P%* would be a career high on above-average attempt rate (40% of field goal attempts)
 - 59.3 *TS%*, 57.0 *eFG%* both above average
- Tyler Johnson
 - Big surge in responsibility since signing the 4yr/\$50M contract
 - 13.9 pts, 4.5 reb, 3.2 ast (1.0 tov), 1.2 stl
 - **Shooting the three well:** 37.4 *3P%* (.314 *3PAr* is exactly average)
 - **Efficiency a little down from last year:** (53.0 *TS%*, 49.0 *eFG%*)

¹ $3PAr = 3PA/FGA$, equivalent to what percent of a player's field goal attempts are three-point attempts

Not-so-sharp Shooters

- Wayne Ellington
 - **Bothered by injuries:** Missed 20 of 41 games
 - Shooting 32.1 3P% (He was a career 37.6% shooter entering 2016-17)
- Luke Babbitt
 - 35.9 3P% as strictly a shooter (entered 2016-17 shooting 40.3%)
- Josh Richardson
 - 31.0 3P% in his sophomore season (shot 46.1% in 2015-16)
- Dion Waiters
 - **Injury troubles:** He missed 20 games, too
 - 12.8 pts, 3.8 ast, 3.0 reb
 - **Shooting very poorly:** 30.8 3P%, 43.5 TS%, 40.9 eFG%
 - **Bad free throw efficiency:** 67.3 FT% on .182 FTr, both are well below average

Injury Plague

- **Already mentioned:** Waiters and Ellington missed 20 games
- Josh McRoberts suffered a season-ending foot injury in late December, played only 22 games
 - **Wasn't playing well:** 14 starts, 4.9 pts, 3.4 reb, 2.3 ast, 41.9 3P%
 - His three-point percentage is great, but he refused to shoot threes at a high rate.
- Justise Winslow missed a month with a wrist injury and then tore his labrum two weeks after returning.
 - He only played 18 games, a horrible development for the 20-year-old sophomore.
 - **Wasn't playing great anyways:** 10.9 pts, 5.2 ast, 3.7 stl
 - **Shooting extremely poorly:** 39.9 TS%, 37.1 eFG% (both very bad)

Eh Young Players

- **Already mentioned:** Josh Richardson
- UDFA Rodney McGruder
 - 37 games, 24 starts, 26.1 min
 - 3rd-most starts on the team
 - 5.7 pts, 3.5 reb, 1.5 stl
 - 31 3P%, half of his attempts are threes
 - 48.0 TS%, 45.3 eFG%

- Willie Reed
 - 32 games, 13.7 min
 - 5.1 reb, 4.8 reb
- Former No. 2 pick Derrick Williams
 - 23 games, 11 starts, 16.0 min, mostly as injury relief
 - 6.3 pts, 3.1 reb, 20.5 3P% on above average attempts
 - 46.5 TS%, 42.6 eFG%

Hassan Whiteside

- 17.5 pts, 14.3 reb, 3.9 off reb (all three would be career highs), 2.2 blk
- Whiteside's points and rebounds per 100 possessions were almost equal to 2016; greater opportunity has not lead to much more production. He's been solid, but he hasn't taken a leap. I already mentioned his huge contract, which took priority over Wade's dispute.
- His block percentage cratered (9.7% last year led the league vs 4.9% through 41 games)
- **Staying healthy:** tied with McGruder for team lead in games played (37 games)
- Whiteside is a defensive player, he is still contributing on that end, but the Heat are desperately hurting for any kind of offense, and he just can't fix that for a team missing Wade and Bosh. He scores primarily by offensive rebounds and lobs. His free throw percentage is also down (55.1% down from 65%).

The Season Must Go On

The first half of the season was filled with nothing but misery. Along with missing Wade and Bosh, the Heat dealt with nagging injuries, disappointing players, and were forced to endure awful shooting night after night. After the loss to Milwaukee, Spoilestra and the Heat were happy to be home after a brutal six-game road trip. I guess it's time for the rest of the season right? Let's just get this over with.

But Then Something Funny Happened...

| January 2017 | | | | | | |
|--------------|---|--|---|--|--|--|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | | | | | | |
| 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 |
| 15 | 16 | 17  W | 18 | 19  W | 20 | 21  W |
| 22 | 23  W | 24 | 25  @ BROOKLYN W | 26 | 27  @ CHICAGO BULLS W | 28  W |
| 29 | 30  BROOKLYN W | 31 | | | | |

Figure 6: Heating Up in January

| February 2017 | | | | | | |
|---------------|--|----|---|----|---|---|
| | | | 1  W | 2 | 3 | 4  W |
| | | | | | | |
| 5 | 6  @ MINNESOTA TIMBERWOLVES W | 7 | 8  W | 9 | 10  @ BROOKLYN W | 11 |
| 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 |
| 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 |
| 26 | 27 | 28 | | | | |

Figure 7: Continuing in February

The Heat suddenly became white-hot and rattled off a thirteen-game win streak. The Miami faithful were gifted with one of the most iconic and fun moments of the season when the 14-30 Heat welcomed the 38-6 Warriors to town.

