

Case 3

A Power Play for Howard

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Nothing less than the future of the Washington Bullets hung in the balance on the evening of July 11 when Juwan Howard, the club's all-star free agent forward, arrived at agent David Falk's headquarters in Chevy Chase Pavilion to solicit \$100 million contract offers from National Basketball Association team executives.

Outside, on Wisconsin Avenue NW, the Bullets held a We-Love-Juwan rally for rabid fans desperate to keep their young star in Washington—a city that hasn't had a winning NBA team in nine years. Inside, in Falk's private office—adorned with Michael Jordan—autographed basketballs and other client memorabilia—Howard braced himself for a long night of high-stakes negotiating.

Bullets General Manager Wes Unseld got first crack at Howard—a courtesy Falk said he was extending to the club as “the incumbents.” It soon became clear, however, that incumbency, like loyalty, had limited value in professional sports. Shortly after 7 p.m. Unseld offered a seven-year, \$78.4 million contract. Lucrative as it was—the offer amounted to more than \$136,000 per game through the 2002–2003 season—Howard considered the proposal far below his market value. He loved playing and living in Washington, and the thought of leaving brought tears to his eyes even as he dismissed Unseld's offer.

Yet leave he would. By dawn, Howard had begun seriously contemplating a move south to play for the Miami Heat, which ultimately trumped the Bullets with a seven-year, guaranteed \$100.8 million deal—the biggest in the history of team sports, garnished with luxury hotel suites and limousine service for the 23-year-old Howard during road trips. The Bullets' most promising player in a generation was gone, and with him hopes of resuscitating the club's fortunes.

But Howard's tears would prove premature and the Heat's huge offer only the opening gambit in one of the most intricate and controversial episodes in recent sports history. Over the next 30 days, Howard would sign with Miami only to have the contract invalidated by the league, triggering a bitter sequence of threats, legal maneuvers, and shifting alliances. The final outcome would prove a colossal windfall for the Bullets: When Washington opens its 1996–97 season Friday in Orlando, Juwan Howard will be wearing his familiar No. 5 on a red, white, and blue Bullets uniform.

This turbulent saga—recounted here following extensive interviews with Howard, agents, league officials, union representatives, and team executives—illuminates the extent to which pro sports have become a tangle of emotion and fiscal logic, on-court talent and off-court financial calculation.

The unprecedented case also featured an unusual collaboration between two traditional adversaries, the NBA and the players' union, the National Basketball Players

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Association. It featured the repudiation, first by the league and then by Howard, of one of basketball's most charismatic, cunning, and successful coaches, Pat Riley, who is also the Heat's president. By taking strong and decisive action against Riley and Heat owner Micky Arison, the NBA may have brought Washington's franchise back from the dead—a critical development for a club that will change its name to the Wizards next year and move into a new, 20,600-seat downtown arena, the MCI Center.

During a summer in which free agent bidding took the never-never land of NBA salaries to new heights, Howard's odyssey ultimately became the story of a favorite son who briefly sought his fortune elsewhere but ended up returning to the fold—perhaps wiser and certainly much, much richer. Buoyed with a nine-figure contract from the Bullets, Howard celebrated by buying a \$230,000 Ferrari sports car and a luxury suite at MCI Center and by contemplating his dream house: a Washington-area mansion with eight bedrooms, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, a bowling alley, theater, and basketball court. "I want elevators inside my house," Howard would explain. "That's always has been a dream of mine."

"This was about bucks," Unseld said in his office next to USAir Arena, a computer printout of NBA player salaries by his side. "No matter how you want to put it, I think that's eventually what it came down to."

A Sour Start

Howard's summer of 1996 "fiasco," as he has called it, had its roots in the summer of 1994 when the Bullets drafted the 6-foot-9-inch University of Michigan junior. Howard wanted a six-year, \$24 million deal, considered the going rate for the fifth player chosen in that year's draft. By agreeing, the Bullets could have locked Howard into a long-term contract.

