

Your 2009-2010 Washington Wizards, Position-by-Position

Contributed by Jshuane Melton
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Point Guard – Starting (and oft-injured) point guard Gilbert Arenas is the team's lone superstar. Opposing coaches, players and front office types will tell you that forwards Caron Butler and Antawn Jamison are the team's engine, and we'd be apt to agree, but neither player can do what Arenas at his best can do.

Gilbert Arenas can take over a game any time he's good and ready to do so. Trainer to the stars, Tim Grover, who Arenas worked with over the past summer to regain his All Star form after multiple surgical procedures on his knee, says Arenas is among the best in the game. Grover wasn't shy in putting Arenas' name among that list of superstars saying that Washington's own baller extraordinaire is as good as any of them. We have yet to see Arenas the facilitator work full time hours – despite the fact that facilitating and making the game easier for others is a part of the position's job description. Arenas showed Jason Kidd-esque flashes in his brief cameos last season and seemed to have taken to Flip Saunders' point guard friendly system throughout the preseason averaging seven assists in just 24 minutes per contest. There's enough talent in Washington to take some of the burden of having to carry the team offensively off of Arenas' shoulders now. If Arenas can reduce his point per game output down to around 18 and increase his career assist average to about seven per contest he'll be best serving his team … and possibly helping push them into the upper echelon of the East's finest.

We may be jumping the gun here in tagging Randy Foye as Arenas' chief backup at the point guard position. With the preseason quickly coming to a close and the starting shooting guard spot still very much open, Foye is a candidate there as well. Foye, brought in during the offseason from Minnesota (along with Mike Miller) for the fifth pick in the draft and change, is essentially a combo guard but he probably affords Saunders the best opportunity at maintaining the same scoring and penetration ability from the position when Arenas needs a breather. Foye is a little underrated as a playmaker. Don't get me wrong here, he's not likely to be confused with Chris Paul at any point in the near future, but he's a solid enough offensive player that he can create opportunities for himself off the dribble and others in penetrate-and-kickout scenarios. He's a solid ball handler and a perfectly capable passer.

Javaris Crittenton and Mike James round out the team's depth at point guard. Crittenton has improved steadily since coming to Washington last season in a trade and could evolve into the team's best “true” point guard. He'll start the season sidelined by injuries though and with Arenas and Foye clearly ahead of him on the depth chart, finding minutes in Saunders' tight rotation could be difficult. Ditto for James, a veteran who comes into the season in the best physical shape of his career. We hate to keep bringing this up, but James' contract makes him an attractive trade chip around the deadline and with the depth the team currently has in the backcourt he may have more value to the team as a bargaining piece than he has on the court.

Shooting Guards – Two guard is probably the team's deepest position. So deep, in fact, that Saunders has had a difficult time settling on a starter to join Arenas in the backcourt. There's a saying in football that if you think you have two good running backs you probably don't even have one. While others have been quick to apply that philosophy to the Wizards shooting guard situation, we couldn't disagree more. There is definitely quality at the spot, but there are no two players that offer the same skillset. DeShawn Stevenson should have a slight edge in the competition if for no other reason than the fact that he and Arenas have coexisted sufficiently together in the backcourt in the past. Stevenson has also been Washington's best perimeter defender since arriving via free agency four seasons ago. Despite his familiarity and defensive abilities, Stevenson might fit best coming off of the bench used as a defensive stopper and veteran stabilizer with the second unit.

Third year pro Nick Young has crazy game when he's on. Equal parts jaw-dropping athleticism and silky smooth jumpshooting, Young can be a scary offensive threat. The consistency just isn't there yet. Young has improved in leaps and bounds over where he was when we saw him last season. He's matured on and off of the court, but perhaps not enough to cement a starting role just yet. Young has improved from “liability” to “eh, not bad” on the defensive end, but he still struggles with consistency enough that putting him in the starting lineup could stall the offense. The thing with Young is if he's on he's on, but you're likely to get the same production from him (at this point at least) coming off the bench as you would with him in the starting lineup. Bringing him in with the second unit takes off some of the pressure and adds a huge scoring punch off of the bench if he's knocking the shots down and if he isn't you don't crush his ego by yanking him from the game and limiting his minutes.

