

# Chapter 19

## Last Christmas

The Mavericks were trailing by 10 in the mid-afternoon Christmas showcase, a rematch of the previous season's West finals with the Timberwolves, when Dončić checked back in to the game with 3:08 remaining in the first half. As he stepped onto the American Airlines Center court with his jersey untucked, referee Natalie Sago whistled Dončić for a by-the-book but ticky-tack delay-of-game violation.

"C'mon, man," Dončić said, cracking a pained smile and shaking his head in disbelief as he fiddled with the waistband of his royal blue shorts. After explaining that he'd clearly broken a rule, Sago smirked. It was the kind of trivial moment that fueled Dončić's belief that some officials were out to get him.

Seconds later, Dončić had a much more serious concern. He felt a sudden pain in his left calf while making a basic move, hitting the brakes and reversing direction on a half-speed drive against Minnesota's Jaden McDaniels. Dončić picked up his dribble at the left elbow, tossed the ball out to Kyrie Irving, grimaced and immediately looked toward the Dallas bench, signaling that he needed a substitution. There was panic in his eyes.

Dončić slowly hobbled a few steps toward the sideline, bending over to grab his calf as he crossed the 3-point line, his back to the action as Irving missed a floater. Dončić had no hope of getting back on defense as Timberwolves forward Julius Randle grabbed the rebound and pushed the ball in transition. Dončić was hunched over as Minnesota's Mike Conley missed a

wide-open corner 3 and then swished a second chance from the same spot after Minnesota exploited the 5-on-4 advantage to grab the offensive rebound.

The Mavs called timeout, and Dončić started his snail's-pace limp across the court, headed to the locker room to get his calf evaluated. As the home crowd sat in hushed silence, an oblivious, middle-aged fan walking down the sideline got in Dončić's way as the superstar was about to step off the hardwood. Brandon Gilliam, the Mavs' assistant athletic trainer and rehabilitation director, made his way from the opposite corner of the court and gently put his hand on Dončić's lower back, guiding him into the tunnel as a remix of a classic holiday song about betrayal started playing over the arena sound system.

*Last Christmas, I gave you my heart. But the very next day, you gave it away. This year, to save me from tears, I'll give it to someone special.*

When Dončić ducked out of view, nobody aside from a select few of the franchise's frustrated power brokers could imagine that it would be the 25-year-old, five-time first-team All-NBA selection's final moments in a Mavericks uniform.

That sort of painful sensation in his left calf was a way-too-familiar feeling for Dončić. It was the fourth time in a span of 28 months that he had strained that calf. The first two calf strains—suffered in the 2022 regular-season finale and during the Mavs' 2023 preseason trip abroad—were public knowledge. The third was misleadingly announced by the team as solely a contusion to the calf, but he also suffered a strain when he landed awkwardly after being inadvertently kicked by a teammate during a pickup game days before the Mavs departed to hold their 2024 training camp in Las Vegas.

By the time he left the arena on crutches on this Christmas evening, Dončić and the Mavs were well aware that this was the most significant of the strains he had suffered. His previous

calf injuries had caused Dončić to be sidelined for 13, 16, and 25 days, respectively, before returning to game action. This absence would be longer—at least a month, it was determined after an MRI the next day.

The momentum the Mavs, who had won 14 of the previous 17 games, had carried into Christmas came screeching to a halt. Dallas responded to the gut punch of Dončić's injury by falling apart for about a 10-minute stretch spanning the second and third quarters, allowing Minnesota to build a 28-point lead. The Mavs' rally from that massive deficit fell short in a 105–99 loss, but there was still a bit of Christmas joy.

Dončić had continued his tradition of giving lavish Christmas gifts to his teammates and basketball staffers. He also included Patrick Dumont, the Mavs' new governor. When they arrived at the arena, Segway GoKart Pro 2s (retail price: \$2,299.99) were awaiting them. There were even personalized name plates attached to the backs of the single-seat vehicles, which go as fast as 26.7 miles per hour. Long after the final buzzer, when the players had departed to have Christmas dinner, Dumont's children used the wide hallways between the home and visitor locker rooms as their personal race track. As the kids took turns zipping back and forth on the go-kart, the wheels were already turning on a seismic change that would send shockwaves throughout the NBA.

