

On The Case

with Casey Shearer

Up in the air

A bear or bull market for the Bullets....err, Wizards?

Welcome back true believers. Another semester begins--the final semester of the three-year roller coaster ride this column has been. Soon will be the time when the real world cometh. Run away, run away!!!!

Fleeing, whimpering and hiding. That's what it appears the Washington Bullets, I mean Wizards, have been doing for the past decade in the National Basketball Association. Now, as a new millennium begins, they have, as I have, decided to beef up their résumé, stand up, and face the real world. The Wizards are tired of being supported by parents and siblings; they are going to make something out of themselves. No longer will they be helpless little losers.

Ok, ok, the extended metaphor has been stretched a little too far. But you'll have to excuse me—I've been reading the *Washington Post*. According to their sports section, the Wizards have just been handed the next six NBA titles on a silver platter. They have witnessed the Second Coming.

Jordan is back. And he's with the Wizards.

But Reggie Jordan's been playing in DC all year. Big deal.

Not Reggie, Michael.

The capital shitty

Oh, let's all jump up and down and throw our hands in the air as if something truly amazing has just happened. That's what the entire city of Washington DC did. "It really is simply going to electrify our city," Washington mayor Anthony A. Williams said. "This changes everything," said Wizards point guard Rod Strickland who has spent all season trying to get himself traded to the New York Knicks. *Washington Post* columnist Michael Wilbon described Jordan's presence as "like a flood coming down the gorge; you can't stand in the face of it. Buck him, and you'll get swept away." Huh? Needless to say, Washington was abuzz about Mike. Some even hoped MJ would suit up in the blue and white of the Wizards. Let's be clear: he won't because he can't. NBA rules prohibit people who own stock in a team, which Jordan now does, from playing in the league. Jordan will not take jump shots or go up for slams; instead he will make all decisions on players, coaches, general managers, drafts, trades and salaries. In other words, tasks we have no idea if he knows how to do well.

Perhaps it is a measure of just how bad the Bullets/Wizards have been that they are so excited about the prospect of a new President of Basketball Operations. As Mark Heisler, the *Los Angeles Times'* national basketball writer, put it, the Wizards have "sunk from 'perennially disappointing' and 'often in trouble with the law' to 'textbook definition of hopeless.'" And I thought that was the Clippers.

If you're a Wizards fan the only thing you can be thinking is: that's bad, that's real bad.

In the last decade, the Wizards have managed to trade away Jeff Malone, Tom Gugliotta, Rex Chapman, Rasheed Wallace and Chris Webber. (Looking at C-Webb's numbers this year you've got to scratch your head thinking why the Wiz didn't push to deal overrated and overpaid Juwan Howard instead.) So what do they have to present to their fans at the moment? A starting lineup that includes such superstars and drawing cards as Jahidi White, Laron Profit and Michael Smith.

The only thing more depressing for the Wizards than the past and present is the future. The team is committed to \$50 million-plus payrolls for the next two seasons, far over the current salary cap of \$34 million. If Washington has any hope of signing quality free agents they must get rid of some of their high-salaried players. The catch is that nobody wants any of them.

First there's Howard, who initially opted for Riley-bucks in Miami before signing a then-record \$105 million contract, and then went into a cocoon after people saw that he wasn't worth close to that much. He has three seasons left after this one, at an average of \$18.75 million.

Next there's former All-Star Mitch Richmond, who's 34, nearing the end of his career, and on the injured list with two more years at \$10 million a piece. Then there's second-string center Ike Austin riding the pine at \$5.5 million per year after he also quit playing after signing for big money.

Add the aforementioned Strickland, who fought with Head Coach Gar Heard all season (until Heard got fired over the weekend) and has two more years at \$10 million per, and you have serious problems. Oh wait. I forgot. According to Rod, everything has changed.

Wiz kids

Not quite.

Jordan might be the best basketball player of all time, but that does not mean he will be a great basketball executive. A number of Hall of Fame players have moved into the front office, with only varying degrees of success. Some have compared Jordan to Los Angeles Laker Executive Vice President Jerry West, one former All-Star who has made the transition from ballplayer to businessman.

After retiring and having his silhouette put on the NBA logo, West the executive has built five Laker championship teams, the team with the best record in the NBA this season, and the best winning percentage in the league over the last 20 years. His list of acquisitions includes James Worthy, AC Green, Byron Scott, Kurt Rambis, Mychal Thompson, Mike McGee, Vlade Divac, Nick Van Exel, Eddie Jones, Kobe Bryant, Shaquille O'Neal and Glen Rice.

Many point to Jordan as the next West. Those who do, however, forget the other Hall of Fame players who have floundered as executives. West's old teammate Elgin Baylor is general manager of the Clippers, a perennial laughingstock of the NBA. Julius Erving is finding rough going as an executive with the Orlando Magic. While an executive for the New Jersey Nets, ex-New York Knick star Willis Reed drafted such busts as Yinka Dare and Ed O'Bannon, maintaining a tradition of mediocrity in East Rutherford equal to that of our nation's capital.

And then there are the Wizards. Just who has been running them so poorly? Well, if it isn't another former NBA great and Washington Bullets legend, Wes Unseld. It was Unseld who created the monstrosity that has been dropped in Jordan's lap, and it is Unseld who, for now at least, will advise Jordan as the Wizards' GM.

In this light, it appears that the celebration in Washington is a little premature. This season the pre-Jordan Wizards were 12-27 and last in the Atlantic Division. The saying around the league was "Everybody Beats the Wiz." Even the beleaguered post-Jordan Bulls, 2-26 going into a home-and-home series in early January, were able to take both games from Washington. The night Jordan took charge, the Wiz were so inspired, they were trounced by the lowly Dallas Mavericks, losing by 18 points. Yet in the Washington Post, Wilbon was excited because Lorenzo Williams suited up for the first time all year.

Lorenzo Williams? Wooooo hoooo!

Last time I checked, basketball games were still won by the team that had the most points. No matter what spells His Airness is able to conjure up, a team that starts Jahidi White at center, Laron Profit at shooting guard and Michael Smith at forward, whose most consistent player is Tracy Murray, and is without any salary cap room will be going nowhere fast.

Oh yeah, DC, just a reminder: MJ may be back but he's in a suit instead of a uniform. And as I understand it, Jerry West is able to pace the corridors of the Staples Center in LA with two of the top talents in the league in Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant. So let's not hand the Wizards those trophies just yet.

Good luck MJ. You're going to need it. Take your best shot. At least your new gun has some Bullets. Wait, those are Wizards.

Abracadabra.

CASEY SHEARER B'00 will be gracing these very pages with his weekly column this semester before he enters the real world and finds out that it's really 2199, machines have taken over the world and we live inside a computer simulation constructed to occupy our minds while our bodies are used as batteries.