So … is Dominic McGuire a guard or a forward? We're not sure either, but since he spent many of his minutes on the court last season as the team's starting shooting guard after Stevenson went down with back problems, we'll list him as a guard here. McGuire was probably miscast in his role last season, but when a guy plays so hard and offers so much versatility it's hard to keep him off the court – even if you can't really find a position that suits him. McGuire is easily the team's most willing defender and he's capable of defending three spots on the court. He hustles every play and is an instinctive rebounder and shotblocker, and he's added an ever-improving jumpshot to his limited offensive arsenal since last season, but minutes are going

to be tough to come by for McGuire at the two spot. We actually like him much more as a backup to Caron Butler and defensive specialist and judging from how McGuire's been (sparingly) used in the preseason, Saunders likely agrees.

Mike Miller is DCSB's favorite to win the race for the starting two spot. It's tough to find a hole in Miller's game – at least in how he fits in to what the Wizards need from their starter at shooting guard. If we could sketch out the perfect compliment to the other starting four that player would be a deadeye jumpshooter (as to take advantage of the open looks Arenas, Butler and Jamison will create), a capable facilitator and ball handler, and a willing defender with a high basketball IQ. Miller fits the bill on all counts. He is one of the game's best three point shooters and does everything well enough that he's an asset even without the ball in his hands. Sure, Miller would likely bring the same quality play off of the bench that he would as a starter, but the starting lineup would not be quite as complete with any of the other candidates in that open spot.

Forwards – Even with the battle for the shooting guard spot, the most intriguing spots on this roster are the forward positions. There's an All Star whose play suggests he should be a superstar, but who has yet to put together a body of work over a season not interrupted by injury, another all star who does nothing but approach a double double on every outing, but who fans have tried to send packing for every forward on the trade block the last three seasons, and a third who flashes all of the skills of a bona fide game changer, but who has only been consistent in his inconsistency.

Caron Butler resumes his role as the team's starting small forward and heart-and-soul. Arenas may be the team's superstar, and Antawn Jamison the glue, but Butler is by far the pulse of the Wizards. As "Tuff Juice" goes, the Wizards go – not always from a statistical standpoint but at least from an emotional one. Butler may not be the team's best defender but he's certainly the most willing. Butler earned his nickname from former coach Eddie Jordan for his gritty, win-at-all-costs style of play – both attributes that Washington has been a little short on the past few seasons.

Butler's scoring average has improved every season since joining the Wizards in the fleecing of the Lakers that shipped Kwame Brown westward in 2005. Just as impressive is that he's expanded his offensive arsenal every season and has developed a reliable jumpshot and an ever-improving deep shot that makes him a multi-dimensional threat…when he's healthy. If there is a hole in Butler's game it is the number of times he'll manage to suit up for a game. Butler hasn't suffered any injuries that have called for him to miss significant time during his time in Washington. We can't rightfully call Butler injury prone, but his time on the trainer's table has certainly been an issue. Butler hasn't been shy in his expectations for Washington this season – according to Butler Washington will win it all this season. He has the skill set to help make that happen, but this team goes nowhere if the key players end up spending more time on the trainer's table than the basketball court, Butler included.

I'm still waiting to walk into the Wizards locker room one day and see Jamison holding court by his locker doing a classic Rodney Dangerfield “I get no respect” routine. The guy has career averages of 19 points and eight assists, has turned in career years each of the last two seasons and has been invaluable in the locker room. Let's not forget his heroic performance as the Lone Ranger in the playoffs two seasons ago while the other two-thirds of the Big Three were sidelined with injuries. All of that and Wizards fans still dangle him in every off-the-wall message board and talk radio trade that arises.

Luckily Ernie Grunfeld isn't so quick with the trigger or ‘Twan would be teaming with Shaq and LeBron this season and would have likely been the piece to propel that unit into the NBA Finals. As things stand, Jamison returns for his sixth season in Washington where his consistency and calm will be desperately needed should the team have legitimate championship aspirations. As much as Butler may be the pulse, Jamison is the heart and soul of this team. Jamison is the one player on the squad whose stats you can write in ink in your program boxscores before the game even tips. Jamison will be sorely missed as he is expected to miss the first 15 games of the season, and someone will have to step up big – which leads us to…

Andray Blatche. We've waited for years for the seven-footer with small forward skills to turn potential into production. With an already thin frontcourt slimming out even more with the injury to Jamison if ever there was a time for Blatche to finally make it happen, that time is now.

