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AS HAWKS ROSTER TAKES SHAPE, FLEXIBILITY REMAINS HALLMARK

JOHN MANASSO | Published: Monday, July 08, 2013, 3:09pm

With each passing day, Hawks general manager Danny Ferry is providing greater clarity as to what next season's team will look like and, to a lesser extent, what the long-range picture of the team will be.

At some of the key junctures of his short tenure -- most notably when he was introduced last June, at last year's NBA Draft and at the trading deadline this past season -- Ferry has mentioned how much he values flexibility. That means no bad contracts or overly-long deals that could potentially trap the team.

In a little more than a year, he has shed most of the Hawks' long-term commitments. Without being able to land one of the major free agents available -- Chris Paul re-signed with the Los Angeles Clippers and Dwight Howard chose Houston over his native Atlanta, one of five teams Howard allowed to make their pitch to him -- Ferry will continue to draft and develop talent.

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However, in terms of trades and free agency, Ferry looks like he will stick to short-term deals for now.

No doubt that is one of the reasons why forward Josh Smith will no longer be a member of the team. Smith agreed to a deal with Detroit reportedly worth four years and \$54 million.

In comparison, the player most likely to take Smith's position as the starting power forward is Paul Millsap, formerly of the Utah Jazz. The contract that Millsap and the Hawks reportedly agreed to is for two years and \$19 million.

What did the Hawks forgo by saving themselves those two additional years and \$35 million that Smith will receive with the Pistons? Smith's 17.5 points per game average was 2.9 points per game more than Millsap's last season. In terms of rebounding, Smith averaged 8.4 per game last season, only slightly better than Millsap's 7.1. The Hawks also are losing one of the game's better defenders in the freakishly athletic 6-foot-9, 225-pound Smith compared to the 6-foot-8, 253-pound Millsap.

However, Smith required almost five more minutes per game (35.3 to 30.4) to achieve his totals and shoots a significantly lower percentage than Millsap.

Smith made 46.5 percent of his shots last season, which also happens to be his career average, whereas Millsap shot 49 percent last season and is a 51.6-percent career shooter. And when it comes to one of the biggest basketball issues with Smith -- not to mention the fans' frustration with him -- Millsap also has Smith beat: Millsap not only shoots a better three-point percentage than Smith (33.3 last season to 30.3) but he also shoots far less of them. Millsap attempted only 39 three-pointers last season while Smith took 201, which in itself could represent a significant upgrade for the offense.

Millsap also has a higher efficiency rating -- remember how Ferry has spoken of investing in advanced analytics? -- plus-17.9 to Smith's 16.33.

All in all, Ferry not only preserved his flexibility with that move but he also did extremely well in terms of value.

For now, the Hawks' starting lineup looks like at point guard it will be Jeff Teague, a restricted free agent whose rights the Hawks have retained (though he remains unsigned), with possibly Lou Williams at the shooting guard. Millsap will start at the power forward and Al Horford at center.

The small forward could be Kyle Korver, who started 60 games last season and set a franchise record with three-pointers in 73 consecutive games. Korver is one of the few players to whom Ferry has appeared willing to commit longer-term, as he reportedly received a four-year, \$24-million deal. With his three-point shooting ability that stretches the opposing defense (he made 45.7 percent of his three-pointers last season, second-best in the league among players with at least 100 attempts), Korver is a great asset to the offense and his deal is relatively modest in NBA terms. (Consider that ex-Hawk Marvin Williams will earn \$7.5 million this season and averaged a career-low 7.2 points per game in 2012-13.)

Another possibility is that Lou Williams remains the Hawks' sixth man and that Korver starts at shooting guard and the starting small forward becomes DeMarre Carroll, another former Jazz player with whom the Hawks reportedly have agreed to terms on a two-year, \$5-million



Associated Press

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As Hawks roster takes shape, flexibility remains hallmark

With multiple moves this offseason, Danny Ferry still kept his organization's hallmark: flexibility.



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contract. At 6-foot-8, 212 pounds, Carroll, 26, would present a better defensive option than the smaller Williams and the slower, 32-year-old Korver.

Carroll started 12 games last season and averaged 16.8 minutes per game. He appears to be one of those players whom the Hawks will attempt to develop, as he averaged 6.0 points per game last season and averages 4.2 for his career. (Like Hawks' 2012 first-round draft pick John Jenkins, who played at Vanderbilt, Carroll played his first two seasons with the Commodores before transferring to Missouri where he graduated.)

One gaping hole that remains on the Hawks' roster is at center.

This became even more glaring when Zaza Pachulia, who had proved effective as a starter or off the bench, chose to rejoin former Hawks coach Larry Drew in Milwaukee.

The Hawks reportedly also are rumored to have interest in Milwaukee free agent guard Monta Ellis. Ellis, who has averaged nearly 20 points per game during his eight seasons, could provide the Hawks with some scoring and help to fill out the backcourt. Ellis' shooting percentages have declined over the last few years but his assists have improved. He has averaged about six assists per game over the last four seasons.

The Hawks' roster also will include second-year guard Jared Cunningham, for whom the team traded at the draft from Dallas, and rookie center Mike Muscala out of Bucknell.

It remains to be seen whether first-round picks Lucas Nogueira, a Brazilian 7-footer, or point guard Dennis Schroeder will be on the roster.

It will be up to new coach Mike Budenholzer to weave it all together into a cohesive, successful group on the court. The group has the potential makings of a playoff team, although hardly a contender.

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For now, it remains a work in progress as Ferry's master plan

Atlanta picks up Lucas Nogueira through trade

could take years to come to fruition.

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WRITER'S BLOCK

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John Manasso is the author of "A Season of Loss, A Lifetime of Forgiveness: The Dan Snyder and Dany Heatley Story" and freelances for NHL.com. He also worked for the website of the Atlanta Falcons as the team's beat writer for the 2009 season.

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