

KNICKS FOREVER

SLAM

**KNICKS
CLINCH
PLAYOFF SPOT**

**CAN
THE KNICKS
WIN
IT ALL?**



JULIUS RANDLE + RJ BARRETT



BRINGING TOUGHNESS BACK TO MSG

October 2019. The New York Knicks are getting ready to embark on the first road trip of the new season. As the team boards their chartered plane for the first time, guys are naturally looking to feel out where exactly to sit (and with who)—a seemingly minuscule decision on the surface but one that could technically have season-long implications. Shoot, for a young guy in the League, it could even be career-altering. We'll explain.

It is in this moment that 19-year-old rookie RJ Barrett, in a scenario very similar to a high school freshman entering the cafeteria for lunch for the very first time, finds himself looking around the plane for a place to sit. He eventually turns to Julius Randle, who is entering his sixth year in the NBA and therefore is already sitting in his preferred spot, and asks if he could join him.

"He didn't really know where to sit. He came and was like, Is it cool if I sit right here? And I was like, Hell no! Nah, I'm joking. I was like, Yeah, of course, man. I've always sat on the same place on the plane my whole career. He sat next to me and it's just kind of been our thing... First day, and ever since then, hasn't changed," says Randle. "They have the table where the guys play cards. I've always sat to the left of the table—directly there. I sit there and [RJ] sits by the window.

For RJ, who's still only 20 years old, his first 18+ months in the League have been a rollercoaster. As the third pick in the 2019 NBA Draft, which became the Knicks' highest draft pick since Hall of Famer Patrick Ewing went number one in 1985, he saw his share of ups and downs as a rookie. The team was losing. A lot. The head coach was fired. The team president was fired. Although many jumped at the opportunity to critique his shooting numbers, he still showed



NEW YEAR, NEW STARS

For Randle, the journey has taken him from four rebuilding years with the Lakers (tough years where the team finished 30 or more games under .500 in three of those) to then one season in New Orleans, where he enjoyed some of the best numbers of his career but nonetheless missed the playoffs. He opted out of the second year of a two-year deal with the Pelicans in the summer of 2019 and ultimately took a leap of faith in signing with the rebuilding Knicks. After a tough first season as a team in New York, Randle

is now averaging career highs in points (24.2) and rebounds (10.3) as of press time. He's been filling up the stat sheet, becoming the first Knick in over three decades to record multiple triple-doubles in a season. He got his first All-Star nod in March and is now gearing up for some playoff action—the first of his career.

“I had never seen [Julius] in person before, so when I [first] saw him I actually was like, This dude is 6-9, 250!” says Barrett while bursting out

laughing. “My favorite stories are just him working hard. Us landing somewhere and [he's] always going to the gym. He just became an All-Star, and he was in New York working after the All-Star Game before anybody even got back....As soon as he gets to the arena, he has his headphones on. He's kind of just in a zone. He doesn't really speak until we get on the court.

Beyond the career-high production from Randle and the second-year leap from Barrett, there's a visible overall culture shift with this team, one that everyone has bought in on. Head coach Tom Thibodeau's teams have always been known for their hard-nosed defense and grittiness. As of late April, the team ranks No. 1 in the NBA in fewest points allowed (104.7 per game) as well as No. 1 in fewest made field goals by opponents (38.0 per game). For reference, the franchise ranked 17th in points allowed last season (112.3 ppg). In their largest margin blowout win in 25 years—by 44 points against the Detroit Pistons on the road—in early April, the orange and blue didn't allow a single field goal to the Pistons starters in the first quarter; that hasn't happened in 22 years.”