Time for “Good News, Bad News". The good news is that Blatche looked very good in summer league play and greatly improved against the real competition in the preseason. The bad news is that, well, we've seen this all before. Blatche has always been capable of putting it together over shot periods of time so it's no surprise to see him dominate in Vegas or even focus in long enough to impress in the preseason, but in the past when the lights have come on Dray has disappeared. Will this season be any different? Maybe, but you won't hear it from me. I've been on the bad side of that transaction for three seasons running now. I will say though that Blatche's entire approach to this season has been decidedly different. The stern, serious approach to basketball that has permeated the Wizards locker room with the arrival of Flip Saunders has even managed to touch the notoriously

lackadaisical and immature Blatche. Never mind the number on his jersey (changed this offseason to 7, which he says represents the seven days of work he's putting in consistently to become a better player). The opinion of his peers has changed since last season and that's enough to suggest that the big kid is finally getting it. Blatche averaged 11 points and seven rebounds per game in the preseason while shooting nearly 50 percent from the floor. If he can put up those types of numbers in Jamison's absence and then find a role as the primary backup to Jamison and Haywood when Antawn returns the team will be very tough to handle.

Center – Humble pie isn't so bad with a little Texas Pete's splashed on for flavor. If you'll remember two seasons ago I used this space to add fuel to the fire in the "Brendan Must Go" campaign – stopping short of forcing my own personal opinions on you, but being sure to echo the sentiments of the very vocal minority. We've since published articles that support Haywood but we've never taken it quite this far: Haywood is this team's most valuable player. There, I said it. Me saying it doesn't make it true, but the stats support the opinion. Washington goes from just below average defensively to absolutely horrible without Haywood in the lineup. Say what you will about DeShawn Stevenson and Butler, but Haywood is by far the team's best defensive player. Haywood erases the mistakes of subpar perimeter defenders and while he's not a tremendous shotblocker he is an exceptional shotalter-er (yes, I did just make that word up). Haywood is a presence in the middle of the paint that driving guards and slow-footed big men have to account for on every possession.

Haywood's value on the offensive end is vastly underrated. He's not going to win a scoring championship, no, but his nearly ten point per game average is solid for a center who is, at best, the fourth option on any given night. Haywood's true value is in his ability to create additional scoring opportunities for his team. He's a very good offensive rebounder. In his last full season as a starter, Haywood averaged 3.2 offensive rebounds per contest which would have tied him for eighth place in the league statistically. His defense also converts to offense. Those blocked and altered shots, his ability to draw fouls and defensive positioning all lead to more chances for the Wizards. Washington experienced life without The "Wood last season and it was not a pretty sight.

While big men dropped off of the list of available free agents pretty quickly back during the summer, Ernie Grunfeld didn't flinch. He knew his team needed some muscle and nastiness down low if he truly wanted to compete in an improved East, but he wasn't going to panic and overpay. Patience paid off as Grunfeld got the guy he wanted all along (at a bargain basement price no less) late in the summer when the team signed their only free agent of the offseason, Fabricio Oberto.

Oberto isn't a big name or a flashy player, but he gives Washington everything they were missing in a backup big. The team needed an experienced thug who'd commit hard fouls and understands the game well enough to know when to be the enforcer and when to be the facilitator to the team's plethora of scorers. Oberto brings championship experience and a good feel for the game with him to Washington from San Antonio. You don't play with a guy like Tim Duncan for years and not pick up some good habits, right? An added bonus for Washington is Oberto's ability to find teammates from the post. Former Wizard Darius Songalia was a capable passer, but Oberto appears to be a good passer and having him on the floor will help keep Flip Saunders' offense from stalling when the ball goes into the post. Oberto figures to be a guy Saunders calls on quite a bit as a backup to both Haywood and Jamison. It's difficult to keep a guy who understands the game as well as Fab does off of the court and why would you want to?

USA Basketball might think second year center JaVale McGee is the cat's meow, but Saunders thinks the pogo-stick jumping, rim-rocking dunking McGee has a lot to learn. While much of Saunders' rotation and lineup has been held close to the vest through the summer, the coach has made no secret of his intentions to bring JaVale along slowly. Think Slowly slowly. If not for Jamison's injury there's nothing that would lead us to believe McGee would see much time at all this season. That is disappointing for Wizards fans with whom the young big man has quickly become a fan favorite. McGee has the instincts and athleticism to be an outstanding pro, but it seems that there will be little time for player development this season on a team engineered to win big now.

Saunders would be wise, however, to ease the kid into the lineup to prepare him not just for the playoffs where his seven foot frame and ability will be a welcome addition, but also for next season – or did you forget that Haywood will be entering the summer as an unrestricted free agent? It's going to be difficult to keep Haywood on a team that is trying it's best to watch the bottom line, especially when the team is already among those with the highest payrolls in the league.

