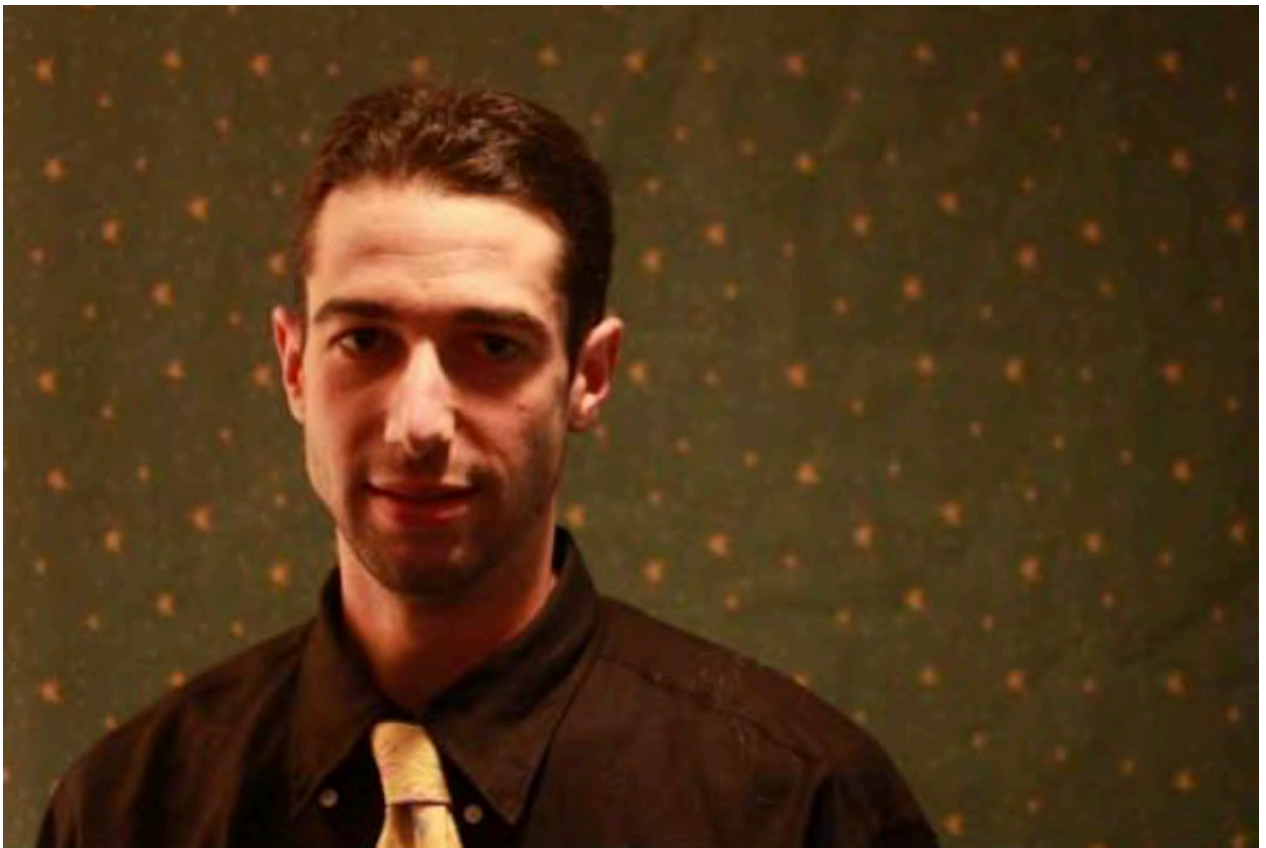


Look Back On Me:

Alex Katz, 2007, and the Long Road Home to Glory

By

The Comptroller



*April 2nd, 2007 – Atlanta, Georgia – Georgia Dome*

With only seconds remaining in the 2007 NCAA Men's Basketball National Championship game, the raucous, capacity crowd of 51,458 fans filling Atlanta's Georgia Dome to the brim grew suddenly quiet and fell into a tense silence. The reason? All that stood between the Florida Gators and victory was two free throws.

Two free throws and Florida would become the first back-to-back champions since Duke in 1991-92. Two free throws and Florida would become the first school to win both football and basketball championships in the same calendar year. Two free throws and this 2006-2007 Florida team would cement its legacy as one of the greatest of all-time.

All that weight stood squarely on the shoulders of one person: Florida's junior point guard, Taurean Green.



After leaving Florida a two-time National Champion, Taurean Green (above) played only one season in the NBA before signing internationally. He currently plays for the Antibes Sharks in France.

Four years earlier it would have been hard to imagine such a future for the young man. An undersized, unheralded recruit out of Boca Raton, Green attended four different high schools in four years and seemed destined to play out his college days in the anonymity of the MAC. Then, just days before signing day, Green received a call from Florida head coach Billy Donovan. Donovan had already reeled in one of the biggest recruiting classes in the country thanks to Joakim Noah, Al Horford and Corey Brewer. But what they were missing was a point guard. Donovan originally intended for that scholarship to go to a blue chipper from Texas. At the last moment,

the recruit backed out, opening the door for Green. Green didn't hesitate. He accepted on the spot.