But during negotiations in the sunroom of Bullets owner Abe Pollin's house in Bethesda, John Nash, then the club's general manager, essentially told Howard he wasn't worth it. Nash (who resigned under pressure in April) later offered Howard an 11-year, \$37.5 million deal with the option of becoming a free agent after his second season, in 1996. Howard considered the below-market offer "totally unfair," but he accepted it and soon established himself as a valuable NBA commodity, averaging 19.8 points, 8.3 rebounds, and 3.6 assists per game over the two seasons.

Howard's game was more than statistics, however. With a positive attitude and strong work ethic, he became a guiding light for less disciplined teammates. Off court, he donated time and money to charitable causes and community projects. Polite and soft-spoken, Howard was untouched by controversy until this May, when a Detroit woman filed a paternity suit alleging he is the father of her 4 1/2-year-old son. Howard has denied the allegation. A blood test taken by Howard indicated there is a greater than 99.99 percent probability he is the child's father, according to a lab report filed in court by the woman's attorneys.

Knowing that Howard would become a free agent this year, players from opposing teams playfully began recruiting him during games last season. "Grant Hill was recruiting me, telling me what Detroit had," Howard said in an interview earlier this month. "Alonzo [Mourning of the Heat] and Patrick [Ewing of the New York Knicks] were recruiting me at the All-Star Game. I just laughed, man. I just said, 'Yo, this seems like college recruiting all over again.' It felt good to feel wanted."

Howard insisted that he wanted to remain a Bullet. "He's theirs to lose," said agent Falk, 46, a George Washington University law school graduate whose client list at Falk Associates Management Enterprises (FAME) includes Jordan, Mourning, and Ewing. In a half-page ad in *The Washington Post*, Pollin promised Bullets fans, "We will do everything we can to keep Juwan with us in Washington. . . . We love Juwan Howard." Howard and his agents could not open negotiations with clubs until a new collective bargaining agreement (CBA) was signed this summer. In early July, with the moratorium still in effect, Falk deliberately sent the Bullets a signal by telling a *Washington Post* reporter he expected Howard would sign for \$15 million to \$20 million a year (\$105 million to \$140 million over seven years, the maximum term allowed under the new CBA).

One minute after the new labor agreement was finalized at 4:59 p.m. on July 11, the NBA's free agent marketplace officially opened. So began a competition that in tone and tension resembled a cross between a television game show and a Turkish bazaar. That evening, a parade of free agents and team officials converged on FAME's eighth-floor headquarters at Chevy Chase Pavilion. Offers for various players were scrutinized by Falk's 36-year-old partner and fellow lawyer, Curtis Polk, in what the agents called their "War Room"—an inner sanctum with a computer main-frame, three laptops, and six telephone lines. But most of the action would unfold in Falk's private office, watched over by a framed *Sports Illustrated* magazine cover featuring Falk and Jordan.

Between 5 and 7 p.m. Falk quickly negotiated a one-year, \$30 million contract that would keep Jordan playing for the Chicago Bulls. Then he turned to Howard.

Unsel, a wide-bodied, 6-foot-7 Hall of Famer who led Washington to its only NBA title in 1978, immediately notified Howard, Falk, and Polk that he alone would represent the Bullets. Howard and his agents asked for assurances that the Bullets' coaching staff, headed by Jim Lyman, would be retained. Unsel said it would. Howard also asked how the Bullets intended to improve a team that hadn't made the NBA playoffs for eight years. Unsel disclosed that he was trying to acquire Rod Strickland, one of the NBA's top point guards.

Unsel, who had replaced Nash as the Bullets' general manager only two months earlier, then offered Howard a seven-year, \$78.4 million contract. The proposal stirred little enthusiasm among Howard or his agents, and after Unsel left Falk's office, Polk said there was no chance Howard would play again in a Bullets uniform. The assessment, with its ring of cold finality and implication of abrupt change, was upsetting to Howard, who began to cry.

But the press of business beckoned. Between 8 and 10 p.m. the Detroit Pistons' top basketball executive, Rick Sund, discussed his interest in Howard, followed at 11 p.m. by Knicks General Manager Ernie Grunfeld, who had flown to Washington in the team's Gulfstream jet. Neither made a firm offer that evening.