Dončić got blame, not sympathy, from many within the Mavs' organization after straining his calf yet again. GM Nico Harrison, in particular, was irate, considering the injury the direct result of Dončić's lackadaisical approach to diet and conditioning. He privately fumed that it was “always the same fucking problem,” attributing many of Dončić's ailments over the years to poor conditioning. The conditioning concerns weren't about whether Dončić, a perennial

MVP candidate, could maximize his immense potential anymore. They were worried about whether he could be consistently available to play.

It continued to be a problem even after Dončić hired his personal “body team” before the 2023–24 season, although it was hard to complain too much in the midst of his historic statistical production and the Mavs’ run to the Finals. Nevertheless, several members of the Mavs’ front office, coaches, and basketball staffers were disappointed that Dončić managed to add about 15 pounds to his frame during the season while averaging 37.5 minutes per game, leading the league in usage rate and employing his own nutritionist and strength and conditioning coach, as well as working with the team’s personnel. Some of those people suggested that Dončić’s knee wouldn’t have bothered him so much during the playoffs if not for the extra weight.

In the wake of the Finals loss, Harrison fired two Mavs staffers who had close relationships with Dončić: athletic performance director Jeremy Holsopple and manual therapist Casey Spangler, both of whose tenures with the team pre-dated the superstar’s arrival. In August 2023, Harrison had banished director of player health and performance Casey Smith, stripping him of any real role or responsibilities for the final season of his contract. Harrison’s explanation, delivered via a Zoom call while Smith was visiting his gravely ill mother, was that Smith was “too negative,” which one Mavs staffer interpreted to mean not being a yes man. Smith, arguably the most respected athletic trainer in the NBA, had been a fixture with the Mavs for two decades, forming strong bonds with stars over the years, including Dirk Nowitzki, now-coach Jason Kidd, and Dončić, who Smith visited in Slovenia each summer. (Smith was hired by Jalen Brunson’s Knicks as soon as his contract expired with the Mavs.)

Dončić had also lost two other trusted liaisons to the front office over the previous year and a half. Longtime VP of basketball communications Scott Tomlin resigned shortly after

Smith's dismissal to become the executive director of Nowitzki's charity foundation. Smith and Tomlin spent the most time with Dončić of any Mavs staffers during the star's first five seasons. Cuban, who had made Dončić's happiness the top organizational priority since his rookie season, still owned a 27 percent share of the franchise but was no longer involved in the team's inner workings. Cuban stopped traveling to road games, complaining to Dallas-based NBA scribe Marc Stein that it was because the league office informed him that he was no longer permitted to sit in the second row of the Mavs' bench. After a quarter century of wielding ultimate power, Cuban didn't have much more influence within the organization than any other rich season-ticket holder.

"They get rid of everybody I like," Dončić privately grumbled in the fall of 2024, foreshadowing the souring of his relationship with Harrison. Not only did Dončić trust and enjoy hanging out with these men, but they played critical roles in guiding the major cultural transition that he made as a teenager from Europe. The list of Dončić confidants who departed Dallas included assistant coaches such as Igor Kokoškov and Greg St. Jean, as well as his buddy Boban Marjanović, among other teammates. The changes in the weight room and trainer's room proved to be especially problematic. The communication between Dončić's personal employees and Harrison's new hires in those roles was infrequent and unproductive. The Mavs staff's input was often disregarded.

"Could the relationships have been better? Sure," a source familiar with the dynamic between Dončić's employees and the team said. "But they're ultimately protecting the player that you alienated. There were mistakes made on both sides."

Dončić's physique was actually relatively svelte when he reported back to Dallas in late September. He had joined his national team less than two weeks after the NBA Finals, getting

some much-needed rest when the Slovenians were knocked out by Greece in the semifinals of the Olympics qualifying tournament, when Dončić committed 10 turnovers. He was obviously and understandably gassed, having played more than 100 games in less than 11 months, dating to the World Cup the previous summer. After some rest, Dončić ramped up for his return to the Mavs by practicing with Ilirija, the Ljubljana-based pro team for which his father, Saša, serves as general manager following two stints as the head coach.