Green played sparingly as a true freshman but he burst onto the scene as a sophomore, starting at point guard for the young Gators squad that swept to the 2006 National Title. Then – inexplicably – the starting five for that team spurned the NBA and decided to return to school.

The result was as dominant as it was expected:

A 34-5 record. A second consecutive SEC Tournament Championship. A number one seed. And now this... a dismantling of a 35-2 Ohio State juggernaut led by future All-Pro Mike Conley and future number one overall pick, the infamous Greg Oden.

If Green had any nerves as he stepped to the free throw line, he didn't show it. He took a deep breath, spun the ball to himself and knocked down the first. Then he knocked down the second. Moments later, when Ohio State's final shot clanked off the rim and the ball landed in Taurean Green's arms it seemed like perfect symmetry. As the final seconds ticked away, Green dribbled the ball exuberantly down the court. Then he closed his eyes, cupping the ball in his arm and hurling it straight into the air with a joyous scream. While the ball was at its apex, the buzzer sounded and one of the most dominant performances in the history of college basketball was complete.

Some 660 miles to the south and east, another young man on the brink of greatness soaked all of this in. Alex Katz's face was still red and raw from a day spent in the sun's warmth. His hair was windswept. If you looked closely you could still make out the fine, white sand deposited along the length of his arms and legs, a product of the day's wakeboarding and surfing. It had been a good spring break. A well deserved rest from the grind that was the first year of medical school in dreary Philadelphia. But what he was now witnessing made it so much more than that.



Alex's first call after winning the inaugural Player Pool was to his brother Jeremy.  
Said Alex of his brother: "He's the real MVP."

When the buzzer sounded, Alex fell to one knee in front of the bar. Rob Kinner – Alex’s confidante and right hand man who was with him that night – claims that he saw tears streaming down his friend’s face. Then just as suddenly Alex rose, signaling to the bartender to retrieve the bottle of champagne he had ordered earlier in the night and asked to be set on ice.

Alex unspooled the wrapper. He stood on top of the bar. He popped the cork and sprayed everyone in sight. Then he drank as the dozens of people in attendance chanted his name. And as the chant grew louder, Alex stretched out his hands to the sky, shutting his eyes and for one shining moment, reveled in what he had done: He had become the first ever champion of the Player Pool.

Sports has a way of creating these moments. Images that are forever burned into our memories. The young athlete, frozen in time, a lifetime of glory and achievement spread out in front of them. A twenty-two year old Derek Jeter winning his first World Series. A twenty-four year old Tom Brady hoisting his first Lombardi Trophy. Wayne Gretzky kisses the Stanley Cup for the first time at the tender age of twenty-three.

As I look back now at the image of Alex celebrating that night I cannot help but ask myself the same question all of us are asking:

*How did it all go so terribly wrong?*



The National Institute of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, MD where Alex now works.

I find myself squinting as I look up at the impressive building that stands before me, its array of glass windows reflecting the midday sun directly into my eyes. I must

have the look of a visitor about me because I am standing there no longer than a few seconds before a young man in shirt and tie approaches me.

“Can I help you, sir?”



Seen here celebrating a pick in one of our last in person drafts (circa 2009-2010), Alex has always been known for his even keeled and composed approach to the Player Pool.

I look down to see a studious young man peering at me through thick glasses. He wears a short sleeve dress shirt and is carrying a coffee in one hand. I note a slight smile on his face. When I tell him that I am here to see Dr. Katz he seems excited and motions with his free hand for me to follow him.

“I’m heading to see him too,” he tells me. As we walk down a long corridor he turns to me: “You work in Genomic Ascertainment, too?”

I shake my head.

“Then you are just a fan of Dr. Katz’s work?”

Again I shake my head.



“You have an interest in the field?”

I am silent. He stops at the end of the long corridor, his hand resting on a doorknob. He looks at me curiously now.

“Then what *are* you here for?”

I smile politely and say simply:

“It’s personal.”

The young man looks at me for a moment longer before shrugging. Then he opens the door and allows me to enter first. We are at the top of a large auditorium. Seats are filled to near capacity. There is a buzz and energy about the room. As I slide into one of the last open seats in the last row the lights dim and a silence begins to descend. I feel my heart begin to beat rapidly.

What I have not told Alex’s student is maybe the most important detail of all:

Alex does not know I am here.



Few players in the history of basketball have had such a meteoric rise as Luc Richard Mbah a Moute after Alex selected him with his last pick in the 2007 draft. “I owe everything to Alex,” Luc says. “Without him I would never have made it onto the radar of NBA scouts.” Mbah a Moute currently plays for the L.A. Clippers.

I do not mean to ambush him. It is not my intention to become a spy and snoop invasively into his daily life while he is completely unaware. And yet, here I am. I feel I have no choice. As a journalist. As a competitor. As an old friend. So much has been written and said about the complete collapse that has been Alex’s Player Pool career that I feel it is my responsibility to see first hand and without any awareness on his end the man he has become. It is akin, I think, to catching a glimpse of a rare and beautiful animal in a completely natural moment in its habitat.



