## **How the Lakers Make a Splash:**

## **Los Angeles Lakers:** The last time the Los Angeles Lakers won the NBA Championship was in the 2009-10 season. Can you recall the last time they even made the playoffs? You’d have to go back to the 2012-13 season, when they made an embarrassing first round exit. Since then, the proud organization and winners of 16 NBA Championships, has won just 124 games, with 5 games remaining in the 2017-18 season. As an NBA Draft Lottery team (2014-17), LA has acquired a solid nucleus of talented young players. This summer they hope to drastically change the direction of their franchise by signing two max superstars from the 2018 free-agent class. At the top of their wish list sits Lebron James and Paul George. But it should also be noted free-agents, such as, Clint Capela, DeAndre Jordan, DeMarcus Cousins, and Jabari Parker would also bolster the Lakers roster and help them become an NBA power once again.

## If Magic Johnson and Rob Pelinka can pull it off, they would position themselves to not only make the playoffs, but quite seriously contend for a Western Conference Championship and a return trip to the NBA Finals. However, certain articles on ESPN.com suggest the Lakers could very well fail in their efforts to lure both James and George to Los Angeles. And if that happens, they will turn their attention to the 2019 free-agent class which includes Klay Thompson and Kawhi Leonard.

 The Lakers were able to create substantial cap space for this summer by sending two of their most promising young players (Jordan Clarkson and Larry Nance Jr.) to Cleveland. In exchange, the Lakers received the Cavs 2018 1st round draft pick, and two players with contracts that will expire when the season is over. It’s tough to really say how much cap space they created, but currently it’s believed to be somewhere between the $50-$60 million range. If the Lakers can somehow find a way to shed Luol Deng’s remaining $36 million from the books, that figure could swell into the $60-$70 million neighborhood. Los Angeles is definitely set up to make a huge splash, but that’s only if the stars align. No pun intended. One thing that should encourage the Lakers is their current roster which includes a solid young nucleus they’ll be able to develop and build around.

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|  |  2017-18 Current Los Angeles Lakers Roster |  |
|  |   |   |  |  |
| Position | Starter | Rotation #2 | Rotation #3 | Rotation #4 |
| Point Guard | **Lonzo Ball** | Isaiah Thomas | Tyler Ennis |   |
| Shooting Guard | Kentavious |   |   |   |
|   | Caldwell-Pope | Alex Caruso | **Josh Hart** |   |
| Small Forward | **Kyle Kuzma** | **Brandon Ingram** | Luol Deng |   |
| Power Forward | **Julius Randle** | Travis Wear | Channing Frye |   |
| Center | Brook Lopez | Ivica Zubac |   |   |

Personnel will not be the only issue Johnson and Pelinka look to address. Although the team statistically ranks among the top 10 in several categories, you can’t ignore the fact they have hovered among the league’s bottom third in several others.

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|  Los Angeles Lakers Statistics and NBA Ranks |
|   |   |   |
|   | Offense | Defense |
| Points per game | **10th**  | 27th  |
| FG .pct | 13th  | 11th  |
| FT .pct | 30th | 14th  |
| 3-pt FG .pct | 29th | **5th**  |
| Offensive Rebounds game | **4th** | 22nd  |
| Defensive Rebounds game | **2nd**  | 22nd  |
| Total Rebounds game | **2nd** | 27th  |
| Assists game | **7th** | 18th |
| Turnovers game | 28th  | 15th  |
| Steals game | 13th  | 24th  |
| Blocks game | 13th | 27th  |
| Personal Fouls game | 24th | **9th**  |
| Disqualifications game | N/A | N/A |

For Los Angeles to take the next step, they’ll need to bring in pieces that help improve deficiencies in areas such as: defensive points/game, defensive off-reb/game, defensive rebounds/game, total rebounds/game, as well as their offensive 3-pt fg pct. The Lakers also rank 28th in offensive Turnovers/gm, but that statistic should improve as their young core plays more together and grows in team chemistry.

