
how many feet from the rim is an nba three point shot? SJMN (Lauridsen): The

Keepers

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The Keepers By Adam Lauridsen Sunday, April 20th, 2008 Whether or not Baron Davis returns to the Warriors next year, the future of the franchise currently rests on the following players. Here are the bright spots in their 07-08 games and the biggest questions hanging over them as we head into the off-season. As I laid out in the last post, the ball is now in Davis' court as to his future with the Warriors. No one doubts that he can be spectacular at times and has the strength to carry teams for long stretches. What he's yet to prove, however, is that he can consistently play with discipline and focus in a way that elevates the games of his teammates. It's something the best point guards do with regularity - and something sorely lacking from Davis' final stretch of games. If Davis returns and rises to that next level with another year under his belt, the Warriors will improve as a team even without any development from the players below. If he bails out of his contract or doesn't find that crucial maturity, however, it'll be up to the following to keep the team moving forward:

Monta Ellis - During the middle third of the season, when the Warriors often struggled against average to poor teams, Ellis was the player most often arriving with clutch shooting or spectacular drives to bail out the team. He grew during this stretch from just one of the Warriors' options into their go-to scorer when points became hard to find. His mid-range jump shot has become a thing of beauty, the death-defying thrill of his drives still hasn't worn off, and he played for most of the season with a good sense of his strengths and weaknesses. Davis, Jackson, Harrington, and Biedrins all stumbled at points this year. Monta never let up. The ultimate question for Monta is no longer will he be a superstar, but rather what type of superstar. He's already one of the most effortless scorers in the league, able to shoot over small, quick players and blow past taller, slower ones. It became clear at the end of the season, however, that Monta scoring at will is not enough for the Warriors to succeed against the best teams, particularly with Davis struggling. For Monta to be a marquee player - the type you build your team around - he needs to improve his playmaking and defense. The prior area I'm not too worried about. Monta is still terrifyingly young, showed improved court vision and decision making this year, and steadily took over the responsibility of running the team as the season progressed. He's not a born distributor but shows clear signs of being able to hold down the point spot the same way Iverson and Wade have managed. The defensive question, however, is more problematic. I fear that he lacks the size and strength to be a top-notch defender, particularly at the shooting guard spot. Paired with Baron, Monta was often able to take the smaller player. If he's left with a smaller back-court mate or matched-up against a larger, stronger point guard, he's likely to face serious problems. Beyond his body, however, Monta never showed the type of defensive focus necessary to lock down opposing players. He far too often seemed intent of floating along with the ball, hoping to play the passing lanes, rather than keeping tabs on his man. It resulted in - literally - hundreds of open, unopposed jump shots over the course of the season for opposing guards. I still think Monta likely scores more than he gives up, but to be a player potentially pulling down more than \$8-9 million a year next year, it would be nice to at least see a consistently ability to stick with one's man. Andris Biedrins - Following his record-setting return from appendicitis, Andris seemed to turn a corner. No longer was he a player merely cleaning up slop around the basket. For the first time, Nelson seemed comfortable running plays for him, going so far as setting up early game offense around him in some of the Warriors' final games. In his usual workhorse fashion, Andris was up to the challenge. Occasionally, however, we saw more than just the utilitarian pick-and-roll moves from Andris. There were drives to the basket, the occasional up-and-under post-up move, and even a few little hooks from three or four feet. It's safe to call 07-08 Andris' breakout season given that (1) he put up fantastic numbers while largely exhausted from two years of non-stop basketball and (2) the performance will earn him a ton of money with his new contract. Still, during my most blindly optimistic moments, I get the sense there could be even better things to come. The biggest question surrounding Andris as he moves into the prime years of his career is simply what else can he do? Given his physical gifts - soft hands, quick lateral movement, tremendous body control - there is little reason why he can't develop a diverse offensive repertoire. He's so disciplined when on the court, taking shots only within his approved 4 foot range, that we're all in the dark as to what other elements he might have to his game. I'm not suggesting that Andris start taking jumpers (particularly the white-knuckle ride whenever he steps to the line, although even that improved at the end of the year). What I would like to see, however, is Andris pushing his comfort zone a bit to see if he can become a more offensive player. A 7-10 foot turn-around jump shot would do wonders for the Warriors' ability to score in the half-court.