Five Big Questions

1. Is Arenas really, really back this time?

• We've seen what this team looks like without Arenas in the lineup wreaking havoc on opposing defenses – twice, and it was equally ugly both times. The Wizards success this season, again goes only as far as Arenas' thrice surgically repaired knee will allow him to carry them. Yes, we know that Butler and Jamison are All

Stars, and the additions of Foye, Miller and Oberto add just the kind of depth that takes playoff teams to championship contenders, but no team wins the "ship this or any season without at least one bona fide superstar.

- With apologies to Butler and Jamison, no other player on this roster aside from Arenas has star potential. This is a completely different team with a healthy Arenas scoring how and when he wants to and opening things up for his teammates. No other player on Washington's roster demands more than occasional double teams. With the depth Washington has, they could still survive even if (heaven forbid) Arenas is forced to the sideline again. Survival isn't enough for this team though. They've said so themselves.

- Arenas is the difference between being second or third best in the conference and being a team that hovers around .500 and squeaks into the playoffs. Whether intentional or not, Arenas makes things easier on the players around him.

2. Is Flip Saunders the right man for the job?

- This question won't truly be answered until two or three years down the road after Saunders puts together a body of work with this roster, but the early returns suggest that Flip is a perfect fit. He's been a hit with the players, the media and the fans. Once hired, Saunders immediately got to work in Washington. He contacted and maintained open lines of communication with each of the players and was firm on what he expects from them individually and as a team. Saunders, known in league circles as an offensive-minded coach, has to be drooling at the prospect of creating mismatches with this roster of players.

- He has no less than eight players (Arenas, Foye, Butler, Miller, Blatche, Young, McGuire, Jamison and McGee) who can play multiple positions and allow him to mix and match lineups to create defensive advantages and offensive mismatches. Saunders has always used a tight rotation of players and has been firm in his statement that his roster in Washington will feature only eight players who will share the minutes. Saunders is going to have a tough task in picking the eight best players out of this talented group. Everyone brings something different to the table and leaving anyone out of the rotation will be conceding a hole in some facet of the game.

3. Who's the fifth starter?

- Your guess is as good as any because Saunders has been extremely tight-lipped about which way he could be leaning. Saunders and his staff have a tough task ahead of them in picking a fifth starter out of a group that includes DeShawn Stevenson, last year's starter, Nick Young, Randy Foye and Mike Miller. Young looked terrific in Summer League play as a catch-and-shoot option coming off of screens. Young said he's been studying film of Reggie Miller and Rip Hamilton all summer long. Hamilton, you'll remember, became a star under Saunders' tutelage in Detroit. Young said Saunders has been clear in his vision for Young to contribute the same way.

- Foye might best be used as a combo guard to spell Arenas at the point and create the occasional mismatch at the shooting guard position. He shouldn't be counted out as a candidate for the starting lineup though. Saunders says the player who shows the most on both ends will get those starting minutes, and Foye certainly has the tools to put together an impressive camp. Until someone steps up and proves otherwise, Stevenson is still this team's best on-ball defender. Stevenson has also been able to improve his shooting enough that he's a legitimate catch-and-shoot threat on kick outs. Miller is best served as a specialist and backup to Butler. Miller can flat out stroke the ball and create for others, but those strengths may help the team more coming from the bench.

- Let's not forget that McGuire inherited the starting spot at the shooting guard position after Stevenson went down with a problematic back last season. But keep in mind, that with Saunders wanting to just play eight players primarily, it's unlikely that all of those players will be guards. Any of these guys could find themselves not only missing out on a starting spot, but out of the rotation completely. No one is ready to concede anything in the battle for the spot either. During separate interviews at media day, Foye, Stevenson and Young all made their intentions to do everything in their power to grab the spot perfectly clear. Each was also on record as saying that no matter who wins the spot they figure to be in Saunders' rotation and will do whatever it takes to help the team.

4. Over/under for the Wiz?

- Healthy, this team wins over 50 games no questions asked, but you can never really account for injury. With this roster, there are few teams in the league who are going to be able to match the type of scoring in waves this deep roster is capable of. This team has always had its defensive deficiencies, but this could be the season that all changes. The players seem as if they're finally ready to buy into the age old adage that defense wins championships. Yeah, we know. Been there, done that, but you have to believe that with all the confidence this team has in Flip they'll be willing to give their all when he demands it.

