

Boston Celtics

2016-2017: 53-29, 1st in the East

Payroll: \$109,083,217

NBA Draft:

#3- Jayson Tatum SF

#37- Semi Ojeleye PF

#53- Kadeem Allen SG

#56- Jabari Bird SG

Offseason:

IN: Marcus Morris, Gordon Hayward (4 years, \$128 million), Aron Baynes (1 year, \$4.3 million), Shane Larkin (1 year, \$5.24 million), Kyrie Irving

OUT: Avery Bradley, Gerald Green, Kelly Olynyk, Amir Johnson, Jordan Mickey, Jonas Jerebko, Tyler Zeller, James Young, Jae Crowder, Isaiah Thomas

Analysis:

I can't decide if it's more entertaining or crazy that the Celtics will only return 4 players (Horford, Smart, Brown, Rozier) from the 53-win 2016-17 campaign. In any case, the way the Celtics approached this offseason made it clearer than almost anything in recent memory that the NBA is a business—just ask Avery Bradley and Isaiah Thomas, fan favorites and locker room leaders, jettisoned in an instant for perceived roster upgrades. Those visible upgrades come in the form of Gordon Hayward, Kyrie Irving, and 2017's #3 pick Jayson Tatum.

Last year's Celtics team was good, but overachieved; neither their offensive nor their defensive rating were top-5 league wide, and they advanced to the ECF (to be trounced by Cleveland) by the skin of their teeth over a Wizards team that outplayed them for the majority of the series. Danny Ainge bet that he could supplement that promising year with superstar talent to raise Boston's ceiling to a championship-caliber team. Whether he actually did that, we'll wait and see, but the moves made provided plenty of drama. In a nutshell:

- Traded the #1 pick in the Draft for the #3 pick and the juicy 2018 Lakers pick (between 2-5) or 2019 Kings pick, despite being optimistically tied to Markelle Fultz for weeks. Josh Jackson, perceived by many as the 2nd best player in the class, refused to even workout for Boston.
- Tied to Paul George rumors for months, but deal held up due to Ainge refusing to part with top assets. PG then suddenly traded to OKC before Boston can make its best offer.
- Somewhat tied to Jimmy Butler trade rumors, but they cooled quickly and significantly around gossip of concern about Butler's personality and fit.
- Traded longest-tenured Celtic Avery Bradley to make cap space for Hayward's max deal.
- Traded Boston hero Isaiah Thomas despite him a) establishing himself as an all-star+ player, b) helping to recruit other star players, including Hayward, to Boston, and c) playing a game the day after his sister tragically died
- Who did they receive? Oh, just Kyrie Irving, the most surreal superstar personality since Kobe. Did I mention Kyrie believes the *Earth is flat*?!

Many of those moves, while controversial, are excellent once the emotion wears off. If Boston truly thought Tatum was the best player in the 2017 draft class, getting an extra top-10 pick by trading back is genius. I personally believe Tatum to be a bit one-dimensional, but his talent, efficient scoring, is the most valuable thing in the league. His rebounding numbers at Duke were underwhelming for someone his size, and he was part of arguably the worst defensive team Duke had seen in a decade, but as he got healthier throughout the season, the flashes of an all-star player became more and more frequent. His foot speed isn't elite, so he'll never be great at getting to the rim or d'ing guys up, but landing in a smart

basketball culture like Boston will allow him the opportunities to mask those deficiencies while potentially dropping an easy 20 ppg in the future. He'll play this year as a rookie and get accustomed to the learning curve, but if he ends up being in the crunchtime 5, it would be surprising.

Avery Bradley became the main victim of the cap squeeze. Boston walked the tightrope as it tried to create room for Hayward and George's salaries, and that meant that either Smart or Bradley needed to go. Bradley is the more well-rounded player, so his absence creates a hole that Smart's absence wouldn't have, but they fetched Marcus Morris, a good return for someone they may not have been able to pay next summer regardless. Morris will instill a needed toughness and physicality that the Celtics' frontcourt lacked in 2016. Still, Bradley was popular and beloved by the organization and the fans, and these upcoming Marcus Smart extension negotiations will likely be full of awkward glances at one another due to the Grand Canyon-sized difference in the numbers they exchange.