At 2 a.m., Howard slipped off to take a nap. As he dozed, the Heat, represented by Riley, a club lawyer and two vice presidents, negotiated with Mourning, their prized, 6-foot-10, free agent center. Of 160 free agents on the market, the Heat rated Mourning and Howard third and fourth most desirable, respectively, after Jordan and the Orlando Magic's Shaquille O'Neal, who ended up with the Los Angeles Lakers.

Riley asked Mourning to sign a one-year contract at less than market value to help the Heat create more room under the salary cap. Mourning dismissed the proposal.

Riley said he then assured Mourning that after “taking care of some business” with other players, “I will make you the highest-paid player on the team.”

At that moment, the seeds of controversy were planted.

Under the CBA, club officials are forbidden to make undisclosed agreements, promises, “representations, commitments, inducements . . . or understandings of any kind” with players. The prohibition aimed to prevent clubs from circumventing the rules of the league’s salary cap, which limits spending on players to keep teams competitive with one another; in general terms, the cap restricts teams’ payrolls to \$24.3 million for the 1996–97 season. The CBA also requires teams to report immediately all player contracts—oral or written—to the league.

Riley would later contend, bitterly, that his pledge to Mourning was proper because it contained no specific dollar figures—an interpretation of the CBA supported by the players’ union but disputed by the league.

Shortly before 3 a.m. Mourning left the room and Howard walked in. “All the guys were very tired,” Riley recalled, “and it was very, very serious in there. We all knew we were going to be talking about a lot of money.” Riley tried to lighten the mood by recalling how his brother had represented him in his first negotiation as an NBA player in 1967. “Before going into the room, my brother looked me in the eye and said, ‘Just think, Pat! You’re going to earn \$17,000 a year!’ ” Riley told Howard and his agents.

The Heat’s opening bid for Howard was \$84 million over seven years. For several hours the two sides haggled. By the time the session broke up around 6 a.m. on Friday, July 12, Riley had increased his offer to \$91 million plus \$3.5 million in bonuses and some perks. The Heat executives shuffled off to breakfast, then to their hotel, the ANA, on M Street NW.

At noon, Howard returned to Falk’s office to review the offers. The Bullets initially were eliminated from consideration; Howard had been impressed by Riley, who had won four NBA championships as the Lakers’ coach. But Howard could not easily shrug off his feelings for the Washington club, and it was decided to give the team another chance, what Falk called “the court of appeals.” Howard asked to meet Pollin at his house in Bethesda.

At 5 a.m. Howard, Falk, and Polk joined Pollin, Unseld, and club president Susan O’Malley in the sunroom where Howard had his first negotiation with the Bullets in 1994. Pollin announced to his guests that Unseld would make one last offer, and warned that the Bullets wouldn’t exceed that “by a dime.”

The Bullets executives left the room for a few minutes to confer. When they returned, Unseld increased his seven-year offer from \$78.4 million to \$84 million. “Wes and Susan said they had studied the numbers and . . . this is what they could afford,” Falk said. “They had given Juwan an ultimatum.” (Pollin declined to be interviewed for this article.)

The meeting broke up before 6 p.m. Back at FAME’s offices Howard again cried as he considered the take-it-or-leave-it negotiation at Pollin’s house, which echoed his first contract talks two years earlier. Regret gave way to irritation. “I couldn’t believe this was happening again . . . despite that I gave 100 percent on and off the floor for the franchise,” Howard said. “Abe Pollin had made that promise to the people that he would do anything it took—anything possible—to make sure Juwan Howard stays in Washington.”

Howard told Falk and Polk that Miami was his top choice, but he wanted the Heat to up the ante. Within an hour Riley was back in Falk’s office. The Heat now offered \$95.2 million

plus \$6 million in bonuses, but Howard wanted more perks. Riley agreed to the hotel suites and limos, as well as an extra \$5,000 to help Howard sponsor a summer basketball camp.

Still, Howard's agents pressed for more.

"You've got to stop this," an exasperated Riley finally demanded. "Every time I walk out of the room and come back in there is something else. Please. It's over with, OK? This is the final offer."

Riley left around 8:30 p.m. Falk and Howard phoned Unsel at his Baltimore home. Do the Bullets have any room to compromise? Howard wanted to know. For three hours, Unsel floated various suggestions for increasing the value of his offer, such as deferred payments. But Falk would have none of it.