Though Josh now has three titles to Alex's one, Alex still retains the (perhaps more prestigious) record for most points in a single tournament (488).

A moment later, the audience hushes completely as Alex emerges from a closed door and steps slowly and confidently to the podium. I find myself leaning forward in my seat, my eyes narrowing on the man I have come to see. He wears dark brown shoes, tailored navy pants and a well-fitting white shirt, a splash of bright color coming from the pink tie around his neck. His sleeves are rolled up to just below the elbows. It's a look that fits Alex. Clean. Classic. Sophisticated. Yet not afraid of a day's work.

From this distance he appears much the same to me. He is still trim and fit. His body language and mannerisms unchanged. When he starts his lecture there is the same deliberate tone, the same subtle joviality and lack of pretension. It is the subject and nuances of Alex's lecture that escape me. It is as if someone were speaking to me in a foreign language of which I know only a few words. Those words reach out and grab me, enticing me to comprehend...

... *cohort*...

... *bias*...

... *phenotype*...

... *variants*...

... *longitudinal*...

But no sooner do I hear one of these words then I find myself adrift again in this sea of advanced, government-funded science. So instead I turn my attention to Alex's students. The dozens of young men and women taking notes diligently in their notebooks and their laptops. Hanging on every one of those words whose meaning escapes me. I see the student who led me here. He is seated in the front row, writing so furiously he twice must shake out his arm to work out a cramp.

All this makes it clear: Alex has not let his Player Pool failures of the last dozen years affect his personal appearance or his professional standing. And I admire him for it.

I must wait forty-five minutes for the auditorium to empty after the lecture is over. Alex stays at the dais this whole time, talking to his students and fans and patiently answering their questions. I suspect that one eager young woman even asks Alex to sign an autograph. Finally, when everyone is gone I make my way down the steps. At first Alex does not notice me. He is packing away two books and his computer into his bag. Finally, I can tell he feels the sensation of being watched.

He straightens. Looks me in the eye. And I can tell right away that he knows why I am here.



In 2007, the Grammy Award for Best Album went to the Dixie Chicks for "Taking the Long Way". The Oscar for Best Picture went to "The Departed".

Alex smiles at the question, a hint of the joyful, lanky, exuberant youth he once was in the glint in the corner of his eyes. We are seated at an outside table at a sidewalk café down the street. The waitress comes before he has time to answer.

"Your coffee, Dr. Katz," she says with a smile. "Just the way you like it."



Alex thanks her politely. I am impressed. Even outside the office, it seems, Alex is a kind of local celebrity. I can understand why. In these challenging political times he is the kind of person everyone can rally around. A uniting force. A voice of reason.

His voice breaks me from my reverie.

"I know it's strange to say but I remember everything about how it started," he says.

I don't tell him just how strange it is. I have asked this question of several people over the years and only gotten vague responses in return. For most it is something hazy and indistinct. As easily forgotten as a change from one semester to the next. But for Alex it's different. In his lack of hesitation, in the precision of his detail, I am confident that not only is he telling the truth but his memory is accurate and precise.

"We were in physiology class," he says as he crosses one leg smoothly over the other. "You leaned over and whispered to me about how your friends from college do a 'player pool' for the NCAA tournament. I asked what exactly that meant and you patiently explained the draft and its beautifully simple scoring system."

He shakes his head, takes a sip of his coffee and places it back down on the table that separates us.

"I immediately woke from my daily med school class nap and knew we were about to embark on a tradition that would forever define my college basketball fandom."

As Alex tells it, this was in late February. On one of those dreary, dismal, cold and wet days only the northeast can produce.

"I needed an escape. Something to take my mind off school. Off memorizing anatomy. Off the pressure. Off everything. Then... poof. Here comes this magical thing into my life. Into all our lives. It's a moment I'll never forget."

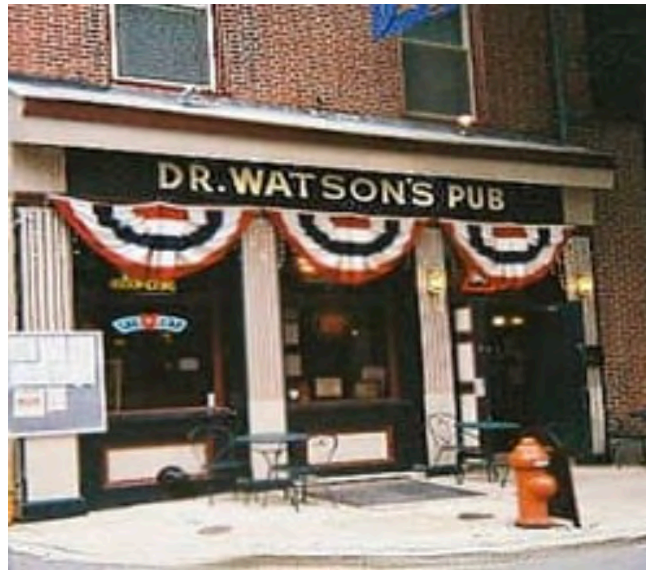
For the next few weeks Alex did little but watch college basketball.