But Dončić's body became bloated when he missed all of training camp and the preseason while recovering from his calf injury. His father joined him in Vegas and stayed in Dallas for a while, and they enjoyed plenty of festive feasts. Dončić's weight ballooned into the high 260s, a significant factor in a sluggish start by his high standards.

Dončić is so gifted that he's capable of putting up All-Star-caliber numbers while not playing well, as he did during the opening month of the Harrison/Kidd regime's first season. That was the case again in this instance. Dončić averaged 29.3 points, 8.0 rebounds and 8.0 assists in the Mavs' opening dozen games, but he shot poorly on high volume and was frequently dreadful defensively as he admittedly attempted to chip off rust and play his way into shape—and dealt with nagging soreness in his groin, yet another soft-tissue issue.

Mavs coaches and executives cited Dončić's fatigue as a primary factor in the team's clutch misery, which was a contrast to Dallas' prowess in closing games the previous season. The Mavs lost five of their first six games that had a one-possession margin in the final three minutes. Dončić kept settling for bad shots—2-of-8 from the floor, including 1-of-6 from 3-point range in those situations—and committing glaring defensive lapses.

The most egregious defensive error occurred with less than 10 seconds remaining and the score tied on the road against Utah Jazz, a team that entered the season with a transparent tanking

strategy. John Collins simply took a couple of steps toward the basket while Dončić stood near the elbow, his back to both the ball and the man he was assigned to defend, staring at teammate Quentin Grimes in confusion. Dallas assistant coach Sean Sweeney stood up in front of the bench, about 15 feet away from Dončić, shouting and pointing at Collins. Too late. Utah's Jordan Clarkson zipped a pass behind Dončić to Collins, who caught the ball and threw down a two-handed dunk that ended up being the deciding points in Dallas' fourth straight loss, all by one-possession margins.

"It was a misunderstanding," Dončić said after the loss, when his 37 points and 9 assists were overshadowed by an awful defensive performance. "I thought I was gonna go hit [double-team Clarkson] and Grimes thought he was gonna go hit. It was loud, so we misunderstood the bench. That's on me."

It was a few weeks into the season and Dončić was already running on fumes. He slogged through a home game a couple of nights later, when the Mavs snapped their losing streak by beating the San Antonio Spurs, catching a break when Victor Wembanyama needed a night off due to a bruised knee. Dončić acknowledged after that game that he felt "a little bit less" than 100 percent, which was an understatement.

"It's probably a matter of time," Dončić said. "It's just there's not a lot of time to rest. But I'll get better for sure. I promise."

Dončić didn't join the Mavs on the short flight over the Red River that night. A bruised right knee was the official reason he was held out against the Oklahoma City Thunder, but Dončić really just sorely needed some rest. He watched from home as his teammates—led by certified Thunder killer P. J. Washington's 27 points and 17 rebounds—pulled out a 121–119 win over the Western Conference favorites. Nipsey Hussle's hit "Last Time That I Checc'd"

blared from the visitors' weight room postgame, plenty loud enough to be heard outside the Thunder locker room down the hall, a bass-thumping reminder that the Mavs won the West the previous season and went through OKC to earn that title.

Dončić returned for the next game and cruised to 26 points in 30 minutes in a rout of the injury-ravaged New Orleans Pelicans. "I feel a little bit better," Dončić said postgame, but he had athletic tape wrapped around his right wrist. He said he started feeling some soreness in that wrist and it got worse throughout the game, "but nothing serious." Two days later, the Mavs announced that an MRI revealed a right wrist sprain and that Dončić would be reevaluated in a week.

The truth, according to several people within the Mavs organization, was that it was a minor injury that provided cover to shut Dončić down for a stretch to enable him to shed weight and get in shape. He stayed behind with his body team and Marko Milić, the Mavs assistant coach who Dončić had known since childhood, when the Mavs headed out on a three-game road trip. Dončić immersed himself in rigorous daily workouts—running, shooting, weight room—that lasted for two or three hours.