"Can you do any more?" Howard finally asked.

Unsel was out of ideas. "No," he said.

"OK," Howard said, "I guess there's no more to talk about. Thank you for two great years. And good luck to you guys."

Howard hung up and turned to Falk. "Call Pat Riley," he told the agent.

Miami Bound

Around 1 a.m. on July 13, the phone again rang in Riley's room at the ANA Hotel. Howard was on the phone.

"Coach," he told Riley. "I'm coming to Miami."

Howard reviewed the Heat's offer, point by point, with an elated Riley. The final deal would amount to \$100.8 million in cash, plus perks. "Then they began to ask for a little bit more," Riley later recalled. "Silly things. I said, 'You need [more game] tickets? OK, we'll give you a couple more tickets. But let's move on, OK?'"

In Falk's office, Howard exchanged champagne toasts with new teammate Mourning and FAME staffers. Falk declined to disclose FAME's cut for negotiating the Howard deal other than to say it was less than the maximum 4 percent agents can charge under the labor agreement.

Yet an apparently ironclad deal still seemed to have some wiggle room. Unsel talked to Falk by phone that afternoon.

"Is it a done deal?" the Bullets executive said he asked. Falk said no.

Later, Falk phoned Unsel again. "Falk gave me a figure and says, 'If you guys did this . . .'" Unsel recalled. "And I thought that was strange because I thought it was finished with us."

Falk said later he never suggested Howard was open to new offers, and Unsel concedes he may have misinterpreted Falk's signals. Nevertheless, Unsel phoned Pollin at his Virginia farm, and the Bullets' owners agreed to increase the club's offer from \$84 million to \$94.5 million.

Unsel said he then phoned Falk only to have the new offer rejected. But Falk said he recalls no new bid on the afternoon of July 13, and he accused the Bullets of using "spin control . . . to make it look like they were really close" to signing Howard.

The next day, the Bullets renounced their rights to Howard—conditional on him having a valid contract with the Heat—in order to have room under the salary cap to sign free agent forward Tracy Murray. In the coming days the Bullets also would acquire free

agent forward center Lorenzo Williams and, in a trade with the Portland Trail Blazers, point guard Strickland and forward Harvey Grant. But the club was being lambasted by Washington fans and media for losing Howard.

On July 17, Howard flew to Miami in a private jet to sign his new contract. At a news conference that evening, Howard called his new contract a “blessing” and his relationship with the Heat “like a marriage.” The signing, he said, was the most important day of his life, after graduation day in Ann Arbor, Michigan, last year.

The Unraveling

Riley had little time to celebrate: NBA investigators were heading his way. In an interview on July 16 on ESPN, Mourning left the impression that he had an agreement with the Heat. Asked if his new deal was for “\$100 million plus,” Mourning said, “Yeah, it is.”

If Mourning had such an agreement, the Heat had not notified the NBA as required. A new Mourning agreement would have dramatically shrunk the room Miami had under the salary cap to sign Howard. And that would jeopardize the validity of Howard’s contract. Riley and Falk again insisted no deal had been finalized. (Mourning declined to be interviewed for this story.)

The NBA hired Robert Del Tufo—a former New Jersey attorney general who also had once prosecuted mobsters and Russian spies as a U.S. attorney—to determine if the Heat had circumvented salary cap rules. Had the team made an undisclosed deal with Mourning, possibly as early as last November, when the club obtained him in a trade with the Charlotte Hornets?

Del Tufo and two other lawyers flew to Miami to interview Heat executives on July 24. Riley insisted there were no undisclosed deals. But a week later, on July 31, the NBA’s chief legal officer, Jeffrey Mishkin, phoned Arison, the Heat’s owner, to tell him the NBA had disapproved Howard’s contract because the club could not fit Howard’s first-year base pay of \$9 million under the salary cap. Mishkin told Arison the Heat had improperly made an undisclosed agreement with Mourning and used his previous, less lucrative contract to calculate the room the club had available to sign Howard. The team also had miscalculated the portion of incentive bonuses in two other free agent deals—for guard Tim Hardaway and forward P. J. Brown—that should have been counted against the cap, Mishkin asserted.