Boston ultimately missed out on PG and Jimmy Butler, and their reported refusal to include a Brooklyn pick or Jaylen Brown in either deal will be talked about forever, but they got their franchise cornerstone anyway: Kyrie Irving. PG and Butler are both better 2-way players than Irving, but he's the youngest of the bunch, still has room to grow, and seems thrilled to be in Boston long-term. The threat of George bolting to LA after 1 year or Butler's potential personality clashes didn't appear to be worth risking primetime assets. For a proven, 25-year-old champion who can nail open threes and score off the dribble at will, Ainge gave up part of his stockpile—the 2018 Brooklyn pick (unprotected), the exciting draft-n-stash project Ante Zizic, and of course, the pieces for now—Jae Crowder & IT.

The success of that deal will depend on where the Nets' pick falls and how healthy IT is, but for everything we know at this moment, it was a fair trade for both teams. Time will tell if Kyrie can take Boston over the horizon to the Promised Land, but the 2017-18 Celtics look primed to legitimately compete for titles for years to come. Last year's team couldn't say that, and for Boston to get out of having to give Thomas a max deal next summer is a victory unto itself (a 5'9" PG coming off a bad injury whose game relies on athleticism? Yikes!)

Brad Stevens is a maestro, Hayward is underrated despite being an all-star, Horford is not only a great, genius player, but one of the best people in the league, Semi Ojeleye was a steal at #37 and could provide Boston with 3 & D versatility on the wing, Brown and Tatum are special talents, and the bench is solid; the ceiling of this team very well could make it past LeBron.

Will they reach it? They were a horrible rebounding team last season and their frontcourt is still thin (Baynes will presumably be their 3rd big), and the defensive holes left by Bradley and Crowder could drag the team's efficiency down. They'll rely on Hayward, Rozier, and Smart to fill those gaps, and for Kyrie to hopefully not be as much of a liability on defense as IT was last year, but no matter how you spin it they won't lock down the Cavs or Warriors. Can they outscore those teams? Probably not, but this Celtics team is ready for Act 2 of its story, evolved from the plucky upstart to the legitimate contender. When Act 3, the champion, begins, is anyone's guess, but it's certainly sooner than anyone could have imagined 2 years ago.

Player(s) to Watch: Terry Rozier, Jaylen Brown

I'm bending my own rules and picking two guys here (and sorry to be a Louisville homer, but it must be done).

First, Rozier was a revelation in the 2017 playoffs. People laughed when the Celtics took Rozier at #16 in the 2015 draft, and his rookie year was rough, but he earned his stripes late last season and looks like a fantastic bench contributor. His defense and athleticism have always been great, but if he can shoot 37% from 3 like he did in the playoffs, Rozier will find himself on the floor playing crunchtime. With Avery Bradley gone, Rozier has the chance to cement himself as the 2nd best guard on the Celtics; considering Marcus Smart's underwhelming development, general inconsistency, and shooting woes, Rozier might be a better fit next to Irving; the defense wouldn't suffer much, because for as good as Smart is, Rozier nearly matches him. I feel confident in predicting Rozier to finish top-3 in voting for 6th Man of the Year.

For Jaylen Brown, the sky is the limit. His development will be the most important storyline of the 2017-18 Celtics. You could see him growing and improving under Brad Stevens last year, but that was only the beginning. Brown has higher two-way upside than anyone on the Celtics roster; he's still raw, so he needs to tighten his handle, improve his spot-up shooting a bit, and unlock more of his defensive potential—if he makes noticeable strides in 2 of those areas he'll be a top 30 player before the year is done—despite being just 21.

Imaginary Prop Bets: O/U 2.5 Boston trades in the next 9 months

O/U 500 'Scary Terry' jokes on r/NBA this season

Prediction: 52-30, 2nd in the East