It was similar to Dončić's shutdown early in the first season of the Harrison/Kidd regime, and the GM and head coach both expressed anger and dismay behind the scenes that such measures were necessary again. So much for the hope that the Finals disappointment would fuel Dončić to be "the best version of himself," as Harrison had said in June. It didn't help matters that Dončić showed defiance during home practices, working with his staff on the other side of the gym when he was asked to be mentally engaged in the action on the court. Their patience had run thin, regardless of Dončić's production that put him on the path to being in the upper tier of all-time greats.



Kidd lasted 19 years as a player, being selected as an All-Star at 36 and starting on the Mavs' title team at 37, in part because he put such meticulous care into maintaining his body as he matured. Kidd won a title with Nowitzki, who was so disciplined that he would frequently consult with Smith before ordering dinners on the road. (It's worth noting that Nowitzki never expressed a shred of doubt that Dončić was a worthy successor to him as the Mavs' centerpiece.)

As a Nike executive, Harrison served as the right-hand man for Kobe Bryant, giving him an up-close view to the Lakers legend's maniacal commitment to diet and fitness as they traveled the world together. Harrison witnessed similar drive from other elite Nike clients, including LeBron James, allowing the all-time leading scorer to remain a force at 40. Dončić, not the first superstar to crack open cold beers to celebrate wins and get over losses, never fit Harrison's vision of an ideal franchise centerpiece.

It drove Harrison and Kidd crazy that Dončić didn't show any signs of improving his habits on a regular basis. They were concerned that he would flame out in what should be his prime years.

Dončić returned to practice on November 29 and to game action two nights later, playing in Portland after sitting out the first game of the back-to-back in Utah. The Mavs managed to win four of the five games he missed while listed with the sprained wrist—five of the six games Dončić sat out including the win in Oklahoma City. There was a firm belief within the Mavs' front office that they had delivered Dončić the best supporting cast of his career. Dallas just needed the Pravi MVP to do his part. Dončić was perceived internally as the one key member of the franchise who hadn't held up his end of the bargain early in the season—and he had the highest salary and heaviest burden.

Having slimmed down to his normal playing weight in the low- to mid-250s, Dončić came back with guns blazing. With a banged-up Irving resting, Dončić scorched the Trail Blazers for 36 points and 13 assists, along with 7 rebounds and a few steals, in his first game after the 11-day layoff. With the score tied, he drove into the teeth of the defense, drew a trio of defenders in the paint and delivered a no-look dime to Washington for a corner 3 that gave the Mavs the lead for good.

“It’s what I love to do,” Dončić said after the win. “I’m just happy to be out there, playing with joy. Obviously happy we got a win. Just really happy to be back.”

Dončić was truly *back*, meaning he returned to form as one of the best few players in the league. He was a few assists shy of averaging a triple-double as the Mavs reeled off five wins in six games over the first half of December. Dončić had an off night in OKC against the league’s No. 1 defense, when the Thunder got a small measure of revenge by eliminating the Mavs in an NBA Cup quarterfinal. Then he responded with arguably the best individual performance of the NBA season to that point, going off for 45 points, 11 rebounds, and 13 assists in a 143–133 shootout win on the road over the Warriors.

“The issue was Luka Dončić,” Golden State coach Steve Kerr said, explaining the Warriors’ worst defensive outing of the season. “That was the issue.”

The Mavs were one of the league’s hottest teams when Santa Claus slid down chimneys, having overcome their slow start to rise to fourth in the Western Conference standings at 19-10. Rival executives and coaches widely considered Dallas, the defending West champs, to be the conference’s primary challenger for the favorite Thunder.

Then Dončić felt that nasty pull in his calf. Harrison and others in the organization were convinced that he got hurt again because that’s what happens to players who show up out of

shape and never get in peak condition. Dončić's camp considered it a reaggravation of the injury that he rushed to return from in time for the regular-season opener, an unfortunate price to pay for a sacrifice made for the team.