Under the CBA, a club can offer a player performance bonuses that are unlikely, in the club’s estimation, to be achieved. “Unlikely” bonuses ultimately are not charged against the cap. The CBA defines “unlikely” bonuses as those based on achievements not attained the previous season by a player or his team. The CBA also gives the NBA commissioner authority to contest any “unlikely” bonus he considers to be, in fact, probable.

Riley had given Brown and Hardaway “unlikely” bonuses. One incentive, for example, would pay Brown \$1.5 million if the Heat won either 27 home games or 43 total games this season. The Heat deemed that “unlikely” because the franchise never had won more than 26 home games or 42 total games in its eight-year history.

But the league, noting that the Heat had significantly improved its prospects by signing Howard, disagreed. Mishkin told Arison that those bonuses, now deemed “likely,” shaved \$2.5 million from the Heat’s payroll ceiling, thus invalidating the Howard deal.

Riley was stunned by the news. He denounced the ruling as “unconscionable,” one that “dismantled” his team. As a “partner” of the Heat, he asserted that the NBA had a “fiduciary responsibility” to alert the club if the Howard deal was in jeopardy. “Every team in this league pushes the envelope a little,” Riley said. “And then you talk to the NBA and they say, ‘You can’t go that far.’”

Owner Arison, who had tangled with the league before, was equally upset. In 1995 the league had fined him \$1 million—and taken his top 1996 draft choice—for recruiting Riley while he was under contract to the Knicks. Miami officials speculated that NBA Commissioner David Stern may have disallowed the Howard contract to punish the Heat’s relentlessness or to bail out Pollin’s flailing franchise.

“We’re not mistake-free,” Arison, who also owns Carnival Cruise Lines, said in an interview. “I don’t think we made mistakes greater than many teams have made, and we’re being punished greater than any team’s ever been punished for similar mistakes.”

The NBA office was unmoved. The league could not alert Miami to potential problems with the Howard deal, an NBA official said, because it only learned of the Brown and Hardaway details after their contracts were signed.

Stern, in his first public comments on the Howard case, said he judged the case solely on its merits. “We took our action because that’s what the facts before us required us to do. . . . If the Heat is unhappy, get on line,” he said in an interview last month.

“At a meeting of 29 owners you would get unanimity that I have it in for all 29 owners,” Stern added. “If you’re not prepared to have all of the teams mad at you, you’re not doing your job.”

Over the Cap: The Dispute between the NBA and the Heat

Issue	Miami’s Version	NBA’s Version
Salary cap	\$24.3 million	\$24.3 million
All other Heat players	\$4.26 million	\$4.26 million
Alonzo Mourning	\$6.84 million*	\$9.4 million**
Tim Hardaway	\$2 million	\$3 million
\$2 million salary	\$2 million salary	\$2 million salary
\$2 million bonuses	\$2 million unlikely bonuses	\$1 million likely bonuses, \$1 million unlikely
P. J. Brown	\$1.7 million	\$3.2 million
\$1.7 million salary	\$1.7 million salary	\$1.7 million salary
\$1.5 million bonuses	\$1.5 million unlikely bonuses	\$1.5 million likely bonuses
Juwan Howard	\$9 million	\$9 million
Total	\$23.8 million (\$500,000 under cap)	\$28.86 million (\$4.56 million over cap)

*Heat’s figure—representing 150 percent of Mourning’s salary last season, in accordance with new collective bargaining agreement—was based on its contention that it had not made agreement with Mourning before making agreement with Howard.

**NBA’s figure—representing salary league believed Mourning would receive in 1996–97—was based on league’s decision that Heat had made undisclosed deal with Mourning before it made deal with Howard.

■ Areas of dispute.

The Heat is Off

In a news release on July 31, the NBA stated that issues raised by the Howard matter would be resolved by arbitrators jointly selected by the league and union. The Heat, however, had at least as much at risk under arbitration as Juwan Howard. Under a worst-case scenario for the Heat, if an arbitrator and appeals panel upheld the NBA's allegations regarding the alleged Mourning agreement, the league could void Mourning's contract, fine the club \$5 million, suspend Riley for a year, take away draft picks—and still leave the Heat without Howard.

