

In the NBA when a player is signed to a contract, the business side is downplayed. Everyone is happy. Everyone knows there is an incredible amount of risk taken, but it's a time to celebrate and ignore what could go wrong. All is right in the world.

When teams have to release a player, the NBA becomes a business and all involved say just that. It's just a business and we all understand that these things happen. But it's not true. The NBA is never just a business. It's always business. It's always personal. All good businesses are personal. The best businesses are very personal.

Creating a close connection to those you do business with has its many risks, rewards and consequences. There are few things in business I have encountered that are more difficult than firing someone, particularly if that someone has always been, or has become a friend. On the flipside, I have been rewarded with many friends.

Michael Finley is one of those people I am proud to call my friend. Releasing Fin last night was one of the hardest things I have had to do as owner of the Mavs. (Trading Erik Strickland was probably the hardest. Strick did more to help me my first year than anyone.) Even more difficult than releasing Mike was having the conversations with him about what our options were.

The model for success in the NBA has changed over the past 6 years I have been in the league. When I first got to the Mavs, there was no luxury tax, revenues from TV and the league went up every year, as did the salary cap. That changed dramatically with the league's new TV deal and it changed even further with this year's new collective bargaining agreement. Rather than an environment where salaries could go up because the cap and revenues were going up, we entered an environment where trades were made almost exclusively for financial reasons and rarely for basketball skill reasons.

The Mavs tried to take advantage of the situation. When the annual league revenue increases stopped and a luxury tax loomed, teams adjusted their financial profiles. To get under the tax threshold, they offered good players packaged with horrible contracts. We took them. We hoped the talent would get us a championship before the number of bad contracts we took on in trades caught up with us.

It didn't happen.

Over the past year we have done our best to try to "rebuild" and still be in a position to win a championship. We have always been good at developing young players. We work hard to give them personal attention and skills development. We are working to improve it even further and have completely upgraded our development programs this summer.

We are also significantly changing how we scout NBA players. It has become more organized, structured and planned rather than "gut feel". We have a coach who is far more systematic in his approach to both.

More importantly we have gone from just trying to acquire talent to having assets that in turn might be traded for better talent, to making sure we have players that fill a role for Coach Johnson's vision of the team. Today, and for the future with young players that we can develop to fill those roles on future Mavs teams.

Which brings us back to Mike. Under the new CBA, the amount of money we would be able to save by waiving Mike, and invoking the amnesty provision, when combined with some financial clauses in the way his contract was structured and the money that could be returned as part of the NBA set off contract provisions, could put our cash savings in the next 3 years at more than 90 million dollars. That's a lot of money.

Now I would be shocked if we are able to realize all of that and stay under the tax amount, but even saving that much money in essence gives us a "do over" in terms of financial flexibility when it comes to signing new players. It gives me a chance to recover from the mistakes I made.

Are we going to get back in the business of taking on bad contracts to get a single player no. Will we consider trading short term contracts for longer, more expensive players yes. If it makes basketball sense and doesn't inhibit our future. The difference going forward today vs the past is that Avery and Donnie are putting in programs and structure that will allow us to better evaluate players and choose those that put our team in the best position to succeed. We never did that in the past.

We made trades because we thought we knew players. I'm embarrassed to admit, but this summer was the first time we actually brought in non rookie Free Agents that we were interested in to work out. Before, we just called the agents of guys we liked and tried to work out deals.

Avery and Donnie and Joe P have watched more tape in a week of players that we have talked about in trades or Free Agency than we have watched in any summer since I bought the team and maybe in all combined.

It's my fault that we got to this point.

I never should have authorized deals without asking for far more details. I was guilty of being overly optimistic. I wanted to believe that the next deal was the one that was the difference maker. I found ways to rationalize the business side and how I would only be losing a few more dollars and that if it made the difference it was worth it. I enabled a culture where we always thought that if we had assets to trade we could fix a mistake.

I was wrong.

We should have done several years ago what the organization is doing now to improve our player evaluation and development.

The template for success in the NBA changed from the Portland model of 1999-2000 when I got to the league, to the Detroit, San Antonio, Miami model. The finances and rules of the league evolved. The winning teams were ahead of the curve or evolved as the business of the NBA changed. Today, success seems to come from being a smart organization that can identify and develop young talent and have the financial and or cap flexibility to be opportunistic and improve your team in season or during the offseason.

Although we have succeeded on the court to the point of 5 straight 50 plus win seasons, we certainly didn't do it "the best way". We did it the most expensive way. It cost us flexibility and created lots of bad habits. That was my mistake and it ended up costing us Mike.

Waiving Mike gave us the opportunity to reclaim financial flexibility. It never should have gotten to this point. My mistakes let it. Which makes it all the more painful. It's business, but it really is personal.

I'm learning. Our organization is learning. The bright side is that I like the team we have going into the year. Our guys have been working hard to get better this summer. I think having AJ for a full training camp along with 11 returning players will allow us to compensate for losing Mike and hopefully be a better team.