"I just tried to appreciate the game, you know? The artistry of it. The intangibles. Who did I want fighting the battles with me? I didn't think about stats. The day before the draft, I did flip through the cheat sheet. But only a couple of times."

There is nostalgia in Alex's voice as he recalls the days before the current Google document.

"You have to remember, this was before Dr. Zahm organized the league. The Comptroller hardly did anything. He looked up, what, five guys per team? *If* that. And even then only players on top seeds. He printed copies of this off and passed them around. There was chatter out there about algorithms and spreadsheets but as

a scientist, I had to question their validity. To me, the draft selections were going to come down to gut and feel.”



Outside Doc Watson's Pub on 11<sup>th</sup> street.  
The venerable establishment shuttered its doors and windows in 2010.

The draft took place in the back room of Doc Watson's. Alex remembers vividly how Dave Goldberg drew the first pick. Clearly frazzled at the immensity of the moment, Goldberg nervously picked Tyler Hansbrough of UNC.

"I'm sitting across from James and Bryan and they both leap up out of their seats, spilling their drinks, exclaiming: 'How could you not pick *Durant*?'"

The 2006-2007 season was Kevin Durant's lone season of college basketball at the University of Texas.

"Goldberg glanced at me and I just nodded. Nah, I told him, that's a good pick. I would have done the same." Alex shrugs and sighs: "And that's how Player Pool 1 commenced."

I give Alex the chance to gloat. Though Durant did score 57 points in two games, Texas was knocked out of the tournament in the second round. Hansbrough, on the other hand, led UNC to the Elite Eight with 85 points.

"The truth is we all make bad decisions in the Player Pool," Alex tells me, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. He looks about him as if to make sure no one nearby can hear him. "But that kind of emotional outburst from James and Bryan? You just can't have that. Avoiding those kind of ups and downs is what I believe set the foundation for my first title."

“Your *only* title,” I remind Alex cautiously.

I know I am stepping into dangerous territory and, for a moment, there is the first tense silence of our exchange. The smile disappears from his face. He looks at me for what feels like a long moment, spinning his cup of coffee absently on the small plate in front of him. Finally he lets go and nods, a sardonic small smile appearing on his face.

“Yes, my only title,” he concedes. “As if I could forget.”



Arron Afflalo (age 21 at left, present day at right) was a key cog in Alex's 2007 arsenal. In leading UCLA back to the Final Four for a second consecutive year he delivered on high expectations.

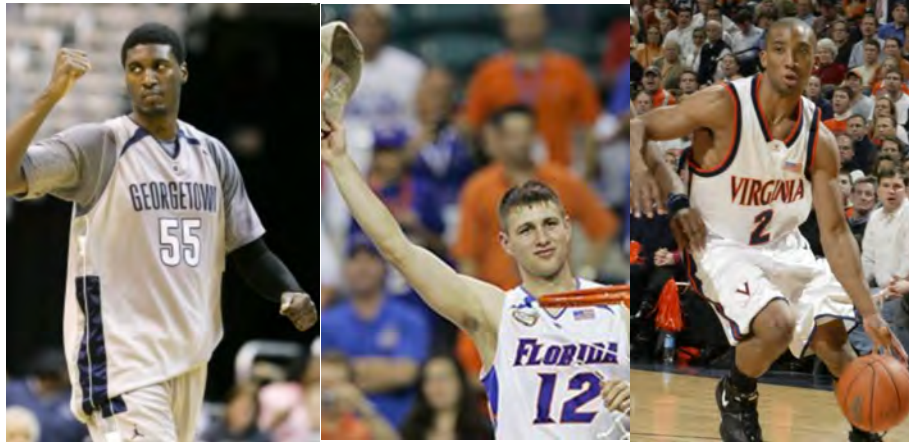
Scholars have debated the composition of Alex's 2007 title team for years now. They've run numbers. They've dissected box scores. They've watched and re-watched old film. But what they've failed to do, Alex tells me, is the simplest thing of all:

Ask him.

So I do. And he is quick to respond.

“I focused on three big teams. Georgetown and, of course, UCLA and Florida.”

Alex knew he wouldn't be alone. Only a season before, Florida had defeated UCLA in the 2006 National Championship Game played in Indianapolis. UCLA returned much of its star-studded roster while Florida – shockingly – returned its entire starting five.



Roy Hibbert (left), Lee Humphrey (center), J.R. Reynolds (right) remain close to this day. For the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Inaugural Player Pool Title they all rented a house on Turks and Caicos together.

“I had the sixth pick. So I knew that Al Horford, Joakim Noah and Corey Brewer would be off the board by the time my name was called. So I went with Afflalo.”

A junior guard, born and bred in LA just minutes from Pauley Pavilion, Aaron Afflalo was not only a consensus first team All-American and Pac-12 Player of the Year that season, he was also UCLA’s top scorer at 16.9 points per game. He did not disappoint in the tournament, totaling ninety points over five games for an 18 ppg average.

“I don’t want to say I wasn’t happy with the pick. I was and he turned out great. But who I really wanted was Jeff Green. I was just banking on him still being available when the draft came back to me.”

