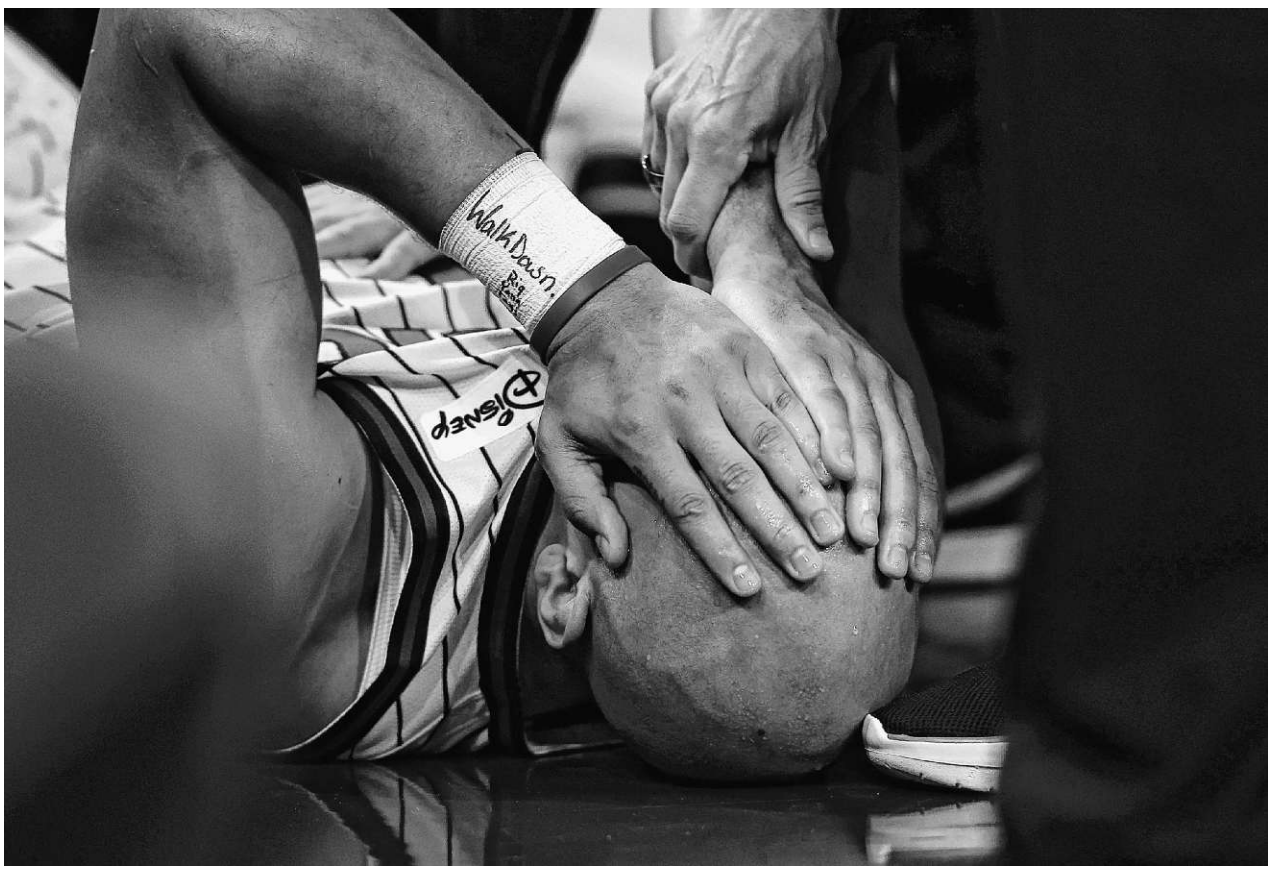
COMMENTARY

Orlando injury curse? No, it's the modern NBA's injury epidemic

BY MIKE BIANCHI
Orlando Sentinel



DUSTIN SATLOFF TNS

The Orlando Magic's Jalen Suggs on the ground after sustaining an injury during the fourth quarter against the New York Knicks at Madison Square Garden on Sunday in New York.

ORLANDO, FLA.

Sigh.

Three games. That's all it took.