Johnson and Pelinka will also need to answer: 1) Who to pursue in free-agency and why, 2) which expiring contracts on their roster, if any, should be re-signed, 3) who they should waive, attempt to trade, or simply renounce. The Lakers currently have four guaranteed contracts affecting the cap in 2018-19 (Lonzo Ball, Brandon Ingram, Kyle Kuzma, and Josh Hart). Unless the Lakers are made an irresistible offer, look for them to retain these players.

**Lonzo Ball:** Ball obviously is the darling of the franchise, for now. Though he’s struggled a bit with his all-around shooting, his numbers have improved.

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|  | Lonzo Ball |  |
|  |   |  |
| Points/game | Rebounds/game | Assists/game |
| 10.2 | 6.9 | 7.2 |

Without his injury, Ball would currently rank 8th in assists among all NBA players. He sees passes most players don’t and seems to be the perfect orchestrator to revive the Lakers Showtime attack. Ball simply just needs guys around him to finish plays. His FG% by distance numbers indicate where he needs work.

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  Ball’s FG% by Distance Numbers |  |
|  |   |   |   |   |  |
| 2pt | 0-3 feet | 3-10 feet | 10-16 feet | 16-22 feet | 3pt |
| .420 | .494 | .269 | .400 | .333 | .305 |

It’s a question of shot selection for Ball, usually a pass first guard. Placing him in more ball-screens should produce both higher quality looks as well as more opportunity to distribute the ball to wide open and more efficiently shooting teammates. Hollinger’s Statistics ranks Ball 17th among all NBA Rookies with a 12.52 PER.

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|   | Ball's Contract |   |
|  Free Agent / Player / **Team** / Early Termination |
| 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 |
| $7,461,960  | **$8,719,320**  | **$11,003,782**  |

**Brandon Ingram:** Ingram has been sidelined with a left Hip Flexor injury, but in spite of that, he’s had a very good season for the Lakers. What’s not to like about him? He’s long, athletic, runs the floor, and has improved his jumper this season.

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Brandon Ingram |  |
|  |   |  |
| Points/game | Rebounds/game | Assists/game |
| 16.1 | 5.3 | 3.9 |

He has improved his FT% (.681), 3P% (.390), and overall FG% (.470). Ingram has started in 59 of the 59 games he’s played in for the Lakers. His length and athleticism allows him to play both the shooting guard, small forward, and power forward positions. He tends to struggle just a bit from 3-10 feet, otherwise his FG% by distance numbers are solid.

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|  |  Ingram’s FG% by Distance Numbers |  |
|  |   |   |   |   |  |
| 2pt | 0-3 feet | 3-10 feet | 10-16 feet | 16-22 feet | 3pt |
| .466 | .645 | .244 | .340 | .418 | .329 |

Hollinger’s statistics ranks Ingram 24th among all small forwards in the league with a 13.89 PER. Ingram has shown himself to play much stronger than he looks, and his ability to run in the open floor is incredibly promising.

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|   | Ingram's Contract |   |
|  Free Agent / Player / **Team** / Early Termination |
| 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 |
| $5,757,120  | **$7,265,485**  |  |

**Kyle Kuzma:** There was something special about Kyle Kuzma from the start. The Lakers liked him so much, he was part of the trade package from the Brooklyn Nets that also sent over Brook Lopez. Kuzma has shown great promise this season, even with being overshadowed by his rookie teammate Lonzo Ball at the beginning of the year. Kuzma has emerged as a solid R.O.Y. candidate.

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|  | Kyle Kuzma |  |
|  |   |  |
| Points/game | Rebounds/game | Assists/game |
| 16.1 | 6.3 | 1.9 |

Kuzma’s athleticism and size, along with Ingram, makes them both interchangeable when they’re on the court together. He’s definitely a high energy player with solid FG% by distance numbers.

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|  |  Kuzma’s FG% by Distance Numbers |  |
|  |   |   |   |   |  |
| 2pt | 0-3 feet | 3-10 feet | 10-16 feet | 16-22 feet | 3pt |
| .514 | .640 | .451 | .365 | .387 | .364 |

Hollinger’s statistics ranks Kuzma 37th among all NBA power forwards with a 14.39 PER. His 2.7 free throw attempts per game should increase as he becomes more aggressive off the bounce.