Alex recalls how his heart sank when Jeff Green was drafted only one pick later. The first gamble in Alex’s career had imploded right in front of his very eyes.

“I can say this now...” He starts and then stops. He swallows. “That was hard for me.”

With some prompting, witnesses recall the moment over a dozen years later.

“I heard this *snap*,” Andrew Farach tells me in a recent phone conversation from Houston where he now lives and works. “And when I look over I see Alex has broken his pencil in half. He was sitting over in the corner. I didn’t know what was going on but it wasn’t like him. Usually he was so mild mannered. Next thing I knew he was jumping out of his seat and headed to the bathroom.”

Bryan Lebude furrows his brow at first when I ask him about this. But after a moment it comes back to him.

“Actually, now that you say something...”

Bryan tells me how he wasn't himself that night either. He'd had a little too much to drink, he admits, leading him to put all his bets down on the Texas A&M Aggies. Riding that high he suddenly realized he had to go to the bathroom. It was while he was washing his hands that he heard something.

"I thought I was alone in there. Then I just hear this *banging* and groaning coming from behind a stall. I crouched down, you know, to make sure everything was okay. I think it was Alex's shoes but I really couldn't say for sure."

When I ask Alex if that was him in the stall and, if so, what he was doing Alex is vague in his response.

"Let's just say I needed a few minutes to regroup. When I came back out I was ready and focused. Roy was where the greatness truly started."



"There's not a day that goes by that I don't have someone come up to me on the street and tell me how much that 2007 Player Pool team meant to them," Alex says. "I don't take that for granted."

Roy Hibbert, 7'3" behemoth for the number two seeded Georgetown Hoyas, scored in double digits each of his five games in the tournament, totaling a respectable seventy-one points in all, an average of 14 ppg, one higher than his 13 ppg he averaged during the season.

Still, Alex knew that if he was to have any chance at the title, the road would have to pass through Gainesville. And now staring at his third round pick, he found himself with none of their players. When the draft came back around and Taurean Green was still available, Alex knew that any bad fortune he'd had with Jeff Green was a thing of the past.

Lady Luck was now firmly on his side.



“I watched Taurean Green play a few times during the year and he was everything I was looking for in a player. He had that dog in him. You could just tell people underestimated him on the court. Just like they did the draft. And I identified with that. Look at the regular season scoring averages and you’ll see what I mean.”

Alex is right. Florida boasted an incredibly balanced scoring attack that season. All five starters averaged in double figures ranging from 10.3 ppg to 13.3 ppg. Green, in fact, was the team’s highest scorer. And yet Brewer, Noah and Horford were all drafted before him.



Seen here with Elias on UVA’s campus, Alex knows his loyalty to his alma mater has put him under intense scrutiny. “They’re my school,” he says.  
“And when they emerge from this March slump, I’ll be right there with them.”

Green started slow with only twenty points in the first two rounds combined before erupting for 17, 21, 10 and 16. In total he scored eighty-four points, 14 ppg, outscoring both Horford and Noah in the process.

“I think about that point total and then I think about him hitting those free throws to seal the win and...” Here Alex pauses and needs a moment to compose himself. He holds back the tear I see forming in the corner of his eye. “Let’s just say it meant a lot to me.”

Still, Alex wasn’t done with Florida. Lee Humphrey – the sharp shooting, forgotten white guy in Florida’s starting five – was still available in the next round.

“And he’s just out there popping threes. One. Two. Three. Four. On and on,” Alex says, going through the shooting motion as if he were out there right now. “I just knew I had to have him.”

Though we don’t have the exact records to tell us what round Humphrey was picked in, suffice it to say that if we did he would no doubt go down as one of the great mid to late round picks in draft history. His fourteen point performance in the title game capped off a seventy-five point tourney. That was five more points than Noah for those scoring at home.

But Alex bristles when he recalls how after he picked up J.R. Reynolds of UVA in the middle rounds he was accused of bias.

“That’s hindsight is all that is,” Alex says, a fierce defiance ringing in his voice. “J.R. was the Cavalier’s leading scorer that tournament and I would draft him again if I had to.”



Barringer Hall on Walnut Street in historic downtown Philadelphia. Alex recalls fondly watching two games at once with Rob that year, duct tape across the top of a TV and adjacent computer screen to prevent them from knowing other scores in advance.

UVA lost in the second round that year but not before J.R. Reynolds proved Alex wise in drafting him. He poured in twenty-eight points in the first round against Albany and followed it up with twenty-six in the Cavaliers’ disappointing second round loss to Tennessee.

All these players were great – but they pale in comparison to Alex’s final pick. The pick that produced one of the the most studied, most well known, most famous players in the history of the Player Pool:

Luc Richard Mbah a Moute.

Alex grows serious at the sound of his name. Even years later you can tell that it affects him deeply.

“I can still remember the snickering across the table when I took Luc with my final pick of the draft,” Alex says with a shake of his head.

Alex knew of Mbah a Moute’s obvious offensive limitations. But that didn’t stop him from making the bold pick. Alex is hesitant to pile on too much glory onto himself. But he can appreciate now how he made history and set a trend of drafting lowly offensive players on top teams instead of high scoring players on lower seeded teams.

