



Posey brings his recipe for success to Hornets

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NEW ORLEANS -- Last season couldn't have been a bigger success for the New Orleans Hornets. They went from missing the playoffs entirely to roaring to the Southwest Division championship and coming within a game of a trip to the Western Conference finals.

This year, they've set their standards higher.

With one of the league's premier players in Chris Paul, an All-Star forward in David West and a budding star in the middle in Tyson Chandler, New Orleans feels it has a nucleus in place to make a run at an NBA title.

And because of that, the most important Hornet this year may not be any of those three or even a starter. Instead, it's the guy they got in the offseason who already knows what it's like to win a championship -- reserve forward [James Posey](#). Obtaining Posey wasn't just a priority -- it was the Hornets' entire offseason shopping list.

New Orleans sold its first-round pick to free up enough money to sign Posey and then used its entire midlevel exception to ink him. In doing so, the Hornets did little to address holes at backup center and backup point guard because they regarded the addition of Posey -- his defense, 3-point shooting and veteran mettle -- as a more desirable upgrade. In fact, beyond Posey, the only new faces are minimum-contract additions Devin Brown and Sean Marks.

Because of his track record as a key cog in title-winning teams in Miami and Boston, Posey didn't come cheaply at four years and \$24 million. But the Hornets are hoping his Finals magic dust can make him three-for-his-last-three in leading new employers to a championship.

So far, the Hornets like what they're getting. While he's still learning the offense, his experience and intensity on defense is exactly what the Hornets feel they need come May.

"He impressed me after about three or four days of camp," said Hornets coach Byron Scott. "James is one of those old pros that knows how to play. He doesn't do anything on the court to hurt you. He's still learning the system, it's going to take him some time, but he knows how to play, he knows the spots to get in, and he takes a lot of pride in his defense."

Paul added to the praise, saying Posey has been the biggest surprise to him in camp: "It's crazy to say him, because he's been in the league so long. But this is my first opportunity to play with him. We both played for [coach Skip Prosser] in college, so I heard about him all this time. His knowledge of the game, how he plays at a certain level all the time, it's something we need."

While Posey wasn't familiar with a lot of his new teammates, the Prosser connection with Paul and West certainly helped establish Posey as a respected elder in the locker room. (Posey played for Prosser at Xavier, leaving for the NBA right before West arrived; Paul played for Prosser at the coach's next stop, Wake Forest.)

It's a role Posey has taken seriously, judging by how vocal he was on the sideline talking to teammates during Sunday's exhibition opener against Golden State, which the Hornets won 106-103.

"I've done it on all the teams I've been on," said Posey of his sideline coaching. "Sometimes players take it a little differently. Instead of the coach keeping on saying it, they take it a little better coming from a teammate."

"The only thing he talked about [Sunday] night during timeouts was on the defensive end, and that's something that's new to us," said Scott. "Besides just hearing my voice talking about getting stops, now we hear another guy that's talking about transition defense and getting stops, and doing all the little things. It's very valuable when you have that type of guy, especially telling the younger guys what they have to do. Because they're gonna listen to him because he's won championships."

That communication from Posey is something Scott hopes rubs off on his troops. He said the Hornets need to improve their defensive communication this season and reiterated that point after breakdowns on the weak side troubled him in the preseason opener.

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It's not a stretch to say that Posey could be the Hornets' missing piece to the championship puzzle.

They're going to need the D to be on their game and to live up to their new status as top dogs in the West. It's been a consistent theme in camp -- they know they're not going to sneak up on anyone this time around, especially now that they've added a two-time champion in Posey to help them.

The coach's expectations have risen accordingly. Last year he wrote down a number in preseason for how many games the team could win and revealed it after the regular season to his coaching staff -- 55. (New Orleans actually won 56).

And this year? "I've written down expectations, what I think we can achieve," said Scott. "We'll leave it at that."

Whatever he wrote down, one imagines it didn't say, "We'll lose in the second round again" -- in fact, at other moments this week he has alluded to going much further. But Scott says those increased expectations can be a positive. He should know. He coached a team in almost exactly the same situation in New Jersey in 2003 -- one that had taken the league by storm a year earlier -- and it came within two games of a championship.

"The biggest thing is that everybody's gunning for you now," said Scott. "You're not the team that can come in and surprise people anymore. But that also brings out the best in players, that's competition every single night."

So far, so good, on that front. The consistent report I've heard is that everybody showed up in great shape and that training camp was a success.

"The intensity level between this year compared to last year has been off the charts," said Scott.

Of course, the other side of the coin in New Orleans is what the Hornets didn't do this offseason. With all their free-agent dollars committed to Posey, New Orleans couldn't upgrade at backup center, where Hilton Armstrong and Melvin Ely struggled last season, and couldn't match a Russian team's offer for backup point guard Jannero Pargo. Instead, Mike James and Brown will battle for minutes behind Paul.

That's why so much of his year ultimately comes down to Posey. Scott loves the flexibility he provides -- he can go small, something the Hornets rarely did last year, by playing Posey at the 4, or he can go big by sticking Posey at the 2 -- and feels that the addition of another floor spacer will give Paul and West more room to operate and thrive.

But in the salary-cap era, everything is a tradeoff. Whether Posey's veteran moxie will offset the question marks at the other bench spots remains to be seen, and it's a question we won't really know the answer to until spring.