

Written by

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Were Monta Ellis and Jose Calderon good multi-year signings for the Dallas Mavericks? How have they contributed to a better-than-predicted start to the Mavericks' season (15-11), and are the Mavericks a playoff team? Answers inside.

The [Phoenix Suns](#) play the [Dallas Mavericks](#) tonight, a team that's eerily similar to the Suns at least in the stats department. Good offense, middling-to-bad defense, two big scorers carrying the nightly load.

I got some good intel on the new-look Mavs - 15-11 on the year - from editor [Rebecca Lawson at SB Nation's Mavs Moneyball](#)

Bright Side: Going back to the summer, were Mavs fans skeptical of the long term deals given to Ellis and Calderon, considering the long-time plan to clear the decks for superstars? Or, were fans ready for this?

[Rebecca Lawson, Mavs Money Ball](#) : The initial reaction was very mixed. One set of thinking (and I fall on this side) was relieved to see the Mavs move on to a viable non-superstar based Plan B, in the sense of not having a "rental team" (like the one year deals last year) and getting guys who could just...play well. I mean, the Mavs started

[Mike James](#)

at point guard for a significant portion of last season. No offense to my favorite team, but I might have revolted if they had not spent out on the best available point guard.

For those who were vocally skeptical, it wasn't so much about the length of the deals as the cost. Calderon's deal is 4/\$28M, which is a very substantial commitment to a player on the wrong side of 30. Monta's 3/\$25M (last year a player option) is a little less controversial and especially so in hindsight. It is quite a bit of money to commit to two players, but sometimes to

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get the best player available you have to spend. And with Dirk likely taking a very substantial pay cut next year, the Mavs should still be absolutely fine to spend heavily again next summer.

Bottom line, the front office wanted to get guys who could compliment Dirk and keep the team competitive in his final few years in the league, and they've done that. Any skepticism about those signings has quieted down now that they appear to be as advertised (Calderon) or better than advertised (Monta).

How has [Monta Ellis](#) matured this season in Dallas? There have been reports of improved maturity and smarter play. Has Ellis been better than expected?

Rebecca, MMB: The collective groan of Mavs Twitter when the Monta Ellis signing was announced was something to see. There were a few reports that once the Mavs lost out on Dwight, that Dirk was actually pushing for them to sign Ellis, and we've definitely seen why. "Monta Basketball" has quite simply been a lot of fun to watch. He's a very willing passer and he and Dirk in the pick and roll are deadly. He can also help out at point which has been useful as the backup point options at the moment are both rookies. Dallas's system maximizes his talent, and he has a coach in [Rick Carlisle](#) who knows how to get the most out of his players. He's been much better than the fans have expected, but seems like the front office knew what they were getting all along.

How important is Brandon Wright to the lineup? He's just come back from injury and been crazy-good in only 16 mins a game (11 pts, 4 rebs).

Rebecca, MMB: If the Mavs make the playoffs, [Brandan Wright](#) will be a very big reason why. Mavs fans were all excited to see Wright re-sign with Dallas and all VERY disappointed with that early injury. And the numbers he's put up in small sample size theater since his return are no fluke - he's picking up right where he left off last year with his off the charts efficiency. I talked earlier about how well Monta and Dirk play together, and Wright only makes that combination even more deadly, opening up a lot more options in an already very good offense. Wright also has a penchant for highlight reel dunks, which makes him also just straight up fun.

Carlisle is going strictly with veterans (five players 32+), while giving very little time to the youngest players, as the Mavs go for a playoff run. Ledo, Larkin, Mekel and Crowder are watching rather than playing. How do Mavs

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fans feel about that?

Rebecca, MMB: Actually, Larkin, Mekel and Crowder have gotten quite a bit of run in the early going, which has been both a blessing and a curse. It's nice to see, but it's unfortunate that the Mavs have had to rely on them. So, it's also nice to have the vets around to keep things steady.

With early injuries at point, Mekel was the primary backup to Calderon to start the season. He's been competent enough, and is now splitting time at backup point with Larkin. Larkin has been exciting to watch for a rookie with no offseason preparation since he has returned from injury. He hasn't set the scoreboard on fire, but he's very fast and does some things well already, and isn't expected or asked to do much just yet. Frankly though, I don't think Mavs fans have been this excited about a draft pick in...well, it's been a long time.

Crowder is fifth on the team in minutes played this season, and is something of a controversial topic of conversation (even among our editorial staff -- we have two editors with completely opposing viewpoints on him). He does a lot of little things like always being in the right place and playing aggressively very well, which are things Carlisle likes. But despite a hot shooting start, he's reverted to last season's frustrating tendency to not be able to shoot, at all. So it's a mixed bag.

[Ricky Ledo](#) was recently assigned to the D-League, where from what I hear he has been getting a lot of praise. He has a ton of learning to do to be NBA ready, but as a late second round pick, not much (if anything) was expected of him this season. He's still a mystery, but a very intriguing one.

What's your prediction for the season for the Mavs? Can they sustain this success?

Rebecca, MMB: Realistically, with the way the Western Conference is shaking out, the Mavs are fighting along with six or seven other teams for those last two playoff spots. They have no defense so they rely on pure scoring to beat their opponents, and that is going to have to continue for them to get one of those spots. They do need to get the defense up to a consistent, passable level at some point. Some nights it's there, most nights it is really awful. I wouldn't be shocked if we saw a trade to help with that.

Phoenix Suns next up: Inside the Dallas Mavericks' 15-11 start with MavsMoneyBall

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But barring some catastrophic injury, I think this team does make the playoffs. Call me optimistic, but I actually think they could even get out of the first round, though that would heavily depend on the matchup.

Bonus: What's the prediction on Saturday night?

Rebecca, MMB: Mavs win an uncomfortably close game that probably goes into overtime since I'm responsible for the recap and my sports teams love to torture me that way.