“I wasn’t trying to set trends,” Alex says defiantly. “Anyone who says that is wrong. I was trying to compose a team. A unit. A group of young men who would rise up to the moment. I was drafting on my gut. Did I know he was limited offensively? Sure. I knew. But I saw something in him. I saw something special. And I was right.”

Green. Humphries. Hibbert. Reynolds. Afflalo. Mbah a Moute.

Alex nods at the sound of each of their names. As if they all hold a special place in his heart. But I pause after the last.

Finally, Alex blinks as he looks at me.

“What?” he says.

I shrug.

“That’s only six players,” I say. “We draft eight.”

Alex sighs and looks out the window.

“The rest of the team has faded into the same recesses of my brain where I keep the clotting cascade.”

I press him. Can’t he remember something? Anything that might give us a clue? But he can only shake his head. He has no memory of the other players. No one else does either. And maybe, he says, it’s better that way.

“There was no ‘I’ in my team that year. That’s why we were so special. Those other two guys... we might not know who they are or how many points they scored. But they know. And they are out there somewhere. Happy. Satisfied.” He pauses and looks at me with a smile. “When you capture magic like that it lives forever.”



Dr. Adam Zahm (pictured here in Calcutta) draws crowds of thousands to his lectures around the globe.

*Magic* is just the word Dr. Adam Zahm is tempted to use when analyzing Alex’s 2007 title run albeit with a different meaning. While Alex means something wonderful and exciting, Dr. Zahm is more inclined to suggest “the art of producing illusions by sleight of hand” (Dictionary.com).

This past summer I caught up with the elusive Dr. Zahm on his celebrated lecture circuit through Southeast Asia. Walking at a breakneck pace down the streets of Shanghai, dressed smartly in a white turtleneck with a gray blazer, gray slacks and white sneakers, Dr. Zahm speaks passionately to me for nearly two hours explaining the purpose of his overseas mission.

“Just look at baseball,” he says. “Any team that won a world championship prior to 1903, does that get counted as a World Series title? In the NFL, does anyone count the Eagles’ World Championships as Super Bowl wins? Do basketball titles count before the creation of the NBA?”



2007 was a simpler time. We were all students in our mid 20's and the recession was still a year away. Apple released the first iPhone. Music was still played on iPods. Britney had the first of her meltdowns and Prince gave us a Super Bowl Halftime Show to remember.

I ask if that means Alex's title should be stripped from the record books entirely. Before the sentence is even out of my mouth Dr. Zahm stops and puts his hands on his hips. He is near speechless.

"That is a wild exaggeration of what I am proposing," he yells at me. People are on the street are looking at us now. He pays them no attention. "By no means am I saying that the championship never happened. I'm just saying that it should be distinguished. It should have a different name. It should not carry the same weight as the others."

The same, he says, goes for Farach's title in Player Pool 2 (the 2007-2008 season).

"Look at the data the Comptroller failed to collect before I came along. For Player Pool One we don't even know who the eighth participant was. Was it Phil Krapchev? Was it Tsvi Jonas? The truth is we might never know. Only by the in depth statistical analyses that my lab has conducted are we even sure that there must have been an eighth player. And the same goes for Player Pool Two. Sure, Josh was in it that year – and scoring an abysmal 275 points by the way – but again we don't even know who



the 8th participant was. I know it's a hard pill to swallow but without knowing who even participated how can we truly consider the Player Pool title legitimate?"

What Dr. Zahm proposes, and what he has been traveling worldwide to promote, is creating a separate spreadsheet entirely for Player Pools 1 and 2.

"Not stricken from the record book at all," he says. "They will have their own tab hidden at the bottom of the screen and the page will be filled with asterisks and other appropriate explanations for why those titles don't count as much as the others. And I will also kindly ask the Comptroller to go back through every email he has ever sent and correct any reference to them as past champions."

I let the moment sit, watching Dr. Zahm closely as he lets out a long breath. Even with sunglasses hiding his eyes I suspect that he knows that he has exposed himself too much. Shown his cards. And now there is no drawing them back. I ask the question I have to ask:

"Do you think any of this has to do with the fact that you're the only remaining participant to not win a title?"

He pretends to not know what I'm talking about.

"I don't see how that has to do with any of this," he mutters dismissively.

"If you take Alex's title away then he will join you," I say, swallowing thickly. We are in a foreign country. If Dr. Zahm decides to seek retribution upon me there will be little I can do to stop him. It is doubtful local authorities will even look into the matter if they are to find me bruised and beaten on the side of the road.

Finally Dr. Zahm looks away, sniffing and looking out over the crowded street with a distant glare.

"I am, first and foremost, a scientist," he says evenly. "I deal in facts. Statistics. Figures. Real data." He pauses, then finishes with emphasis: "I don't let emotion get in the way of this sort of thing."



A picture of Alex at a first year physiology class.

This April 2nd will mark an even dozen years since the night of Alex's coronation as the first ever Player Pool champion. Much has happened in that time both personally and professionally.