Bedlum

The Warriors entered the game on a seven-game win streak and had won 17 of their last 19 games. It was a back-and-forth affair with fifteen ties and twelve lead changes; neither team was able to take firm control of the match. It went down to the wire: The Heat led 101-96 with under a minute remaining, but the Warriors showed patience, Goran Dragic missed a free throw, and three point-blank shots later, the game was tied at 102.

Then, Dion Waiters had [his moment](#).

A dagger three over a prime Klay Thompson. The building exploded. Dion stood at the top of the key with his arms crossed, expressionless [13]. It was truly a magical moment.



0.6 seconds remained on the clock, but Curry wasn't able to respond, and the game was over. The Heat beat the Big-4 Warriors. Dion immediately faced the raucous crowd. and cried out "This is my city." You would have thought that Dwyane Wade was back in the 305. Curry, Thompson, and Durant combined for 70 points, but Waiters scored 33 and that magnificent dagger. This became the defining moment of the Heat's season.

Breaking Down the Win Streak

Personnel

The Heat did not undergo drastic personnel changes. They signed frontcourt man Okaro White, who was a productive shooter off the bench. Derrick Williams played just nine minutes before he was waived and acquired by Cleveland.

Health

One of the keys to the win streak was continuity: a majority of the Heat's key players stayed healthy and finally shared the floor together. Obviously, Winslow and McRoberts were out for the year. Josh Richardson missed the entire win streak with a sprained left foot. In addition, Tyler Johnson missed five games with a shoulder injury. However, Babbitt, Dragic, Ellington, James Johnson, McGruder, and Willie Reed played all thirteen games. The unconscious Dion Waiters missed just two games, and Whiteside missed only one game.

The Sharpshooters Came Alive

The Heat's abysmal shooting suddenly made a 180:

- .582 TS%, .420 3P%, .556 eFG%
- Many players suddenly couldn't miss from three

| Player | 3P% |
|-----------------|-------|
| Luke Babbitt | 40% |
| Goran Dragic | 53.8% |
| Wayne Ellington | 42% |
| Rodney McGruder | 39.5% |
| Dion Waiters | 50% |
| Okaro White | 47.1% |

Table 2: Heat shooting during the streak

Guard Play

Alongside Dragic, Dion Waiters stepped up and played much better to help lead the Heat's offense.

- Goran Dragic: 22.8 pts, 6.7 ast, 4.4 reb, 65.5 TS%
- Dion Waiters: 20.6 pts, 4.8 ast, 4.1 reb, 59.0 TS%

Quality of Wins

The win streak alone was beyond unexpected, and many of the individual wins were very impressive. Six wins came against playoff teams (Bucks (2x), Bulls, Hawks, Rockets, Warriors), and two wins came against elite teams (Warriors game winner and Rockets outdueling Harden's 40-point triple double). From games 42 to 54, the Heat had a +10.8 Net Rating, which ranked second to...the Warriors with a +15.2 Net Rating. What a win that was.

Any Big Differences?

Given the explosion in offensive production, one might expect some drastic change in offensive philosophy. However, that isn't the case. There were no significant changes in pace, three-point attempt rate, free-throw attempt rate, or *FT/FGA*. The Heat simply got (relatively) healthy and unbelievably hot from the perimeter. The combination of continuity, Coach Spo, reliable veterans, and hot shooting was all they needed.

The Rest of the Season

The Heat cooled off considerably after winning thirteen straight, but they still played at an above-.500 level heading into the end of the season. Suddenly, a team that was 11-30 in mid-January was now thinking about the playoffs at the end of March. The Pacers (37-39) and the Bulls (36-39) competed with Miami (37-39) for the last two spots in the Eastern Conference. Unfortunately, the Heat played Chicago twice in the beginning of the season when they were very bad, and lost both times. Miami beat Chicago during their huge winning streak, but they had no chance to play the Bulls again. The Heat defeated the Pacers 2-1 in the season series, so they held the tiebreaker over Indiana, but not Chicago. According to ESPN, the Bulls held the tiebreaker over the Pacers. Note: the Bucks and Hornets were technically a part of this scrum, but the Hornets nearly went winless in April and the Bucks were so far ahead, so I felt it

