

## Answering the Questions From the Luol Deng Trade



That's the risk sports fans take by going to sleep each night. You never know when you are going to wake up and find that your team made a big trade in the wee hours.

That's where Cavs fans find themselves today, as they have woken up to the news that their team has acquired Luol Deng from the Bulls for Andrew Bynum, a first-round pick (a heavily-protected pick acquired in 2011 from Sacramento), two second-round picks, and a limited right to swap first-round picks in 2015.

The trade is a complex one; let's delve into some of the questions you may be asking about it.

### Why did the Cavs make this trade?

That question has a lot of answers:

*Because Luol Deng is far, far better than any small forward currently on the Cavs' roster.* As of last night, the Cavs' small forward situation was likely the worst position of any team in the NBA.

Earl Clark and Alonzo Gee have been awful this season.  
Beyond awful, actually.

The "Polar Vortex" isn't a winter storm; it's a description of how bad the Cavs' small forward situation had become.

Deng is a two-time All Star. And while his reputation probably outpaces his production a bit – he's more of an above-average player than a true star – there is no overstating how big of an upgrade he will be at the small forward position. He may not be a filet mignon, but he is a damn good strip steak, for an audience that has been eating Alpo for far too long. It's been well known that the Cavs have been essentially playing 4-on-5 on offense (watching LeBron James absolutely ignore Gee in the most recent Cavs-Heat matchup was simultaneously funny and sad).

Hopefully, Deng puts an end to those days.

*Because Deng is exactly the type of player Coach Mike Brown needs.* The Cavs are a very, very young team; the second-youngest in the league. Collecting a pile of young talent is nice, but that talent is not going to develop unless there are veterans in place. Particularly veterans who are good enough to lead by example.

That's Deng.  
He's been around for years and is still playing at a high level.

Just as importantly, Deng is a willing defender (and a good one). Brown has been trying to get the team to buy into his defense-first philosophy. Having Deng on board could be the tipping point in winning that battle.

*Because this was the Cavs' best chance to turn Andrew Bynum into a worthwhile asset.* We'll discuss this one a bit more when we get to the Bulls' reasons for making this trade, but Bynum's contract, a unique one by NBA standards, pretty much mandated that he be traded by today.

*Because a certain young point guard is going to be up for a contract extension soon, and the Cavs need to keep him in Cleveland.* Kyrie Irving is in the third year of his four-year rookie deal.

After that, the Cavs are guaranteed to have him for a fifth season, under the terms of the NBA's bargaining agreement.

After that ... he could be gone.

While he has not committed one way or the other about his future in Cleveland, you can bet that he has grown tired of the constant losing, and of the need for talent upgrades.

Trading for Deng sends the message to him that the organization will do its best to surround him with talent ... and that should make him more likely to commit to the team long-term once his rookie contract expires.

(Deng, for his part, has been enthusiastic about Kyrie, so we can only surmise that he will enjoy playing alongside the Cavs' star.)

*Because the rest of the Cavs' roster needs to see that this organization is going to move to make the team better.* Same song, second verse, for the other young players on this team.

*Because it didn't cost them that much.* Bynum has clearly worn out his welcome here; the Cavs were only too glad to find a taker for him (more accurately, his contract).

The three draft picks may seem a bit steep at first.

However, two of those picks are second-round picks (in 2015 and 2016, from Portland, via a draft-night deal last June; given how Portland has risen, those picks figure to be low in the second round).

The third pick is a potential first-rounder from Sacramento, acquired for J.J. Hickson (*remember him?*), back in the summer of 2011; and it carries more protections than a Trojan factory.

(The pick is top-12 protected in 2014, and top-10 protected in 2015-17; if not conveyed by 2017, it becomes a second-round pick.)

While the Cavs probably don't like to surrender a first-round pick, this one has no hope of ever being a top-ten pick, and so is not as valuable as it might initially appear.

(Note:

Chicago also receives the right to swap first-round picks with the Cavs in 2015, but only if the

Cavs are in the playoffs.)

### **Why did the Bulls make this trade?**

It seems funny on the face of it, doesn't it? That the Bulls would trade a two-time All Star for a guy they are going to immediately release and some future draft picks?

That's life in the NBA these days, where trades are often (usually) made based on salary considerations more than the actual talent involved. Chicago made this trade for one reason and one reason only: to save money.

Bynum's contract was uniquely attractive – his \$12 million deal is only partially guaranteed (unlike most NBA contracts), and as long as he is waived by 5 PM today (which will probably happen between the time I write these words and the time you read them), then his team will owe him only six million.

So the Bulls, who were roughly \$8 million over the luxury tax line, traded Deng (making a little over \$14 million) for Bynum (whose cap value is \$12 million), saving them about \$2 million; and then by waiving Bynum, they'll save another \$6 million, and thus slide in just below the tax line.

### **What are the potential downsides to this trade for the Cavs?**

It's Cleveland, so there must be a downside, right? There are a few:

*Deng, while very good, is not a star player.* Don't be fooled into thinking that the Cavs just picked up a second star to pair with Kyrie. Deng is a good player, and is best cast as the third- or fourth-best player on a team. But his numbers tend to be good "counting" type numbers, largely because he plays so many minutes.

His shooting percentages – both two-point and three-point – are not great.