"I look back on myself and I was just a kid, you know?" he tells me with a smile. We are walking now down the streets of Bethesda, Maryland where he has only recently just moved with his wife, Erin and their two children, Elias and Harlan. "What was I? Twenty-four? I didn't know what I was doing, of course. But I believed in myself. I really did."

The tone of his voice as he says this begs the question:

"Do you doubt yourself now?" I ask.

Alex pauses. The wind blows stiffly across his face. He thinks for a moment.

"As a person, no. I just try to be the best husband, the best father, the best man I can be. I don't look back. But when it comes to the Player Pool?"

He pauses. A cold wind bites at his face. Alex winces, then looks down, kicking the pavement with the toe of his shoe.

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah, I admit it. I've lost confidence. Somewhere in there. You lose year after year, it's only natural to start having doubts. You start to wonder. Do I really belong here? Do I deserve to be a part of this? You see someone like Josh come in – and he doesn't even like college basketball – and he wins three titles. And I can't even win a second? Yeah, that gets to you. You wouldn't be human if it didn't."

Name a remedy and Alex has tried it when it comes to getting his mojo back. Cupping. Yoga. Spin class. He's watched countless hours of film of his players from his 2007 team, looking for that missing link he's yet to be able to identify again. He's dived deep into the study of sabermetrics, emailing frequently with Ken Pomeroy. He's struggled mightily with his close relationship to his alma mater. One year he avoids UVA players entirely while going after them hard the next. He's even hired a sports psychologist to address his mental preparation and attitude on draft day.



Alex and his beautiful wife Erin welcomed Harlan into the world on 2.17.19.

"No matter how poorly I do in the Player Pool, at the end of March my family still loves me," Alex says.

"I won't lie, there have been some struggles. Some real dark days," Alex says. "It's not easy to get over a pick like Arinze Onuaku."

Alex can only shake his head as he recalls one of the most puzzling draft picks in Player Pool history. Arinze Onuaku was a solid role player for the 2009-2010 Syracuse team when Alex drafted him in the last round. Alex was so desperate to recreate the magic of Mbah a Moute's 2007 run that he ignored the fact that Onuaku was injured and unable to play in at least the first two games out the tournament. Syracuse ended up making it to the Sweet Sixteen where they lost. Onuaku did not play a single minute and, thus, did not score a single point.

But as bad as that pick was, it's 2016 that stands out to him.

"The 2016 title was mine to lose heading in to the Elite 8, with two key UVA cogs London Perantes and Anthony Gill as well as Perry Ellis on Kansas all still rolling. Kansas went down in an upset, but worse, UVA blew a huge lead down the stretch against Syracuse and missed out on what really should have been a final four berth (up until last year's debacle, this was the loss that stung the most in recent UVA memory). All three guys were exactly the type I wanted on my team, strong players who weren't dominant scorers but made winning plays for winning teams...or so I thought. The 2007 strategy just didn't translate to 2016 even though the draft and early tournament rounds went exactly as I had hoped that year."

But any momentum Alex felt he had gained with 2016, dissolved the last two years as he has posted back-to-back third places finishes, watching Josh and then Farach claim their third and second title respectively while he is once again forced to watch from the sidelines.



"I've called him. Multiple times. I don't want there to be bad blood," Arinze Onuaku says of his strained relationship with Alex. "But he never picks up. That's on him." Alex denies the accusation: "I'm an open book. If Arinze wants to talk, he knows where to find me."

UVA's historic loss as a one seed last year only added to insult to injury.

"When that happened, I remember just staring at the TV shaking my head," Alex says. "What else could go wrong? I wasn't even surprised. It just sums up my March experiences for over the last decade."

Of course, Alex is a different man than he was back in 2007. He is married now to his beautiful wife, Erin. And they have two handsome young boys. Elias, age 2.5 and Harlan, born just this past February.

When Alex steps out to handle a call from work, I have a chance to speak with Erin alone.

"He does his best to not show it," Erin tells me when I ask her how Alex's struggles in the Player Pool have affected him at home. "But I know how much it bothers him."

Erin grows silent, her eyes coming to rest on a framed picture of the two of them in earlier days. They are laughing. Embracing. Holding each other lovingly in their arms.

"I remember when I first met Alex he would just light up when March came around. You know, you could just see the excitement on his face. Now?"

She shakes her head.

I tell her we don't have to discuss it but Erin insists that it is okay.



March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2018 – a low point in Alex's career.

"The hardest thing for me is to see how strong he is," she says, wiping a tear from her eye. "And his critics out there? They don't see that. All they see is the end result. Alex acts like he doesn't hear the critics but he hears them. He reads everything Josh and Adam and everyone say about him. But it motivates him. It keeps him hungry. And I know one year Alex is going to break out of this slump and win that second title. And when he wins a second there's no telling how many he will win in a row."

When I tell Erin that this sounds just like the streaky nature of Alex's pick-up basketball game she is quick to agree.

"He relies on his instincts. On quick thinking. On his guts. Yeah, it hasn't panned out in the last ten years but that doesn't mean he should change. And he won't change. That's the Alex I love."





