

For Better or Worse

There are pros and cons to being the best player on a bad team or the worst player on a great team



Would you rather be the worst player on a great team or the best player on a bad team? While the question sounds like one straight off a Myers-Briggs test that would be used in a job interview, keeping it in the sports context can lead to a robust debate.

This question arose in my mind as it does every NCAA basketball championship game when, toward the end of the game, the TV camera pans to the end of the championship bench where, far removed from the men-children on the court, you find players who look like Richie, Potts and Ralph Malph cheering excitedly in the sweats that were never removed during the game. Meanwhile, on the other side of the coin, Kevin Love of the Minnesota Timberwolves continues to defend against suggestions that his impressive statistics are inflated because he plays for a team that is in last place in its division, faces no pressure, and therefore has the opportunity (though some would say burden) to do it all alone. Given the opportunity to be on championship teams for many years as a bench jockey or enjoy a long career of hitting 35 home runs each year, batting .310 and driving in 100 runs but never making the World Series, which do you choose?

We'll consider door No. 1 first. Championship teams are fun; there's a buzz around the locker room. You are surrounded by players making a contribution. And you not only get the advantage of the exhilaration of the present, but championship teams are likely to relive the shared glory in the future. You don't hear about a reunion of the 0-14 Tampa Bay Buccaneers of 1976, but the 17-0 Miami Dolphins of 1972 reunite frequently. So, to add some specifics to the debate, would you rather be Tampa Bay Hall of Famer Lee Roy Selman or Jim Del Gaizo, the Dolphins' third string QB in 1972?

Being way down on the depth chart of a great team will no doubt instill better habits in you and potentially make you a better player in your chosen sport. And being on a championship team also means that you have achieved the Holy Grail, at least in the American consciousness where winning a championship is everything and your career is not branded complete until you do. It's what causes even a great player like Ray Bourque to play 21 seasons with the Boston Bruins and leave to chase (and win) the Stanley Cup with the Col-

orado Avalanche in his 22nd and final season. Oddly, he was cheered in Boston when he brought the cup there for several days after Colorado had won it.

Perhaps the greatest endorsement for being an inconsequential player on a great team came from Duane DeArmond. DeArmond was an end-of-the-bench guy on the LSU basketball team in the late '70s and early '80s. After LSU won the 1979 SEC championship he was asked if that feeling would be diminished in any way when he looked at the box score the next day and saw a "DNP" by his name? DeArmond replied: "Well, all I can tell you is that it won't stand for 'did not party.'"

So let's turn to being the best player on a bad team. Some would say that if you need to feed your ego by being "the man," even if it takes being on a bad team,

DID ANYONE EVER ACCUSE ERNIE BANKS, WHO PLAYED 19 SEASONS WITH THE CUBS, OF PLAYING FOR EGO OR BEING SELFISH?

who played 19 seasons for the Chicago Cubs, of playing for ego or being a selfish player? Moreover, the best player on a bad team goes at it with the deck stacked against him, but inevitably earns the respect of his or her teammates, opponents and fans—much more so than a guy at the end of the bench. Who commands more respect: Archie Manning walking down the streets of New Orleans or Steve Fuller (1986 Super Bowl ring) walking down the streets of Chicago?

Someone will always be the best player on a bad team, and someone will always be the worst player on a championship team, each perhaps regretting his circumstance for different reasons: the best player regretting never capturing his career with a championship and the worst player regretting not having performed as well as he would have liked. Thus, the debate over which fate is better or worse is likely to continue as long as sports are played. ■

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