While the NBA was disapproving his contract, Howard was en route to Miami to shop for a house in Coconut Grove, a picturesque community on Biscayne Bay. Howard planned to visit a Mediterranean-style house on the water—a location that would even let him take a boat to practice. But as Howard stepped into the airport terminal, one of his agents told him of the latest trouble.

Howard rushed to the Heat's downtown offices, where Riley assured him the NBA's allegations were false. "We'll fight these charges like hell because we've been wronged here," Riley told Howard.

With Arison looking on, Howard hugged Riley. "Coach," he later quoted himself as saying, "I'm behind you guys 100 percent."

That evening, Howard joined Riley at Paulo Luigi's, a trendy restaurant in Coconut Grove. But in the next several days the warm relationship between new player and new team quickly cooled. Howard concluded after discussions with Polk that if he backed Miami and the team lost a protracted fight with the league, other NBA clubs might have as little as \$40 million or \$50 million to offer him for seven years. In effect, he would take a \$50 million pay cut and become, he said, "a laughingstock."

That house on Biscayne Bay suddenly lost its appeal. Riley found he couldn't get Howard to return his calls.

"I mean, this is a business," Howard later explained. "Yes, indeed, I believe in loyalty. But I believe in loyalty in the sense that it has to be done right and make sure that I don't lose in no kind of fashion."

Falk had gone to Europe and Israel on a long-planned family vacation, leaving Polk to sort out Howard's future. Polk tried to sort through the key issues. Could the Heat prevail in arbitration? Possibly, Polk believed, but it might take two months. But if the Heat lost the arbitration, Howard stood to lose tens of millions.

The Bullets could sign Howard only if the league restored the team's "Larry Bird rights." The CBA provision, named after the former Boston Celtics star, allowed teams to exceed the salary cap in order to re-sign their own players. The Bullets had lost their "Bird rights" to Howard when they renounced him. But if the rights were restored, the Bullets would have no limit on the sum of money they could pay Howard.

On August 1, the NBA declared Howard a free agent. Howard instructed Polk, "Wait for word on the Bullets before coming to an agreement with any team."

The next day, Unsel'd phoned Pollin, who was in Atlanta for the Olympics.

"If we can get Juwan, we could be a very good team," Unsel'd said.

"Do what you want to do," Pollin responded. "Do what you have to do."

Unsel had tried not to second-guess himself over the earlier Howard negotiations—the media and irate fans had done plenty of that. But now he had a chance to make amends. “I’m sure if I looked back on it,” he subsequently said, “I would find plenty of mistakes. . . . I choose not to do that because if I did I would drive myself crazy.”

The league was driving the Heat crazy. On August 2, NBA Deputy Commissioner Russ Granik told Arison by phone that based on his understanding of the CBA the Heat would be unlikely to regain Howard’s services through arbitration. “You will not get Juwan Howard,” Granik declared, according to Heat officials.

Later that day, the Heat obtained a temporary injunction prohibiting Howard from signing another contract unless it recognized the validity of the Miami deal. The injunction named the NBA and Howard as defendants. Howard was angry at the Heat for not forewarning him. “Where’s the loyalty there?” he demanded.

The players’ union agreed with the Heat that the Hardaway and Brown bonuses were “unlikely” and that Mourning did not have an undisclosed agreement. But the union disagreed with Miami over whether Howard should be allowed to re-sign with the Bullets.

On August 3, as the league and union were completing an agreement to restore the Bullets’ Bird rights, Unsel prepared to negotiate his second-chance contract with Howard. Polk, concerned that Miami would impose further legal obstacles, phoned Howard in his hometown of Chicago and advised him to return to Washington. Howard arrived that night.

Monday, August 5, was triumphant for the Bullets, disastrous for the Heat. The league and union agreed that if a player signs a second contract after his first deal has been disapproved, the second contract is the valid one, making arbitration moot. The deal, which would apply first and foremost to Howard, was intended to protect players against financial losses in disputes between the NBA and its teams.