Elias (2.5 years old) already demonstrates the same poise and composure with the basketball as his father.

I can't help but grow emotional watching Alex play with his oldest son, Elias. It comes as no surprise to see that Alex is a kind and devoted father. In the small glimpse I see of him he is patient and understanding yet strict when he needs to be. It seems Alex will forever retain his ability to make everyone around him feel that everything will be alright in the end.

Elias is his father's son in so many ways. Quick-witted. Handsome. Full of life. Alex and Erin have set up a basketball hoop for Elias in their living room. In the way that Elias changes direction with the ball I can't but help thinking of Alex's patented back door cuts and streaks to the basket.

Still, it takes Alex a moment to answer when I ask him how he explains the Player Pool to Elias.

"Every dad wants their son to be proud of their father," Alex says. Then he pauses. "At the same time, he's getting to that age where I know he's getting asked questions. Why can't your father win this? Is your father a loser? Why did he pick that player? What's wrong with him? Just the other day he overheard Bryan and James laughing about how I haven't won a title in so many years. What do you say to him when he asks about that? I don't know if there is a right answer to that. But that's what I work for. That's why I put myself out there every year. To show him what I'm capable of."

Harlan awakes from his nap only a moment later and I find myself overcome with emotion on meeting the newest addition to Alex and Erin's family. Perched comfortably on Alex's arm, Harlan is an alert, healthy and happy baby. That he is surrounded by a loving family is apparent in the open smile on his face. A smile that instantly reminds me of Alex.

Harlan was born on February 17<sup>th</sup> – a date whose significance is not lost on Alex.



Alex and Erin know they have a fierce 1-2 punch on their hands with Elias (left) and Harlan (right).

"Harlan being born like this? Right before March Madness? No, I don't think it's a coincidence at all." Alex stops to put his other arm around Erin's shoulder. "These last few years I haven't been myself in March. I've been angry. Lonely. Sometimes bitter. But I see things differently now. Even if I never win another Player Pool I'll always associate this time of year with Harlan coming into the world."

Some day, Alex hopes, he will be able to explain all of this to his boys.

"In time, in time," he says. "When they're old enough. I don't want to overburden them with this. I don't want them to join their own player pools with their friends and start thinking to themselves: 'Hell, my dad can't win one of these, what chance do I have?' I want them to be their own men. Carve their own path. Shape their own destiny."

As for his own destiny?

"I don't know," Alex says. "Every year is a new challenge. Every draft is full of possibilities. Who is this year's Steph Curry? Trevon Bluiett? Or Mbah a Moute?"

Every year brings the chance of making history. You can't get cocky. You have to stay grounded. And I think that's what I love about the Player Pool. The reality of the situation is that while college basketball has evolved and everyone else in the Player Pool has evolved, I haven't. And that needs to change if I'm ever going to get back on top."



Joe DiMaggio and his 56 game hit streak. Roger Bannister and the four minute mile. "Records are made to be broken," Alex insists. And yet we all have to wonder... will 488 ever be broken?

Still, as introspective and professional as Alex can be, he can't help but smile when I remind him that his point total from 2007 still stands as the record point total to this day.

488 points.

No one has ever scored higher.

The closest anyone has come is the Comptroller's 472 points in 2015.

"I won't lie," Alex admits. "That does soften the blow of not having won a second."

Will anyone ever break the elusive 500 point barrier?

“Records are made to be broken. We know that. And I hope someone does get there. It will be great for the sport. Great for the fans. Great for everyone.”

What does he say to Dr. Zahm who claims that – like the title itself – Alex’s point total should also have an asterisk? After all, Dr. Zahm claims, where is the paper work to document that this ever happened?

“I heard a little about what Adam said,” Alex admits. “But I think the points record is something that needs to be judged on its own. I see this similarly to Roger Maris hitting 61 and the misguided attempt to asterisk his HR record because of the added games he played compared to Babe Ruth. Critics can squabble all they want, and anyone can find caveats with a given title/record, but the purity of the Player Pool is such that each year can and should be judged in its own era.”

And does he have a final word to say to his critics before the tourney tips off on Thursday?

“All anyone can do is win the title you're competing for. Critics want to caveat and asterisk everything in the record books. Hakeem Olajuwon won back to back titles, but only in the years when Jordan decided to play a whole other sport. Kobe needed Shaq. Shaq needed Kobe. The list goes on.”

He pauses.

“Look. I won. That’s the only thing that matters. Finding fault with a given championship will always be a weapon used by losers in the moment, but time has a way of drowning out the noise. There is no doubt in my mind that my Player Pool One championship will live forever.”

As I leave Alex’s home in Bethesda, I stop across the street and look back. Through the open window I catch a glimpse of Alex back at home. I see him embrace Erin and kiss her on the cheek. He holds Harlan in one arm, pulls Elias close with the other. It is impossible not to respect this man and what he has done. What he is doing now. What he still might do in the future.

And as I walk away I am struck suddenly by a certainty that Alex Katz’s best days are not behind him. No, they are very much ahead of him.

Maybe, I think, as soon as April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019 when the final buzzer of the season sounds just as it did those twelve years ago.

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