

There is nothing tougher than being in the locker room after losing in the playoffs, particularly this year. Every man on the roster knew we were capable of playing better than we did. We knew we gave them 3 games that we had won. In the locker room after the game, it all hits you at the same time.

There is nothing you can say to players with tears welling in their eyes or rolling down their cheeks. You can put your arm around them. You can tell them how much you care about them.

The players know just how fragile every part of their careers are. You just don't know where things will go from here. There are any number of outside elements that impact the physical and business side of basketball, which makes a lost opportunity all the harder to deal with.

It hurts. It hurts that night. You can't sleep. It hurts the next day. The only feeling that can compare it to is the one you get breaking up with a girlfriend. Your emotions are tied up for 8 months in the season and when it's over. It hurts.

The only saving grace is that I love the team we have and the direction our coach will take us. It still astounds me that we did as well as we did given that we not only changed coaches with 18 games to go in the regular season, but we also did 180 degree change in philosophy. Hopefully we will have a full summer to develop our young players and a full training camp under AJ. AJ is a great teacher and motivator. Training Camp and a full season will make us far better than we were this year.

At this point last year, I was concerned. We lost in the first round. We had multiple players who were asking to be traded. We had taken some chances in bringing in players, and it didn't work out. Guys had played for themselves rather than for the team. It was a team that was going nowhere fast.

Our first move was to trade Antawn Jameson to get Devin Harris and Jerry Stackhouse. Antawn wanted to be started on a team where he could have an impact. He is a first class guy and when Washington called with the offer of the #5 pick and Stack, it was a chance to keep our word to AJ, reduce our logjam at the Power Forward position and pick up a backup point guard in training for Steve.

Of course, pretty much the next day Nash decided to leave. At that point I was very concerned. I was concerned as to what our team would have looked like had Steve stayed, but I was even more concerned about life without Steve because we now had no idea what our team would look like at the beginning of the year. It was bad enough that I thought we had made a mistake by not lottery protecting the draft pick we had traded to get Pavel.

We had always expected Steve to stay. I had also given the mandate to Donnie that other than draft picks, our committed payroll (the amount of money that we owe in total to all players) would have to come down. We were able to save some money when we traded Antawn.

Walk (Antoine Walker) had asked to be moved. I had promised him we would do our best to accommodate him. Walk was always very professional with me. We had talked through the summer to that point. I kept him up to speed on the discussions going on, but made it clear that I wasn't going to take back more salary. That if we could do a deal that was salary neutral with him and any other players, and that would help the team, we would do the deal. Unfortunately, to that point, we hadn't received any offers that would meet those criteria.

I also was trying to keep my options open in case the chance to trade for Shaq could become a reality. In talking to the Lakers however, they made it clear there was zero chance of a trade with us. Front door, back door, with one, two, three other teams, it wasn't going to happen.

As of Draft Day, our starting lineup was looking to be the exact same lineup as the one we had ended the previous season with Nash, Finley, Marquis or Josh, Dirk and Antoine Walker. On the bench we would have Eddie Najera, Shawn Bradley, Devin Harris, Stack and we knew that Danny Fortson would be turned into Calvin Booth.

One of the reasons we traded our pick to get Pavel on Draft Day was that we knew we didn't have a great team, and that a big part of this season was going to be developing young players. We could make the playoffs, maybe do some damage there, but our biggest upside from this season would be in developing our young guns around Dirk, Steve and Fin and seeing where they could take us in the future.

Then Steve left for Phoenix. If we had questions about our team before he left, we had more after he left. We started to scramble. Our first order of business was to re-sign Marquis. Nellie liked to use him as a point guard, so it gave us some stability there.

After that, Donnie went to work. His first deal got us Jason Terry and Hendu from the Hawks for Tony Delk and Walk.

That gave us a point guard with experience and that had had individual, if not team success in the league. At that point, we honestly didn't expect Hindu to play at all. He hadn't played the year before due to back problems, and we expected to be able to collect insurance money on his contract. (Obviously it didn't turn out that way, and Hindu more than paid for himself with his contributions this year). So at that point in time, the economics of that deal actually saved us money.

With the money that we had saved when Steve left, I could have just put the money in my pocket, and I seriously considered doing that.

Around that same period in time, I started having conversations with Avery Johnson about coming back as a player and then at some point after he retired, becoming a coach. I really wanted AJ here. He was the unsung hero of our 2002-3 playoff run. He ran practices and got in people's faces when it needed to happen. When Portland ran off 3 straight against us, he was the voice in the locker room pushing the guys and the guys loved him and responded well to him.

Avery still wanted to play at that point, so we signed him to a 1 year deal as a player. He also told us that we should be going after Erick Dampier if we could work out a sign and trade with the Warriors.

The thing about a sign and trade is that it's just that a trade. I told Donnie that as long as we gave up enough salaries, plus what we saved from Nash, to be less than or equal to what we guaranteed Damp in his deal, I would give it my blessing. It took what seemed like months to work out, but we were able to trade basically Laettner (who we got in the Stack/Devin deal) and Eddie Najera for Damp and Evan Eschmeyer. We had stuck to our financial parameters, saved money and got to a point where we felt we had the nucleus to have a very good team. In fact, it was the first time we had what looked like a traditional team, with a post up center and 3 young perimeter players who were good and could be great defenders.

I need to also mention that although I was upset when Steve left, that was tempered because I was mad at how his agent handled the entire situation. Steve is a first class guy. Someone I think is amazing in so many ways on and off the court. His agent I don't feel the same way about. (And for those who care about trivia, I would rather get beat by Steve, someone I like then someone I don't think much of)

What hurt far worse than Steve leaving for more money, was having to trade Eddie Najera. Free Agents leave of their own accord. When we trade someone, it's usually not their choice. Eddie didn't want to leave. He loved it with the Mavs and we loved having him here. He would be in and out of Nellie's doghouse, but he always had a smile on his face and picked up the energy and spirits of everyone around him. He not only was a crowd favorite, he was a locker room favorite as well. It was not a fun day when the trade went down.

So that was how the team of 2004-5 was put together.

Unlike last year, this year ended completely differently. I'm proud of what we accomplished, on and off the court. To a man, every new player came up to me, and thanked me for bringing them into the organization. Guys thanked each other for a great year. Our young players continued to develop and will be even better next year. I think our veterans will thrive as they get more comfortable with Avery's system.

It doesn't take the hurt away from losing this year. But it sure makes it easier to look forward to next year

I want to bring up one more thing that I am incredibly proud of this team for. Starting with the first game of this season, Michael Finley asked that every player on the team put his hand over his heart during the National Anthem. Although we have players from around the world, every player, coach, trainer and throughout the organization, followed his lead as a sign of team unity and as a way of saying thank you, and did so every single game of the year.

I thought that other teams might follow our lead. I thought that the media might pick up on it and maybe even give us a hard time about it since we had players from around the world. None of the above happened, which made it all the better. It was something that was uniquely our Dallas Mavericks.

I have to tell you, that as owner of the Dallas Mavericks, win or lose, I started every game, with my hand over my heart, grateful for the opportunity to live in this great country and incredibly proud of every single person representing the Mavs on that court.