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|   | Kuzma's Contract |   |
|  Free Agent / Player / **Team** / Early Termination |
| 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 |
| $1,689,840  | **$1,974,600**  | **$3,562,178**  |

**Josh Hart:** Hart has started in 20 of the 58 games he’s played in for the Lakers this season. He has the ability to finish at the rim, but often settles for the jumper. In any case, he’s shown tremendous promise as a three-point shooter (.390) and future “3-and-D” player.

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|  | Josh Hart |  |
|  |   |  |
| Points/game | Rebounds/game | Assists/game |
| 6.8 | 3.9 | 1.2 |

Hart fractured the fourth metacarpal of his left hand, just as he was beginning to settle into his role as a part-time starter. His FG% by distance numbers will need to improve if he expects to play more minutes in the rotation.

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|  |  Hart’s FG% by Distance Numbers |  |
|  |   |   |   |   |  |
| 2pt | 0-3 feet | 3-10 feet | 10-16 feet | 16-22 feet | 3pt |
| .542 | .670 | .222 | .167 | .333 | .390 |

He’s ranked 46th among NBA shooting guards with an 11.34 PER, according to Hollinger’s Statistics. 2019-20 and 2020-21 are team option years, so next season will be huge for him.

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|   | Hart's Contract |   |
|  Free Agent / Player / **Team** / Early Termination |
| 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 |
| $1,655,160  | **$1,934,160**  | **$3,491,159**  |

 With the core group of Ball (20), Ingram (20), Kuzma (22), and Hart (23), the Lakers will take a $16,564,080 salary cap hit in 2018-19. With this group, Johnson and Pelinka should not waste precious time attempting to find the quick fix that will lead them back to the NBA Finals, but rather find the pieces to end their playoff drought and help these young stars gain valuable experience while they continue to develop. With that said, what additional moves should the Lakers make to bring prosperity back to La La Land?

**“Waive-and-Stretch” Luol Deng:** Deng is guaranteed $36,810,000 over the next two years. Broken down, it simply means the team would take a cap hit of $18,000,000 in 2018-19, and $18,810,000 in 2019-20. While the number one priority should be to clear this salary off the books, the Lakers have struggled to find a suitor, but not from a lack of trying. His hefty salary is too much for a player who played only 13 minutes in the first game this season but hasn’t seen the court since. We know he’s a former two-time All-Star, but without quality numbers to prove he can still play, Los Angeles hasn’t been able to move him. Teams have not hesitated to ask the Lakers to include one of their younger players, most notably Ball or Julius Randle. So far, Johnson and Pelinka have held up under the pressure, and seem somewhat committed to keeping the rest of their young bright future stars together.

By clearing $36,810,000 off the books, it would virtually guarantee being able to sign two max-players and quite possibly Randle to a max deal as well. And anyway, isn’t that the best scenario? The question now is without a trade, what’s the Lakers next move? They circle July 1 on their calendar and exercise the “Waive-and-Stretch” provision on Deng.

First of all, waivers are a temporary status for players who are released by their team. **CBAFAQ #64: What is the Stretch provision?** If the player is waived from July 1 to August 31, then his remaining salary is paid over twice the number of years remaining on his contract, plus one. Simply put, the remaining contract is paid over five years (two seasons times two, plus one). This would break Deng’s salary up into five equal payments of $7,362,000.

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|  |  | Luol Deng's Contract |  |
|  |   |   |   |
|  | Year | Current Contract | Stretched by 8/31/18 |
|  | 2017-18 | $17,190,000  | N/A |
|  | 2018-19 | $18,000,000  | **$7,362,000**  |
|  | 2019-20 | $18,810,000  | **$7,362,000**  |
|  | 2020-21 |   | **$7,362,000**  |
|  | 2021-22 |   | **$7,362,000**  |
|  | 2022-23 |   | **$7,362,000**  |
|  | Total | $36,810,000  | **$36,810,000**  |

 While unloading Deng’s contract thru a trade would be ideal, by exercising the “Waive-and -Stretch” provision, it increases the Lakers’ cap space $10,638,000 in 2018-19 and $11,448,000 in 2019-20, respectively. With this move, the Lakers create even more cap space and can shift their focus to Julius Randle.

