



Indiana's Granger Era Set To Begin

By: **Bill Ingram** Last Updated: 11/12/08 1:24 AM ET

When the Indiana Pacers traded Jermaine O'Neal to the Toronto Raptors this summer it signaled the end of an era for the team. O'Neal helped the team recover from the retirement of Reggie Miller, though injuries prevented him from taking them back to the Eastern Conference Finals. In fact, after the 2004-05 season it was almost like the team lost both superstars - Miller to retirement and O'Neal to injuries.

The Pacers may now be ready to put those frustrations behind them as they usher in the Danny Granger era.

"Danny can put up some big numbers," says TJ Ford, who came over in the trade with Toronto. "He's definitely the guy the Pacers are building the team around and he's a big part of the future of this franchise. I think they did a good job with him from the time he came out of college and he's been improving his game constantly. He's definitely one of the premier up-and-coming players in the NBA. It's an opportunity that he's taking full advantage of and I definitely enjoy playing with him."

"He's definitely the leader of the team," agrees Rashaun Nesterovic, who also came over in the trade. "He's our franchise player and he's going to have to accept that role and give it everything he has. We all have to support him in that, try to be good teammates, and make his job easier. If we make his job easier it will make everybody's job easier. When you win everything is easier. People only remember winners, so if we want to do something meaningful we have to win."

Granger feels his team, which started the 2008-09 season with a win over the defending champion Boston Celtics, is definitely up to the challenge.

"I definitely think we're a playoff team," says Granger, who's averaging 25.3 points per game through six. "We were only a game out of the playoffs last year, so we were right there. There were a lot of games we should have won last year, but we just let them get away. If we can just finish games better this year we should not only make the playoffs, but do some damage once we get there."

It's a long road from November to April and the playoffs, but the Pacers look like a team that can make some hay in the Eastern Conference this year. The trade and the draft added some nice pieces to a team that just missed the postseason last year. As much as the team will look to Granger to lead them, they also know it takes a team to win.

"Danny's a very good player, but we have a lot of good players here and we really want to be a complete team," says GM David Morway. "Danny's very important to us, Mike Dunleavy's very important to us, and we're developing a lot of young players. I think Danny's really come along

over the last three years and we're excited about his future. The objective now is to build a culture of 'team' around him and to win as a team."

"It can't just be one person," agrees Dunleavy. "We're a well-built team from top to bottom and it's not going to do us any good if just one guy has a big year. It's going to take a lot of effort from everybody and hopefully Danny can have the same type of year that he has last year. But to put all of the expectations on one person's shoulders would be too much."

While it certainly takes a team to win, a successful team needs a visionary leader who believes in his teammates and in his team's ability. Granger fits that description to a T.

"I think this season is a great opportunity for us," he says. "We didn't make the playoffs last year and normally we've been a pretty good playoff team. This is a good organization, so this is a good time for us to prove what we can do. We have a lot of new faces coming together, so this is going to be an exciting year."

Not many people are talking about the Pacers early on, and Rasho Nesterovic's ankle injury has prevented the team from hitting on all cylinders since their second game. Rasho's due back this week and all indications are that the Pacers are ready to embark on a serious playoff run. The fact that they'll do it as underdogs suits Granger just fine.

"We're not being talked about much and no one is really expecting much from us. We really don't pay much attention to the media. I always say the media is about selling papers and doesn't have much to do with what we're actually doing. We're going to let our game speak for itself, but we are definitely relishing the idea of being underdogs. We love it!"

If they can get healthy and resume the breakneck pace they set during preseason, the Danny Granger edition of the Indiana Pacers won't be underdogs for long.