was only necessary to focus on these three teams. With the stage set, here's how April went as these three teams battled for playoff positioning:

| April | Schedule | | | Win-Loss | | | Playoff Positioning | |
|----------|----------|---------|---------|----------|-------|--------|---------------------|----------|
| | Heat | Bulls | Pacers | Heat | Bulls | Pacers | 7th Seed | 8th Seed |
| Entering | - | - | - | 37-39 | 36-39 | 37-39 | Heat | Pacers |
| 1 | | ATL, W | | 37-39 | 37-39 | 37-39 | Bulls | Heat |
| 2 | DEN, L | @NOP, W | @CLE, L | 37-40 | 38-39 | 37-40 | Bulls | Heat |
| 3 | | | | 37-40 | 38-39 | 37-40 | Bulls | Heat |
| 4 | | @NYK, L | TOR, W | 37-40 | 38-40 | 38-40 | Bulls | Pacers |
| 5 | @CHA, W | | | 38-40 | 38-40 | 38-40 | Bulls | Heat |
| 6 | | @PHI, W | MIL, W | 38-40 | 39-40 | 39-40 | Bulls | Pacers |
| 7 | @TOR, L | | | 38-41 | 39-40 | 39-40 | Bulls | Pacers |
| 8 | @WSH, W | @BKN, L | ORL, W | 39-41 | 39-41 | 40-40 | Pacers | Bulls |
| 9 | | | | 39-41 | 39-41 | 40-40 | Pacers | Bulls |
| 10 | CLE, W | ORL, W | @PHI, W | 40-41 | 40-41 | 41-40 | Pacers | Bulls |
| 11 | | | | 40-41 | 40-41 | 41-40 | Pacers | Bulls |
| 12 | WSH, W | BKN, W | ATL, W | 41-41 | 41-41 | 42-40 | Pacers | Bulls |

Figure 8: The day-to-day Playoff Race in April 2017

They fell just short. A team that had no business competing for a playoff spot was now gutted to be on the outside looking in. The Pacers won five straight to escape the tiebreaker business. The Bulls had a relatively soft schedule (their last six games were all against non-playoff teams, including three games against the gutter of the East), and they took care of business. They did just enough to clinch the eighth spot. Considering how the Bulls spent most of the season languishing with drama swirling and uninspiring play, I wager that the public would have preferred to see this fun Heat squad make a postseason appearance instead. The Heat were also trying to make this unlikely run without Dion Waiters, the man who had the moment of the season for Miami. He missed the last thirteen games of the regular season with an ankle injury. Alas, it was not meant to be. The 2016-17 Miami Heat would miss the playoffs due to a tiebreaker. After their miserable start, the Heat won thirteen straight and then ended the season 17-11. After Game 41, they flipped their win-loss from 11-30 to 30-11.

Breaking Down Their Improvement

After the first 41 games, I displayed a couple of tables showing how bad it had gotten for the Heat (Figures 4 & 5). Here are those same statistics for the last 41 games:

| Stat | Value | Rank |
|-------------------|--------------|------------|
| Record | 30-11 | 2nd |
| ORtg | 112.6 | 8th |
| DRtg | 105.8 | 3rd |
| Net Rating | +6.9 | 2nd |

Figure 9: The Big Picture

| Stat | Value | Rank |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| FT% | .734 | 28th |
| TS% | .566 | 9th |
| 3P% | .390 | 2nd |
| eFG% | .536 | 5th |

Figure 10: Shooting stats

A complete 180: From second-worst record through 41 games to the second-best

record in the last 41 games. Their shooting went from disturbing to deadly, and they still maintained their defensive chops.

As you can imagine, many of their shooters caught fire:

| Player | 3P% | |
|-----------------|------------|-----------|
| | First 41 G | Last 41 G |
| Luke Babbitt | .359 | .458 |
| Goran Dragic | .397 | .411 |
| Wayne Ellington | .321 | .407 |
| Rodney McGruder | .310 | .350 |
| Josh Richardson | .310 | .366 |
| Dion Waiters | .308 | .445 |

Babbitt and Ellington both ranked top-six in the NBA in *3PAr* for the season, and both vastly improved their three-point percentages. They both reinstated their status as very reliable downtown threats. Ellington played all 41 games in the second half of the season, allowing him to regain comfort and rhythm. Not included in this table is Okaro White, who shot 35.3% from three in his 35 appearances in the second half of the season. Tyler Johnson was nearly lateral in his shooting (.374 vs .369) and James Johnson took less threes and made less as well (.384 vs .298).