**Re-sign Julius Randle:** Randle is 6’9” and 250lbs. He has great strength, speed, and can hurt you in a variety of ways. He scores in post-ups, pick-and-rolls, basket cuts, and at times off the bounce. What’s there to think about here? Randle has shown great efficiency this season and although he’s only started 44 of the 77 games he’s played in, it hasn’t stopped him from so far establishing career highs in points per game (16.2) and field goal percentage (.561).

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|  | Julius Randle |  |
|  |   |  |
| Points/game | Rebounds/game | Assists/game |
| 16.2 | 8.0 | 2.5 |

This past February, Randle served notice to the rest of the league he’s becoming a matchup nightmare. In a game against the Cavaliers, he dominated down low on his way to a career high 36 points. He punishes defenders from 0-3 feet but obviously needs to polish his long-range shooting and ability to stretch the floor.

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|  |  Randle’s FG% by Distance Numbers |  |
|  |   |   |   |   |  |
| 2pt | 0-3 feet | 3-10 feet | 10-16 feet | 16-22 feet | 3pt |
| .578 | .731 | .396 | .364 | .244 | .233 |

With a 20.00 PER, Hollinger’s statistics not only ranks Randle 9th among all power forwards, but also 39th overall among all NBA players. He is an incredible weapon for Ball and the Lakers. He’s playing his butt off and clearly needs to feel some love from Johnson and Pelinka. So, sometime between the day following the last game of the NBA Finals and June 29, the Lakers must submit a $5,564,134 Qualifying Offer to Randle.

Citing the **CBAFAQ - #42:** this move makes him a restricted free agent (RFA) and gives the team the right to keep him by matching a contract he signs with another team. This is called the “right of first refusal.” The qualifying offer is a standing offer for a one-year guaranteed contract, which becomes a regular contract if the player decides to sign it. If Randle chooses this option, he would become an unrestricted free agent (UFA) the following summer. This ensures that the team does not gain the “right of first refusal” without offering a contract themselves.

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|   | Randle's Contract |  |
|  Free Agent / Player / **Team** / Early Termination |
| 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 |
| $5,564,134  |  |  |

However, the Lakers may also submit a **maximum qualifying offer** to Randle as well. Once again, citing the **CBAFAQ - #42:** A maximum qualifying offer is for five seasons at the maximum salary with 8% annual raises. It can contain no options, ETO’s (Early Termination Option), or bonuses of any kind, and must be fully guaranteed. When a team submits a maximum qualifying offer (in essence “stepping up” with a maximum contract offer before the player hits the free-agent market), it places a more stringent requirement on the other teams’ offer sheets.

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|   | Randle's Contract |   |
|  Free Agent / Player / **Team** / Early Termination |
| 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 |
| $12,447,727 |  |  |

The Lakers needn’t overthink this. If they can go out and sign another player with the ability to defend both centers and power forwards, and switch off screens to defend smaller, quicker players, then show them the money. Bear in mind, the Lakers do have “Bird Rights.” **CBAFAQ - #34:** The Bird exception simply enables a team to exceed the cap to sign certain players. Los Angeles Sports Hub writer, Jason Reed says, “if the qualifying offer to Randle is worth just over $12 million, then an extension should be somewhere in the 3-year, $45 million range.” Taking care of Randle first is undoubtedly the key to what could be a great summer for the Lakers, and he is definitely worth the investment.

**Renounce rights to Lopez ($33,963,525), Pope ($21,295,073), and Frye ($14,099,733).** **CBAFAQ #39: What does renouncing a player mean?** By renouncing a player, a team gives up its right to use the Larry Bird, Early Bird, or Non-Bird exception to re-sign that player. A renounced player no longer counts toward team salary, so teams use renouncement to gain additional cap room. Teams are still permitted to re-sign renounced players, but only with cap room or an exception other than the Bird exception. The exception to this rule is that an Early Bird free agent, at the team’s option, can be renounced to the Non-Bird level. A team might do this in-order-to sign the player to a one-year contract, instead of the minimum two years required by the Early Bird exception.