- Eddie Jordan lost the battle when his continued emphasis on defensive strategy didn't yield visible results,

and Saunders will face the same fate should his strategy similarly not work. It took Jordan three seasons before he started sounding like a broken record and the team started tuning him out. They'll extend Saunders at least the same courtesy, but if he can get the defense to work for him early and often they're likely to not only buy in, but also stay in. With the potential this team has offensively, they don't need to be Detroit's Bad Boys or even Saunders' Bad Boys II remake to yield some of the benefits of showing up to play on both ends. If they can manage to shave just a few points per contest off of their opponents' box score, they'll earn at least 15 more wins this season. That would be all Wizards fans need to see to believe that the team has finally made a commitment to improving defensively.

5. Are there big changes in store if this team doesn't finish deep in the playoffs?

• This team has to bolt out of the gates quickly or the changes might come quicker than next offseason. Ernie Grunfeld has been waiting patiently for the core of this squad to get healthy because he believes that with all of the key players in place this team is one of the best in the East. The payroll suggests they should be and if the standings don't say they are as the deadline approaches, Grunfeld will probably start tinkering with the roster then.

Grunfeld has some attractive pieces in Mike James' expiring deal, a handful of young players with upside and any of the Big Three of Arenas, Butler and Jamison. Arenas' contract pretty much guarantees he's not going anywhere anytime soon, but both Jamison and Butler generated interest over the summer. Grunfeld resisted dealing either then, but don't think he wouldn't reconsider if a healthy Wizards team isn't playing like one of the Conference's elite by the deadline. Either way there's going to be work for Grunfeld headed into next summer when he'll have to make decisions on Randy Foye, Mike Miller and Brenden Haywood.

Final Analysis

Projected Finish: 49-33, 5th in the Eastern Conference, 2nd in Southeast Division

Washington finishes short of that elusive 50-win mark they've talked about hitting for seasons, but with a 30 game turnaround, who's going to complain? We've been burned with predictions before, mostly because of injuries, so we're just a little gun-shy about throwing 50 wins out there as a benchmark. If this team can stay healthy though they'll easily be the league's most improved squad.

How deep into the playoffs can they go?

We're going to need a little more convincing before we're ready to back Caron Butler's lofty Championship aspirations.

As things stand now, most Wizards' fans think they would be happy with just a return to the postseason, but, and trust us here, no one is going to be happy with another first round boot out of the NBA's second season though. We've already predicted a 5th seed for Washington headed into the playoffs and a 5-6 matchup in the East likely favors Washington, and the team has traditionally played very well against the upper echelon teams in the conference. We're going to go out on a limb here in (please Wizards, don't make us look crazy) saying that it's plausible that Washington could make the Eastern Conference Finals. Healthy, this team could be the deepest and most talented, player-for-player, in the conference and Saunders has proven to be an excellent game planner in the playoffs. The stars could just be aligned for Washington to shock the world. The more likely scenario? A tough fought second round exit with — you guessed it, the Cleveland Cavaliers. Kind of makes you itch all over doesn't it?

Individual honors?

If the team manages a 30 game turnaround and advances past the first round in the playoffs, Saunders will likely be a shoo-in for Coach of the Year Honors. The team will likely be a little too balanced for any of the players to put up the type of stats they'd need to in order to receive any consideration for individual honors.

Keep an eye on Foye or Blatche for Sixth Man of the Year honors though. Foye is capable of scoring big in spurts and he'll have plenty of opportunities this season as Arenas' primary backup and part-time backcourt mate. Blatche is an unlikely candidate based on his historical body of work, but call us crazy for buying into the hype and believing Blatche's boasts of big improvements. There is a different kind of swagger about Blatche this season and if he's finally going to live up to that potential there will be few (if any) backups in the league as talented.

Conventional wisdom says there will be at least one All Star to be chosen from this group if the team is winning, but who? Competition is tight at the forward spots in the East with the LeBron James', Kevin Garnett's, Paul Pierce's and the like. Butler and Jamison could again be on the bad side of the popularity poll that All Star voting has become. Don't count out Arenas at point guard though. Agent Zero (..err, Hibachi…I mean, well…whatever he's calling himself these days) is still a fan favorite and NBA Nation is just waiting for him to

prove he's worthy of the vote before they send him to another All Star game. If Arenas can give the fans a double double average and throw in some nice SportsCenter highlights, he'll make the trip to represent Washington.

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