The relationship between Dončić and Harrison was as strained as the superstar's calf. Harrison was incensed that the Mavs had no control over Dončić's treatment, which was overseen by his personal staff. The team had trouble even getting access to his MRI results and other medical records. He didn't know or trust new director of player health and performance Johann Bilsborough or new head strength and conditioning coach Keith Belton. They were Harrison's guys hired to replace Dončić's friends. Dončić seemed to have lost trust in Harrison—a feeling that was likely mutual—and had grown increasingly detached from others throughout the franchise.

“If you're holding us hostage, that means you don't want to be here,” a Mavs official said regarding Dončić's reluctance to communicate or cooperate with the team's front office and staff during his rehabilitation. “His actions spoke loud.”

Dončić would scoff at that suggestion. For years, the Mavs feared that he might eventually request a trade, but he never uttered such a threat. He was in the process of purchasing a newer, larger house—his American forever home—in Dallas.

Dončić had no doubt that he'd sign the five-year, \$346-million supermax extension that only the Mavs, as his original franchise, could formally offer him over the summer. It would have broken the record for the biggest contract in NBA history, but according to numbers crunched by several front offices around the league, it still would have qualified as a bargain based on Dončić's production and impact. He never imagined that the Mavs wouldn't eagerly put the deal on the table.

But Harrison, as well as other key figures in the Mavs' basketball operations group, had come to consider such a massive investment in Dončić to be a major risk. They believed that his body was beginning to break down—"a ticking time bomb," as one source put it—a trend they feared he wouldn't put in the required work to end. (In some senses, it was similar to Cuban's outlook on Steve Nash's ailing back when the Mavs allowed him to leave in free agency 21 years earlier—immediately before Nash won the next two MVPs.)

They were concerned about the impact Dončić's displays of public petulance, such as his furious rants at referees, and his perceived sense of entitlement behind the scenes would have on the culture Harrison and Kidd envisioned for their franchise. "If you give power to him and then try to take it away, it's not going to be a good situation," one team source said, putting some of the blame on Harrison for Dončić's disgruntlement.

Another No. 77 supporter noted that several stars require at least as much maintenance, if not more, pointing out that Dončić had never been in trouble off the court or requested a trade. "When it comes to headaches, ask Miami if they would have rather dealt with Jimmy Butler or Luka on the way out," the source said, referring to the months-long saga the Heat endured after Butler's trade demand during the 2024–25 season.

But Harrison forecasted the 2025 offseason as a "tumultuous summer," fearing that he'd be cornered into committing to a record-setting contract with a superstar he didn't really want. Harrison also knew that multiple teams were maneuvering to create salary cap space to sign a star to a maximum contract (four years, \$219 million) in free agency the following summer, when Dončić could hit the market if Dallas didn't extend him. Attempting to negotiate a contract for less than the full supermax—or with weight and/or body-fat percentage clauses, like Zion Williamson's deal with the Pelicans—wasn't a realistic option.

Harrison left Nike to come to Dallas in part because he believed Dončić's presence made a championship possible. After the Finals loss, Harrison was more determined than ever to win that title. But even before Dončić limped off the court on Christmas, Harrison had been privately pondering whether the best path to a parade was trading the Mavs' prodigy, as painful as that would be for the fan base. Harrison soon decided that trading Dončić was a must.

"We enabled him for years because we were scared of him eventually wanting to leave," a Mavs official said. "At the end of the day, we shipped him off because he became the very thing that we created."

Less than two weeks after the Christmas loss, Harrison met Lakers GM Rob Pelinka at Ascension Coffee in the Hotel Crescent Court, where most of the visiting NBA teams stay. It was the morning of January 7, hours before their teams met at the American Airlines Center, and the longtime friends always tried to get together when they were in the same city to catch up and talk shop.

This occasion, though, was different. Harrison had serious business on his mind. He wanted to float the idea of a trade around the framework of a Dončić-for-Anthony Davis superstar swap.

Harrison didn't want to shop Dončić and deal with what would surely have become a media circus. He didn't want fan backlash to become a distraction while trying to get a deal done. More importantly, he didn't want to give Dončić and his agent Bill Duffy the power to determine the destination, which could have been the case if the trade talks leaked while Dončić had only one more season remaining on his contract before a player option for 2026–27. This conversation had to be hush-hush.