**Sign Paul George:** George is only 27-years-old and would fit perfectly with the young Lakers. Although he ranks just 57th among all NBA players with an 18.47 PER, only Lebron James and Kevin Durant have better numbers at his position. We’re talking about a five time All-Star, and arguably the games best “3-and-D” player. He averages 2.05 steals per game and leads the league in deflections. That means he gets his hands on quite a bit and disrupts the offensive rhythm of his opponents. Not to mention his FG% by distance numbers would definitely help the Lakers be more efficient offensively.

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|  |  George’s FG% by Distance Numbers |  |
|  |   |   |   |   |  |
| 2pt | 0-3 feet | 3-10 feet | 10-16 feet | 16-22 feet | 3pt |
| .454 | .677 | .314 | .358 | .317 | .397 |

 Just having George on the roster would already make the Lakers better on both sides of the ball, and that would be contagious, especially to a group of young, hungry, future stars, looking to restore the Lakers to glory. George is definitely worth a max-deal and he’ll have several options with the Lakers.

 A) Option #1: The Lakers sign George to a 4-year, $130.6 million deal. **CBAFAQ - #53:** Is there a limit to the length of a contract, or to the amount a player’s salary can increase or decrease from year to year? the “standard” maximum length is four seasons and the “standard” maximum raise is 5% -- when a team signs another team’s free agent using cap room. This would fall under the Non-Bird exception.

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|   |  Non-Bird Exception |   |
|  A player signing with a new team (5% annual raises, up to four years)  |
|   |  |  |  |
|  | Up to 6-years | 7 to 9-years | 10+ Years |
|   | 25% Max | 30% Max | 35% Max |
| **2018-19** | $25,250,000  | **$30,300,000**  | $35,350,000  |
| **2019-20** | $26,512,500  | **$31,815,000**  | $37,117,500  |
| **2020-21** | $27,838,125  | **$33,405,750**  | $38,973,375  |
| **2021-22** | $29,230,031  | **$35,076,038** | $40,922,044  |
| **Total** | $108,830,656  | **$130,596,788**  | $152,362,919  |

B) Option #2: This is where Johnson gets a little creative and works his Magic. He first needs to convince George to sign for 2-years at $62.1 million this summer. If PG-13 is thinking long-term, he’s headed in the right direction. This contract would end after the 2019-20 season, giving George 10 NBA seasons under his belt, making him eligible for a 35% maximum contract. During that summer, with the new projected salary cap due to be set at $113.4 million, the Lakers could make a staggering offer to George for 5-years at $232.8 million, with a first-year salary of $39.6 million.

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|   |  Paul George  |   |
|   | Contract Options  |   |
|   |   |   |
|  | 7 to 9-years | 10+ years |
|   | 30% Max | 35% Max |
| **2018-19** | $30,300,000  |   |
| **2019-20** | $31,815,000  |   |
| **2020-21** |   | $39,690,000 |
| **2021-22** |   | $42,865,200 |
| **2022-23** |   | $46,294,416  |
| **2023-24** |   | $49,997,969  |
| **2024-25** |   | $53,997,807  |
| **Salary** | $62,115,000 | $232,845,392  |

Getting this deal complete gives the Lakers a five-time All-Star with playoff experience to help mentor the younger core players. Adding George alone most certainly won’t propel them to the NBA Finals, nor will it guarantee they can beat any of the Western Conference Powers (Warriors, Rockets, Thunder, Spurs, and Trailblazers) in a 7-game series. But even if the Lakers fail to sign anyone else this summer, George’s presence should be good enough to get the team back into the playoffs next season, which is what this young group so desperately needs a taste of. Los Angeles is home to George and he should flourish as he plays in front of family and friends. Meanwhile, the Lakers still need some help on the interior and have several possibilities they can explore, such as, Clint Capela, DeAndre Jordan, and Demarcus Cousins.