By more advanced statistical measures, he grades out as an above-average player, but not much more.

*Deng is a free agent at the end of this season.* It's very possible that he will be with the Cavs for three months, then leave. (That being said, the Cavs will have the ability to offer Deng a better contract than any other team.)

*Deng has battled injuries over the years.* He is definitely not a brittle player, but he has missed time because of various ailments. He recently returned from an Achilles injury.

Given the number of miles on his odometer, it wouldn't be a surprise to see him suffer some breakdown-type injuries.  
(Hopefully, Brown will keep a close eye on Deng's minutes, as he has done for Anderson Varejao.)

### **Does this trade kill any chance the Cavs might have of signing LeBron James?**

Let's answer that question with another question: you really thought LeBron was going to return here?

If you believe that, step outside, right now. (*Note: This little exercise is going to assume you live in northeast Ohio. If you happen to be reading this piece from your seaside villa in Tuscany, or your beach shack in St. Kitts, you can skip it.*)  
) Look at the snow. Breathe in that -10 degree air. Feel the hair inside your nostrils freeze.

Now consider that the high temperature in Miami today will be in the 60s, with the weather returning to sunny and 80s by the weekend.

LeBron is likely headed to his fourth consecutive Finals appearance, and possibly his third

straight title. He plays alongside two fellow stars and two of his best longtime friends. And when he wakes up and steps outside to pick up the paper, his nostril hair doesn't freeze.

Not that a certain Lakers fan should have any place in this article, but [let's quote him anyway](#) : do you get me, sweetheart?

Yes, it is still possible for the Cavs to sign LeBron as a free agent this offseason, even if they can ink Deng to an extension. (It would mean declining the options on Clark and Gee – some might debate whether that is a negative at all -- as well as Varejao; and it would also mean clearing about \$10-12 million in additional salary, in much the way that Houston cleared its decks to sign Dwight Howard. But it could be done, if LeBron really wanted to return. And before you say "but LeBron and Deng are both small forwards" ... LeBron is not a small forward. Not anymore. He plays mostly at power forward now. Besides, in today's NBA, traditional positions mean less than ever, especially when discussing LeBron, who is the lone queen on the chess board.) But the Cavs cannot pin all their hopes on the prodigal son returning. Especially when said prodigal son is in a pretty sweet situation right now, and really doesn't have much incentive to leave. Hope is not a business plan.

### **Does this trade kill any chance the Cavs might have of getting a lottery pick in the 2014 Draft?**

The short answer: probably. Even though the Hollinger analysis on the ESPN Trade Machine says that the Deng-Bynum trade will not affect the Cavs' win total, it is hard to believe that the Cavs will not be a better team with Deng aboard.

Before you say that the 2014 Draft is chock full of stars and can't-miss talents, and that every team with no realistic title aspirations should chuck the rest of the 2013-14 season and jockey for a high pick in that draft, answer this question. What do the following players have in common: Chris Kaman, Kirk Hinrich, T.J. Ford, Mike Sweetney, Jarvis Hayes, Mickael Pietrus, Nick Collison, Marcus Banks, and Luke Ridnour?

The answer? They were picks six through fourteen in the [2003 NBA Draft](#) . A draft regarded as one of the best of all time. Once you got past the top five, there were no franchise-changing talents, or even moderate stars, to be had. (And even that top five had a land mine, a

seven-foot one named Darko Milicic.)

The point? Tanking and gathering high draft picks is far from a sure thing. (And even if a team finishes with the worst record in the league, they are assured of at most the fourth overall pick, thanks to the NBA's lottery rules.)

Right now, the Cavs have the fifth-worst record in the league. Let's say that they stayed that course, and ended up picking sixth in the draft -- just out of the reach of the top talents like Andrew Wiggins and Jabari Parker. Is that result worth tossing away another season?

There's also a bigger issue here, one that is lost on the "tank now!" crowd: *losing begets losing*. The "tank" crowd assumes that it is always best to lose, gather ever-higher draft picks, and turn those picks into star players who will lead to more wins in future seasons. Alas, history shows that the future usually does not work out that way. If anything, history shows that teams that tend to be repeat visitors to the lottery almost never break that cycle of suck. Sacramento, Toronto, Minnesota, the Clippers before they landed Blake Griffin (and even then, it took a gutsy trade for Chris Paul to really lift them out of their depths), the Cavs before (and since!) LeBron ... do we need to go on? It's relatively rare (as in, only Oklahoma City has really done it) for a team to load up on high lottery picks for several seasons, then vault to the head of the NBA class.

You need to start winning at some point.

Otherwise, the culture of losing takes root, leading to rebuild after rebuild after rebuild.

So yes, this trade probably does kill the chances that the Cavs will be in the lottery again. The real question is why that should be viewed as an end goal, season after season.

### **Will this trade work for the Cavs?**

That's the bottom-line question that all Cleveland fans are asking. *Don't bore me with all the labor pains about salary caps and defensive schemes and contracts; just show me the baby, in the form of wins.*

My crystal ball isn't better than anybody else's (in fact, it's probably worse; I'm the jamoke who predicted 50 wins for this team). So I'm not going to predict anything.

I will say that the trade makes sense. For both teams. As any trade should be. As Cavs fans, there's reason to be optimistic.

On a cold day in Cleveland, that's as good as it gets.