“We had to keep it tight,” Harrison said. Harrison knew he could trust Pelinka. Their relationship dated back more than two decades, to when Pelinka was a power agent who represented Kobe as the Lakers star left Adidas for Nike, where Harrison was a young marketing representative. They spent countless hours together as part of Bryant’s tight inner circle over the years, as Harrison climbed the company ladder until he was running Nike’s basketball operations in North America. Pelinka wore a black Mamba Academy hoodie to their coffee shop meet-up, a reminder of the bond he shared with Harrison.

Harrison also had honed in on Davis, a 31-year-old big man about to be selected as an All-Star for the tenth time, as the star he hoped to land to headline the return package in a Dončić deal. Harrison had known Davis since the big man’s high school days, just like Irving and Washington, players he had traded for before the previous two seasons’ deadlines. Of all the players Harrison worked with at Nike, Bryant might have been the only one he was tighter with than Davis. And Davis wasn’t just one of Nico’s guys. Kidd loved him, too. They won a title together during Kidd’s two-season stint as a Lakers assistant coach. Harrison and Kidd believed they could win another title with Davis as the backbone of the dominant defense they wanted to build in Dallas. Davis, along with Irving, was the sort of star that Mavs brass wanted as a culture-setter.

This was far from the first time Harrison had broached the idea of trading for Davis. But it was the first time he piqued Pelinka’s interest. Dončić had never been part of the discussion before. “That sped things up,” a source familiar with the Lakers front office’s thought process deadpanned. When they parted ways that morning, both Harrison and Pelinka were motivated to make this work.

The GMs continued the discussion over the coming days. The talks were a blend of a negotiation and working together to solve a math equation, figuring out how to make the salaries match to satisfy the complicated rules in the league's collective bargaining agreement. The talks gained enough momentum for the general managers to loop in the ownership level, Jeanie Buss in L.A. and Dumont in Dallas. Harrison first mentioned the scenario to Dumont about a week and a half after his coffee date with Pelinka.

"The first time he laughed at me," Harrison recalled. Harrison then detailed to Dumont why he felt like divorcing Dončić would be in the Mavs' best interests, an unprecedented decision for a franchise to make without any pressure of a trade demand.

"Patrick, he's the owner obviously," Harrison said. "He's the ultimate decision maker, but he entrusts in J Kidd and I to lead this team and he's putting the trust in us."

The pieces of the deal came into place over dozens of hours of conversations between Harrison and Pelinka during the next couple of weeks. Pelinka agreed to give up Max Christie, a promising 21-year-old wing who had worked his way into the Lakers' starting lineup and was locked up on a team-friendly four-year, \$32-million deal. They haggled over whether rookie sharpshooter Dalton Knecht would be in the deal and how much of the Lakers' available first-round draft capital (the 2029 and 2031 picks, 2030 swap rights) would be included.

Pelinka had leverage due to the secretive nature of the discussions. If he couldn't reach out to Duffy to gauge the likelihood of Dončić signing an extension with the Lakers in the summer, he couldn't go all in. They agreed that the Lakers would keep Knecht and cough up only the 2029 first-round pick. The Mavs included Maxi Kleber, who'd just had surgery to repair a broken foot, and 15th man Markieff Morris as salary filler.

The trade talks were in the red zone. Harrison and Pelinka had to find a third team to serve as a facilitator because of the complicated salary cap rules. They needed a dumping ground for the remainder of Lakers first-round bust Jalen Hood-Schifino's \$3.9-million salary. The Mavs began canvassing teams with cap flexibility in the final week of January, vaguely inquiring about what they would want to take on a salary of that size. Harrison held his cards tight to his vest, revealing only that he was targeting a "frontcourt player."

Davis, who had a history of durability problems but played a career-high 76 games the previous season, suffered an abdominal strain in the Lakers' January 28 loss in Philadelphia. It was considered a minor injury, and the team announced that he would be reevaluated in a week. It didn't halt the momentum building in the trade talks. The most shocking trade in the history of the NBA—perhaps all of professional sports—was going to get done.