Capela, 23, is expected to earn $12-18 million a year as a restricted free agent. It is rumored Houston General Manager Daryl Morey will do whatever it takes to keep him. Few teams will be under the cap to sign him, so the Rockets could end up retaining Capela for cheap. However, Houston could decide to let him walk with any offer north of $15 million. Jordan, 29, would also be a great addition to the Lakers roster, and would definitely improve their interior defense. But the question to be answered is would his skills be on the decline as the team is expected to make a run at the title? Jordan, rumored to be Dallas bound, also wouldn’t come cheap and is expected to be signed to a 35% max deal this summer. Then there’s DeMarcus Cousins. Cousins, 27, ruptured his Achilles tendon as he made an attempt to rebound his own missed free throw, causing him to miss the remainder of the season. Cousins is due a 30% max contract, however, the Lakers may be able to get him for a bargain price due to the uncertainty of his recovery from this injury.

**Sign Clint Capela:** If this was a question of offensive output, then it’s a no brainer, the Lakers go with Cousins, even with the uncertainty of his recovery. But, they’re looking to upgrade their defense and Capela will most definitely give them that. He’s the youthful rim protector they’re looking for and immediately upgrades their defense which has been their Achilles Heel all season. Capela is 6’9” with a 7’4.5” wingspan.

He is currently 4th in the NBA with 1.89 blocks per game. Capela is currently averaging career highs in points per game (14.0), and rebounds per game (10.9). SBnation considers him to be what DeAndre Jordan was six years ago. Translation, that means he’s pretty darn good.

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| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Clint Capela |  |
|  |   |  |
| Points/game | Rebounds/game | Assists/game |
| 14.0 | 10.9 | 0.9 |

 Capela definitely understands his role and won’t hurt the Lakers with poor shot selection offensively. If they’re looking for range here, forget it. And they should also know it isn’t likely he’ll provide them with great offensive numbers. However, he has shown tremendous proficiency, which is obviously due to Harden and Paul breaking down the defense. Though his .652 field goal percentage leads the NBA, his .562 free throw percentage is one of the worse in the league.

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|  |  Capela’s FG% by Distance Numbers |  |
|  |   |   |   |   |  |
| 2pt | 0-3 feet | 3-10 feet | 10-16 feet | 16-22 feet | 3pt |
| .653 | .718 | .383 | .500 |  | .000 |

Hollinger’s Statistics has Capela ranked 13th overall in the NBA, including 2nd among all NBA centers with a 24.68 PER. Capela is a restricted free agent when the season ends. And although the Rockets can match any offer from the Lakers, an offer of 4-years in the $68.9 million neighborhood with a starting salary of $16,000,000, may persuade them to let him walk. Every NBA offseason is unpredictable and this one is surely no different. The Lakers should look to Capela for a defensive upgrade.

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|  Clint Capela's Contract |
|  5% Annual Raises for 4-years |
|   |  |
|  |   |
|   |   |
| **2018-19** | **$16,000,000**  |
| **2019-20** | **$16,800,000**  |
| **2020-21** | **$17,640,000**  |
| **2021-22** | **$18,522,000**  |
| **Total** | **$68,962,000**  |

**Re-sign Isaiah Thomas:** The Lakers are still in need of key personnel to fill out their rotation, and Thomas is a viable option. The two-time All-Star is the first player under 6’0” to score 50+ points in an NBA playoff game. Just recently, the Lakers announced Thomas underwent successful arthroscopic surgery on his right hip and the expected recovery time is four months. As of late, he has expressed his openness to re-sign with the Lakers regardless of his role. Thomas is a high-volume scorer and if he can find a way to accept a one-year deal as the lead guard on the second unit, then the Lakers definitely have a home for him. In spite of his injury, he still brings career averages of 18.9 points per game, 5.1 assists per game, a .361 3P%, a .877 FT%, and 25 games of playoff experience to the table. Arguably the best backup point guard in the NBA, Thomas signs a one-year deal worth $9 million.