In Howard’s case, the league and union also agreed to restore the Bullets’ Bird rights and allow Murray and Williams to remain with the Bullets. If the club re-signed Howard, however, it would forfeit its 1997 first-round draft choice.

Riley, ever more furious, accused the league and union of “getting into bed together” in an “unholy alliance.”

On the afternoon of August 5 Unsel phoned Polk. “We got our Bird rights restored. Why don’t you come on over?” Unsel said, according to Polk.

Pollin agreed to match the terms of Howard’s \$100.8 million Miami deal—adding \$4.2 million to cover Maryland taxes because Florida has no state income tax—even though Howard seemed to be in a decidedly weaker negotiating position. “We wanted a happy player,” Unsel said.

Howard’s seven-year, \$105 million Bullets contract—contingent upon the resolution of the Heat’s legal challenges—took but 30 minutes to negotiate. Unsel refused, however, to match Riley’s offer of hotel suites and limos. “I didn’t want him getting picked up in a limousine and everybody else getting on a bus. It’s as simple as that,” Unsel explained. “Everybody else in a regular room and one guy in a suite? I don’t think it makes for the chemistry of a team.”

Before signing the contract, Unsel took Howard aside. “He wanted to see where my head was at,” Howard said. “He wanted to see, Did I have any grudges against

him? . . . I told him, 'Hell, no.' Excuse my French. I said, 'No. You guys had to do what was best for the organization and make a bright business decision for yourselves. And I had to do the same thing for me.'"

Shortly after 10 p.m., Riley called Polk at his Rockville home. Though arbitration was now a remote possibility, Riley still hoped for a final meeting with Howard. "We needed Juwan to tell us, 'If I go down the road with you and you win [arbitration] I will come to Miami,'" Riley said.

Polk refused, and the conversation turned ugly. "Riley told me, 'You're a shrinking violet. . . . You're a coward,'" Polk said. Riley said he does not recall making those comments, but added, "We had some very, very heated discussions."

For Riley, the battle was over. Without Howard in his corner, he said, "we had nobody to fight for anymore. . . . And that's where you had to cut bait." Riley remained furious at the league for allowing Washington to recover from its mistake. "The league built a team in Washington, basically," he later charged.

Falk said the Heat fell victim to a league intent on "dealing very sternly, no pun intended" with clubs that pursued free agents too aggressively and to a union "not in a strong enough position to do battle with the league."

"The league had the whole thing wired; the league forced Miami to settle," Falk added. "The league presented the Heat with a plea bargain: If you go to an arbitrator, you'll go to jail for 100 years. If you don't, we'll let you off."

In the settlement, announced August 10, Howard's contract with the Bullets was approved. The NBA and Miami agreed to drop "the various legal proceedings between the parties," which meant the Heat would abandon its bid for a permanent injunction and the league would not pursue the alleged undisclosed Mourning agreement. The Heat signed Brown and Hardaway to new contracts, removing the issue of whether their bonuses were likely or not, and Mourning signed a seven-year, \$105 million deal.

Two days later, Howard appeared at a news conference at USAir Arena.

"He's baaaaaack," Unseld said in introducing his once and future star.

"I look at this as a blessing—a blessing from God," Howard told reporters, echoing the same language he had used a few weeks earlier in Miami. "I could recall the time I graduated from college. That was the best day of my life, right there. I consider this behind that."

The "\$205 Million Man"

In the end, Pat Riley said, he bears Howard no malice. "You know what? I wish Juwan the very best," Riley said one afternoon recently. "But I think deep down in his heart he will always wonder what it would have been like to play with Alonzo and this team down here. That's something he'll never know."

Riley paused, chuckling softly as he reconsidered. "Juwan will probably win championships in Washington," he said. "And he'll probably forget that this whole thing ever happened."

That, Howard said, is unlikely.

“I will never forget this,” he said after a Bullets practice. “This is something I can tell my grandkids about. How I signed a \$100 million contract. How I signed a \$105 million contract. I’m the first guy this has ever happened to. This summer—Juwan Howard had the look of a man who had just accomplished something really big— “I was a \$205 million man.”

Also contributing to this story were *Washington Post* staff writers George Solomon in New York and J. A. Adande at the Bullets training camp in Shepherdstown, West Virginia.