Highlighting Individual Players

For reference once again, here are the league average shooting percentages from Games 42 to 82:

| Stat | eFG% | TS% | 3P% | FT% | FTr |
|-------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Value | .517 | .555 | .356 | .773 | .271 |

Table 3: League-average shooting metrics thru 41 games.

The biggest riser from half one to half two was Dion Waiters:

- Fiami's first 41 games (21 games played): 12.8 pts, 3.8 ast, 3.0 reb, 43.5 TS%, 40.9 eFG%, 30.8 3P%
- Miami's last 41 games (25 games played): 18.4 pts, 4.8 ast, 3.6 reb, 56.1 TS%, 54.8 eFG%, 44.5 3P%

All three shooting percentages are now above average, especially his three-point percentage. Unfortunately, he only played 25 out of 41 games; he just couldn't stay healthy. I would be remiss if I didn't give credit to Goran Dragic. He continued his strong play and even improved it: He averaged 21.4 pts, 5.3 ast, 3.8 reb, 1.2 stl on 59.2 TS%, 54.5 eFG%, 41.1 3P% (All three percentages above average); he also started drawing more fouls (.368 FTr) to put additional pressure on the defense. In addition with his strong play, he played 40 of 41 games. Dragic was the only true shot creator available half the time and he still managed to score very efficiently. He was truly a warrior, ever reliable and dependable for a team that desperately needed his shot creation. The other star of the team, Hassan Whiteside, still had solid averages: 16.5 pts, 14.0 reb, 3.7 off reb,

2.0 blk. However, he greatly increased his free throw percentage (55.1% to 71.1%). He was an ever present lob threat and a menace on the offensive glass, the dominant low post presence Miami needed.

Why This Means Something

Per the Heat's Game 82 broadcast, the 2017 Heat are the first team to be nineteen games under .500 and eventually make it back to .500. No team even thirteen games below .500 had ever done that. Usually, especially in the modern NBA, when a team is nineteen games under .500 this deep into a season, they abandon ship. They trade any valuable veterans or pieces and send a substandard team to tank into a better position for the draft lottery. The Heat refused to tank². It was like a movie where a struggling team comes together and turns it around. They didn't have the happy ending they desired. The second half of the season showed the camaraderie and unity of the team. They were all about the team and they all started believing that they could actually qualify. The combination of faith, sacrifice, selflessness, and heart led to one of most endearing regular season teams ever. The ESPN recap of Game 82 paints a picture of how crushed the Heat were after finding out the Bulls won:

"Goran Dragic's eyes were red long after the final buzzer. Willie Reed sat at his locker, overcome by emotion. Some players shed tears. Others yelled in frustration.

The Miami Heat won.

The season ended anyway.

...'I don't know if I've ever wanted something more for a team,' an emotional Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. 'When any one of us wanted to get into team sports, it was to be around a team like this. ... The hardest thing for any of us to wrap our minds around is that we don't have practice tomorrow at 12. It just doesn't feel right. It doesn't feel like the basketball gods shined down on us.'"

Despite not getting the desired result, the Heat fans were grateful. They gave their team a standing ovation in the closing moments of Game 82. They were loud, thankful, and made sure the Heat players knew how proud they were of their group. The Heat showed more resolve than almost any other team in NBA history. It mattered. For everyone involved, it mattered. 'Heat Culture' has become an overused term; it has almost lost its meaning to the point of becoming a punchline. The 2016-17 Heat are the definition of "Heat Culture." Sacrifice, selflessness, doing what's necessary, resolve, being greater than the sum of parts: these are all qualities demonstrated by this great, great group. This group did something beyond unprecedented, something that no one saw coming. Well...almost no one saw it coming.

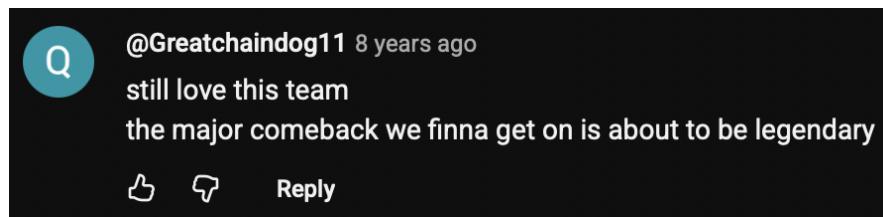


Figure 11: YouTube Comment from the Game 41 video recap, when the Heat were 11-30.

²Ironically, they still ended up with Bam Adebayo as their 2017 draft pick, who would go on to become one of the better players in the NBA.

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