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|   | Thomas's Contract |   |
|  Free Agent / Player / **Team** / Early Termination |
| 2018-19 | 2019-20 | 2020-21 |
| $9,000,000  |  |  |

**Re-sign Ivica Zubac:** Back in February, Luke Walton said in an article, “He’s come a long way. What I really like, what he’s been doing is being more aggressive,” Walton said. He went on to say, “Zubac is rolling to the rim, no matter what, whether he thinks he’s getting the ball or not. Getting offensive rebounds, running into screens instead of jogging into them. He’s got a great skill-set for his size, great touch, great feel for the game. He’s done a really good job of being more physical and aggressive in what he’s doing.”

 Sounds like the perfect backup to Capela. Zubac is 7’1” and 265 pounds. He’s only 20-years-old, but he’s been playing professionally since he was 15. He has a nice touch around the rim and he’s solid from the foul line. Zubac has a very nice drop step and the ability to draw contact when he’s near the basket. He also understands his role on “D” and looks to protect the rim. Solid on the glass. Zubac will need to improve his shooting range and his ability to stretch the floor. The Lakers should exercise the $1,544,951 option on Zubac.

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|  |  2018-19 Projected Los Angeles Lakers Roster |  |
|  |   |   |  |  |
| Position | Starter | Rotation #2 | Rotation #3 | Rotation #4 |
| Point Guard | Lonzo Ball | Isaiah Thomas | 1st Rd Draft Pick |   |
| Shooting Guard | Brandon Ingram | Josh Hart |   |   |
| Small Forward | Paul George | Roster Spot Hold |  |   |
| Power Forward | Julius Randle | Kyle Kuzma |  |   |
| Center | Clint Capela | Ivica Zobac | Roster Spot Hold |   |

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| --- | --- |
| LOS ANGELES LAKERS | 2018-19 SALARY |
|   |   |
| PAUL GEORGE | $30,300,000  |
| CLINT CAPELA | $16,000,000  |
| JULIUS RANDLE | $12,447,727  |
| ISAIAH THOMAS | $9,000,000  |
| LONZO BALL | $7,461,960  |
| **LUOL DENG (Waived)** | **$7,362,000**  |
| BRANDON INGRAM | $5,757,120  |
| KYLE KUZMA | $1,689,840  |
| JOSH HART | $1,655,160  |
| IVICA ZUBAC | $1,514,547  |
| 1st ROUND DRAFT PICK (25th) | $1,470,200  |
| EMPTY ROSTER SPOT HOLD | $831,311  |
| EMPTY ROSTER SPOT HOLD | $831,311  |
|   |   |
| LAKERS TOTALS | **$96,321,176**  |
| SALARY CAP | $101,000,000  |
| CAP SPACE | **$4,678,824**  |

There’s so many ways the Lakers could use their cap space this summer and who knows exactly what Johnson and Pelinka will do. They could very well swing and miss on George, Capella, or both. If that happens, what direction should they go?

**Look to sign DeMarcus Cousins:** No doubt there’s some risk involved here. But if Capela re-signs with Houston, and with Jordan rumored to be Dallas bound, the Lakers can roll the dice here. From a medical perspective, the injury is relatively easy to surgically repair. But the question to be answered on him would be about his recovery. Joshua Dines writes, “Many athletes must undergo physical therapy for a year or more before the leg recovers enough to compete.” He goes on to add, “Although the healing rates for surgery are high, it is still very difficult for athletes to fully recover their explosive power. This becomes a huge issue for basketball players.”

Cousins is a four time All-Star and before the injury he was averaging 25.2 points, 12.9 rebounds, 5.4 assists, 1.6 blocks, and 1.6 steals. His talent has never been a question, but there are some concerns on his ability to get along with teammates as well as coaches. Not to mention, Cousins definitely doesn’t solve the Lakers answers on the defensive side of the ball.