Three measly games into the Orlando Magic's season, that's when already we started talking about MRIs, rehabilitation schedules and return-to-play protocols instead of victories and championship aspirations.

Paolo Banchero? High ankle sprain. Out at least a month.

Jalen Suggs? Bone bruise in his knee. Will be reevaluated in two weeks.

Jonathan Isaac? Still sidelined - naturally.

Noah Penda: Partially torn hamstring before the season even started.

For a franchise seemingly haunted by injuries, this is becoming an exasperating annual ritual. Just when the Magic appear ready to take another step toward championship contention, somebody limps off the court.

Sorry, but I refuse to buy into the popular theory that the Magic are simply cursed. Look around the NBA and you'll see it's not just the Magic. Oklahoma City's star Jalen Williams broke his leg and dislocated ankle a few nights ago and is out for the season. Minnesota Timberwolves star Anthony Edwards is undergoing arthroscopic surgery on his ailing right knee and is out for up to two months. Utah Jazz star Jaren Jackson Jr. has a torn MCL in his right knee and will be reevaluated in six weeks. Detroit Pistons star Jalen Duren is out for at least two weeks with a hamstring issue. Toronto Raptors star Kawhi "Load Management" Leonard is out (again) with a swollen right knee.

I could go on and on.

The frustrating part is that there's nobody we can blame for injuries.

Unless you want to blame the modern NBA itself. I'm talking about modern salaries, modern culture, modern science and modern analytics.

Let me explain.

Remember Willis Reed?

Of course you do. Game 7 of the 1970 NBA Finals. Reed had previously torn a muscle in his thigh, received painkilling injections, famously limped onto the Madison Square Garden floor, hit two early jump shots and inspired the New York Knicks to a championship.

One of the most legendary displays of toughness in sports history.

Today?

Are you kidding?

Reed wouldn't have gotten within 50 feet of the scorer's table without an MRI, three medical clearances and a signed permission slip from the team's insurance company.

Welcome to the NBA, where Willis Reed has been replaced by Willis Read-the-Medical-Report.

And here's why:

- Modern salaries; Reed was making $65,000 in 1970 whereas modern-day franchises invest hundreds of millions in guaranteed contracts. Players aren't just athletes; they're financial assets. When you're protecting a $250 million investment, you're not taking unnecessary chances with a sprained ankle. You're wrapping that investment in bubble wrap and ordering another MRI.
- Modern science: Today's players are bigger, stronger, faster and more explosive than ever. Strength coaches, nutritionists and sophisticated training programs have created extraordinary physical specimens. Combine that with the faster pace-and-space style - in which players are running faster and further than ever before - and you've got a torn tendon just waiting to happen.
- Modern analytics: Teams now track virtually everything: workloads, acceleration, fatigue, biomechanics and recovery patterns. They have mountains of data telling them when an athlete might be at increased risk. And perhaps that's the greatest irony of all.

Any orthopaedic surgeon will tell you that you might be able to build up your strength, speed and stamina, but your tendons and ligaments remain structurally unchanged. Quite frankly, the human body wasn't built to handle the size and speed of today's athletes.

- Modern culture: Once upon a time, playing hurt was a badge of honor. Sprained ankle? Tape it up. Bruised knee? Rub some spit on it. Muscle strain? If you can walk, you can play. Such a mentality wasn't very smart and players undoubtedly sacrificed long-term health for short-term glory. But something has undeniably changed when yesterday's definition of toughness becomes today's definition of medical irresponsibility.

We have more medical knowledge, more sophisticated training and more injury-prevention technology than at any point in basketball history. Yet here we are two weeks into the season and the Magic and many other teams are already looking more like field hospitals than basketball teams.

Willis Reed once limped onto the court to help win an NBA championship.

Today, he'd be sitting on the end of the bench in a $5,000 designer suit while an army of sports scientists calculated the precise date he could safely stand up.

We've come a long way in sports medicine. I'm just not sure we've come as far in sports entertainment.