Brandan Wright - When I suppress that excitement that comes from the first days spent with a new toy and put my rose-colored glasses back in their case for a few moments, it's hard to deny that Wright's slender body caused major problems for him during his few stretches of play. That's not to say it was a total curse or prevented him from being effective. His light frame probably helps him get off the ground so quickly for put-backs and blocks, not to mention allowing him the speed necessary to push the ball on the break. That said, in the post - where the Warriors need Brandan to play - his body was often a tremendous liability. He struggled on defense against bigger players and often found himself knocked out of the way on both offensive and defensive rebounds. Nelson coaches so much on mismatches that the thought of opponents isolating the strongest player on the court against Brandan likely often kept Nelson from turning to his rookie when the team needed either a substitute or support for Andris on the front-line. My biggest question for Brandan is not whether he'll be able to bulk up - I have little doubt that in a year or two he'll have the wiry strong body common among many NBA players (think Chris Bosh, Tim Duncan, even Stephen Jackson). My doubt rests on whether we'll lose some of what makes Wright unique when he puts on the pounds. Wright has an undeniable smoothness on the court, from his moves around the basket to finishing on the break. If he adds 20-30 pounds of muscle, it'll add force to his game but might risk the other elements. Still, it's a risk the Warriors are going to have to take. At his current weight, he's too big a defensive liability against most NBA frontlines. I'd love to see him