In December 2017, the ringer.com’s Jonathan Tjarks wrote an article, The Center Cannot Hold: Are the Pelicans Maximizing DeMarcus Cousins? The Pelicans apparently have three lineups: A) Davis and Cousins together, B) Davis w/o Cousins, and C) Cousins w/o Davis. Davis w/o Cousins produces the best defensive rating (100.9) for the Pelicans. That figure is followed by Davis and Cousins together (104.3) and Cousins w/o Davis (112.9) respectively. What does that mean exactly? It’s abundantly clear Cousins benefits the most when he and Davis are on the court together, with Davis as the rim protector. However, Tjarks points out there are some things Cousins does well, “He has the ability to be a good individual defender. According to the tracking numbers at Synergy Sports, Cousins is in the 77th percentile when guarding isolations, and in the 83rd percentile when defending post-ups. What he can’t do, at least not consistently, is cover for his teammates.” Cousins is 6’11” and 270 pounds with a 7’4” wingspan, but without lateral agility and the inner desire to protect the rim, it spells trouble. Consider other facts from Tjarks article: 1) The Pelicans went from the 9th ranked defense last season to 24th ranked this season after the Cousins trade. 2) While Cousins was with the Kings, they had a top-20 defense only once in his seven years there. 3) Guarding the pick-and-roll, Cousins is in the 41st percentile when defending the ball handler in the two-man game, and he’s in the 37th percentile when defending the roll man.

In all fairness, Cousins may not address the Lakers defensive needs, but he instantly gives their offense a boost as arguably the best post scorer in the NBA. Yes, he has baggage, but this guy beats you in many ways. He can stretch the floor, beat you off the bounce, passes well for a big man, catch-and-shoot the 3, and he’s powerful on his way to the rim. Even with all that said, there’s still an attitude issue to address. However, it’s doubtful Cousins becomes a part of the storied Lakers organization, without Magic making it reasonably clear what it means to don the Purple and Gold.

The only reason Magic makes this move is because the Lakers have leverage here. Cousins has yet to lead any of his teams to the playoffs and his full recovery from an Achilles injury is considered difficult to say the least. This is a great chance for him to be a part of an organization with championship lore. Magic convinces Cousins how great an opportunity this will be for him, but if he’s set on a max deal, the Lakers should turn and walk away.

**Pass on Lebron James:** Now we know Magic and Pelinka are going to make a go for Lebron James, and who could blame them. James is the best player in the league right now, and only one of seven to score more than 30,000 points. He’s a 14-time All-Star, a four-time MVP, and he’s won three NBA championships. But my gut tells me this is the wrong move. James is a dominating figure and extremely difficult to play with. Just ask Kyrie and Isaiah. The Lakers should also consider this. James won’t come cheap. He has already said he’ll no longer sign anywhere for a discounted price, and it’s also rumored his desire is to sign with a team that has the best chance to win a championship.

Assuming the Lakers do get James, they automatically become a contender for the NBA title, and rightfully so. But not so fast. Is this the direction the Lakers truly want to go? Are they truly willing to pay 35% of the salary cap, with 5% annual raises, to an aging superstar who arguably at the end of the day, still does not make them better than Golden State, Houston, Oklahoma City, or even San Antonio?

Let’s face it, as great as he is, Lebron has a lot of mileage on his legs, and nobody knows when his body will begin to break down. We would like to think he could play forever. After all, isn’t he a freak of nature? But Lebron’s battle isn’t against Golden State, Houston, Oklahoma City, or any other team for that matter. His battle is simply against Father Time, and deep down, Lebron knows it. He would love nothing more than to win another NBA championship, but that window of opportunity to beat the NBA Elite is closing for him. How fast? Only Father Time has the answer. But are the Lakers willing to invest millions on someone who may not have the time to deliver on his promise?

No, Magic and Pelinka must do what’s right for their young core. They should continue to develop their young core and build around them. So, how do the Lakers make a splash? Well, when the legendary hockey coach, Herb Brooks was faced with the task of piecing together the 1980 USA Hockey Team, he had two lofty goals in mind. 1) Defeat the USSR, who at the time was considered to be the best team in the world, and 2) win the gold medal. Brooks was famously quoted for saying, “I’m not looking for the best players, I’m looking for the right ones.” This is the thought that should keep Johnson and Pelinka up at nights.