COMMENTARY

Without Edwards, Finch faces his toughest test with Wolves

BY CHIP SCOGGINS
Minnesota Star Tribune



JASON MILLER TNS

Anthony Edwards of the Minnesota Timberwolves argues a call during the second quarter against the Cleveland Cavaliers at Rocket Arena on Monday in Cleveland.

MINNEAPOLIS

The NBA tracks a statistic known as "gravity." This measures how much attention a player commands from the defense, with and without the ball. It's a metric that demonstrates a player's influence on opening things up for teammates.

Anthony Edwards posted the NBA's second-highest gravity rating last season, behind only Kevin Durant.

Timberwolves coach Chris Finch must channel his inner Sir Isaac Newton to figure out how basketball gravity works on his team now that Edwards will be sidelined for an extended period.

Edwards' knee surgery throws the Wolves ecosystem completely out of whack. He is their alpha, their leading scorer, their go-to guy in go-to situations, their Mr. Gravity.

Edwards is a hooper's contradiction. He scored 47 points the night before it was revealed he needed surgery on an injured knee.

The integration of LaMelo Ball had gone seamlessly and swimmingly the first week of the season. The Wolves came flying out of the gates, displaying chemistry, firepower and a highly entertaining style of play.

This injury news delivers an emotional blow and presents a strategic challenge that must be solved.

"We have great depth at that position," president of basketball operations Tim Connelly said after shootaround Wednesday morning. "I'm confident in the guys we have."

Everything will be reconfigured in Edwards' absence. A new pecking order established. A shifting of roles and responsibilities. More weight hoisted upon different shoulders. Probably tweaks to style of play.

This will be Finch's toughest coaching challenge as the Wolves' bench boss. Good thing he's become something of a coaching chameleon the past few years.

He had the task of pairing two centers — Karl-Anthony Towns and Rudy Gobert — on the floor together when the rest of the league was trending smaller.

That plan blew up when Towns was traded to New York for Julius Randle. Version 2.0 led to a different structure on offense.

Randle's exit and Ball's arrival swung the pendulum back the other way. From big and lumbering to small and fast.

Finch navigated those changes with a steady hand, tinkering and adjusting and fitting pieces together, all while keeping the Wolves in the contender conversation.

Edwards has been the one main constant, a superstar providing gravity to ever-changing blueprints.

Injuries caused Edwards to miss 21 games last season, but not all in one stretch. This will be different. He could miss up to two months, though a definitive timeline is difficult to determine this soon.

The Wolves play 29 games between now and the end of December, or 35% of their season. Edwards has proven to be a fast healer, and he treats recovery with the same ultra-competitive mindset as basketball games. Perhaps he returns sooner than expected.

Connelly noted that Edwards was itching to play Wednesday night against the Golden State Warriors.

The long-term health of his knee takes priority over everything else. Get it fixed and fully strengthened, then unleash Edwards for the final push.

To recalibrate on the court without him will be a communal undertaking.

"Tough to fill his shoes just for what he does on the floor for us," guard Bones Hyland said. "Nobody can be like Ant. But we've got players who can step in and take over a game as well."

Edwards averaged 26 shots per game through four games. Those will be distributed more widely. The assumption is that Ball will take on more of the scoring load, but this can't become a case of hero Ball.

He is suddenly thrust into a different approach as the point guard, balancing being a distributor and organizer with the need to score more and, most likely, handle big shots in late-game situations.

Scoring responsibility should fall on everyone, though. Jaden McDaniels must continue to expand his offensive game. Ayo Dosunmu is a capable scorer. Jonathan Kuminga and Terrence Shannon Jr. will get more opportunities.

The Wolves still have enough talent, depth and versatility to remain competitive in the heavyweight Western Conference. They just have to stay afloat until Edwards returns.

Playoff seeding is not the end-all, be-all. A Wolves team that is healthy will be formidable regardless of seed.

"We're going to miss Ant for sure, but it's not going to be for long," Hyland said. "We're going to hold the fort down."

An upbeat outlook to news that is an undeniable bummer for the team and fans. Two months minus Edwards will feel like an eternity. Finch has handled seismic roster changes deftly before, but this one is a subtraction without a corresponding addition. A massive subtraction.

The Wolves must find their balance without the superstar who provides gravitational pull and so much more.