eventually paired with Andris as twin towers of hustle and shot-blocking, but it's awfully hard to score put-backs and sway shots when you've been knocked on your backside or cleared into the basketball support by someone's flailing arm. Marco Belinelli - It took Marco 82 games, but we finally saw some of the white-hot shooting that made him a summer league star back in 07. I'm not sure yet whether the final game demonstrated that Marco just needs time without the pressure of being yanked off the court or if the burst of scoring after a few lesser performances is just proof of his inconsistency. I'm guessing it's somewhere in between. There's no doubt that the brief appearances earlier in the season made it difficult for him to find his rhythm. That said, the shots Marco took against the Sonics to close the season looked identical to earlier shots that clanked out (they were all sideways, leaning, and out of Marco's hand before anyone could fully realize what had happened). I suspect we might have just caught Marco that final evening while he was hot, compared to the few other nights he wasn't feeling it. That type of streakiness won't be a problem if we peg Marco as a 6th or 7th man, brought off the bench to help bust zones or shoot in the half-court. If the Warriors have ambitions of him starting, however, that type of inconsistency will be tough for the offense to handle, particularly when paired with Jackson's similar here-today, gone-tomorrow touch. As with Wright, the chief question for Marco is his defense. There were quite a few ugly moments when he was on the court where smaller, faster players simply faced him and blew right past him. His lateral movement is far from impressive, although his sense of spacing and defensive timing improved as the season continued. My hope for Marco is that he can learn from veterans like Jackson that not all of defense is about speed. By knowing when to commit and when to back off, a defender can minimize certain physical advantages. Also, despite Belinelli's less-than-lightening fast footwork, he appears to have tremendously quick hands. The hands will allow him a little more room for error when it comes to defense (see Mullin, Chris). Still, I can't help but shake the image of an Ellis / Belinelli back-court giving up bucket after bucket as the Warriors' guards either fail to fight through screens to challenge shooters or get abused by players facing the basket, looking to penetrate. Both are young, so I'm hoping it's not too late for someone to instill some defensive fundamentals. Kelenna Azubuike - Monta gets all the attention when it comes to rapid development on the Warriors this year, but Kelenna deserves special mention as well. Azubuike put on an offensive show during the Vegas summer league and the Jackson-less opening of the season. After a middle third of the year in which he didn't see much time, he re-invented himself as a rugged defender, giving Kobe as hard a time during the late season games as anyone the Warriors have been able to throw at him in years. Azubuike also went from playing above the rim in the early season to fighting below it for rebounds or loose balls by the end. To me, the changes signify a player looking to fit in however he can. When the Warriors needed a scoring two-guard, he was it. When they needed a pseudo-power forward, he hit the boards. And when the original defensive stopper - Jackson - struggled to stay with his man, Kelenna stepped up to the challenge. MP should have been taking notes on how to perform in a contract year. Azubuike will likely be nicely rewarded. The doubt swirling around Azubuike this off-season is whether the Warriors will have the benefit of his services next season. He's already signaled an intent to opt out of his minimum deal (who can blame him). He'll be a restricted free agent for the Warriors, who should be willing to match any reasonable deal (\$1-2.5 mil) that he might receive. If the contracts get much richer, the Warriors will need to ask the tough question: do we want to invest more money in a player who is already developing knee problems during his second year? The change in Azubuike's aerial game between the opening and close of the season was alarming. He rarely complained about it (a smart move in a contract year), but there's dramatic proof in the differences between his November and April performances. Here's hoping Kelenna can combine the gritty intelligence of his late season games with the high-flying scoring of his early-season minutes. Kosta Perovic - Playing the crucial role on a Nellie team of the wacky foreign center, Kosta might actually turn into more than a bench-novelty. At 7-2, he has height the Warriors lack elsewhere. During his late season performances, he seemed willing to throw his size around down low and take up space. Kosta's minutes against Shaq went from being a classic isn't Nellie crazy story to a viable strategy in a few quick minutes. With a little lower-body strength work, Kosta could be a nice change of pace from the light, quick-flight Warriors we know and love. The book on Kosta has always been that he's offensively gifted, so the reports from the D-League about his rebounding and shot-blocking are particularly encouraging. The question surrounding Kosta is simple: will Nellie find time for him to develop? We spent an entire season watching Andris yanked only to be replaced at center by Al Harrington or Mickael Pietrus. Kosta would allow the team to go bigger or slide Andris to power forward (as the team did successfully during the Phoenix game). Still, given Nellie's big man track record and the limited minutes Andris saw this season, I'm not sure how a slower big man like Kosta fits into the Warriors' game plan. Of course, some great rebounding and shot-blocking during the summer league would go a long way towards forcing Nellie's (or any other coach's) hand. Stephen Jackson - One of these names is not like the others, at least in terms of age. But despite Jackson's years in the league, I actually think he might be getting better. Before he hit the wall this year, Jackson was shooting a higher percentage, rebounding more, and getting to the line with regularity. Everything fell apart in the final third of the season, but I'm optimistic that with fewer minutes, Jackson could sustain his well-rounded, disciplined efforts from earlier in the year. Also, compared to Baron's contract and Monta's soon-to-be contract, Jackson is a downright deal for a 20 point a night scorer. Jackson's decision-making is often called into question, and I'm certainly not one to defend it in all cases. Still, I will say that when a game really does depend on scoring points asap, Jackson tends to be good about taking the ball to the hole and looking to get fouled rather than pulling up for a quick three. Jackson made huge strides this year in controlling his temper and playing under control. Now, imagine if he made a similar leap next year in terms of his shot selection and offensive discipline. Jackson is crafty and his game has almost no reliance on athleticism. It's a combination that should allow him to continue to improve long after most NBA players have peaked. There are notable absences from this list. They'll be covered in the next post on the players likely to be left out of the game plan or off the roster entirely next year. The tough question becomes whether we think internal improvement from the players listed above, along with the addition of a mid first round pick, will be enough for the Warriors to keep pace in the West. There certainly are

intriguing possibilities in the futures of the above players, but intrigue alone doesn't win end-of-season games against Western playoff teams. Even with all of the above talent panning out, the Warriors most likely will need to find another contributing piece to hang with the pack.

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