N.B.A. Draft Lottery Recap: Pelicans Win No. 1 Pick, and the Right to Select Zion Williamson

Image
"The biggest challenge is just trying to live up to everyone's expectations," Duke's Zion Williamson said before the N.B.A.'s draft lottery on Tuesday.CreditCreditNuccio Dinuzzo/Associated Press

After months of breathless anticipation — and a race to the bottom of the standings by several teams — the New Orleans Pelicans shocked everyone by winning the N.B.A. draft lottery on Tuesday night, giving them the No. 1 pick in a draft that will include one of the most acclaimed prospects in league history: Duke's Zion Williamson.

For the Pelicans to win the lottery, the three teams with the worst records this season — the Knicks (17-65), the Cleveland Cavaliers (19-63) and the Phoenix Suns (19-63) — had to lose again. They each came into the night with a 14 percent chance of getting the top pick in a revamped system designed to reduce the value of finishing at the very bottom.

The Knicks ended up with the No. 3 pick, the Cavaliers with No. 5 and the Suns with No. 6.

New Orleans was tied for the seventh-best chance of getting the first pick — at just 6 percent — after finishing the season with a 33-49 record. Though not among the teams that appeared to tank for draft position, the Pelicans had trouble focusing all season because of drama surrounding a trade demand from their signature star, Anthony Davis. The question of what to do now about Davis — and possibly the rights to Williamson — will undoubtedly captivate the league in the lead-up to the draft at Barclays Center in Brooklyn on June 20.

Regardless of whether New Orleans stays at No. 1 or trades the pick, the top choice in the draft will almost assuredly be used on the 18-year-old Williamson, a player who has received as much attention as any amateur since LeBron James went straight to the N.B.A. from high school in 2003.