The Jazz, a team in the early stages of a rebuild, blindly agreed to be the third team in exchange for a couple of second-round picks, one from both teams. It was a good piece of business for the Jazz, who weren't worried about what the Lakers and Mavs were getting out of the trade. Utah, whose CEO Danny Ainge had been on Boston's side of the bitter Celtics-Lakers rivalry for three Finals as a player and two more as a GM, didn't know the other details of the deal until about a half hour before it was finalized.

Harrison, who had planned to fly to Cleveland the next morning for the Mavs' Sunday afternoon matinee, instead hopped on a February 1 afternoon flight. He needed to be around the team when news of the trade broke. It wasn't until "the 11th hour," Kidd claimed, that Harrison informed the head coach that the trade was in the works. The hope was for the deal to be done before the Lakers-Knicks game tipped off that night at Madison Square Garden. But there was a



holdup on veteran guard Patty Mills' trade certification paperwork necessary to make another Jazz trade official, and that deal needed to be done first so Utah would have an open roster spot.

So Christie played that night, starting and making a major contribution in the Lakers' 128–112 win in New York, scoring 15 points and factoring into an off night by Brunson as his primary defender. Davis watched the game from his Los Angeles home and sent a congratulatory text to his teammates in the group chat. He settled back on the couch to watch a movie with his wife, unaware that his life and the league were about to be drastically altered.

At 12 minutes after midnight ET, ESPN's Shams Charania sent a tweet that has since been viewed more than 100 million times. It broke the news of the blockbuster trade nobody saw coming. The widespread response was to check to see if it was an impostor account and then to wonder whether Charania had been hacked. "Yes, this is real," Charania tweeted minutes later, laying out the full details of the deal. Harrison confirmed the trade with an on-the-record comment minutes later. "I believe that defense wins championships," he told me, explaining that he thought adding a dominant defensive anchor in LastDavis gave the Mavs "a better chance."

Dončić, who stayed home during the Mavs' road trip, found out only minutes earlier when Duffy called to relay the message. Dončić ignored calls and texts afterward from Harrison. After years of getting his butt kissed by Mavs ownership and management, Dončić felt as though he'd been stabbed in the back.

"You can imagine how surprised I was," Dončić said during his introductory press conference at the Lakers' practice facility, most of which he spent with a blank stare on his face, although he soon warmed up to the idea of playing for the NBA's most glamorous franchise and with his childhood idol. "I had to check if it was April 1st. I didn't really believe it."

Dončić was distraught as the news sunk in, causing him to shed tears. He later admitted that the next 48 hours felt like a full month. He was far from alone in his disbelief. Cuban got a heads-up from Harrison only minutes before the news broke and was dismayed, attempting to convince the GM he hired to back out of the deal, to no avail. Dumont gave Cuban a courtesy call after the trade was done, a conversation that lasted all of two minutes.

“Well, you know this is Nico’s team now,” a Mavs staffer said the next morning in a hallway at the Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse. “There’s no fuckin’ way this woulda happened on Cubes’ watch.”

James found out about the deal while enjoying a dinner with his family in New York following the 40-year-old’s 33-point triple-double performance. “I thought it was for sure fake,” James said later. “I thought it was a hoax, people messing around or whatever.” He had a long farewell talk with Davis that night before welcoming Dončić, who James referred to as “my favorite player in the NBA for a while now.”

Irving learned about the franchise-changing development while getting treatment from his personal staff, which also travels with the team. He cut the session short and rushed to his Ritz Carlton suite to make a series of phone calls as he tried to wrap his mind around the stunning move. He welcomed the opportunity to play with Davis, who he once hoped would join him in Boston, but Irving was jolted by Dončić’s sudden departure. “Still the grieving process right now,” Irving said a few nights later in his first public comments about the trade. “I miss my *hermano*.”

“Man, it’s crazy,” Timberwolves star Anthony Edwards said, perplexed that Dallas voluntarily traded Dončić only months after he led the Mavs through Minnesota en route to the Finals. “Insane,” Suns star Kevin Durant said. Several other stars in the league had similar

reactions, as did many rival executives. Generational talents just don't get traded before they hit their prime years, especially not without forcing a franchise's hand.

"Holy shit. What is Dallas doing?" an executive from a Western Conference rival texted seconds after the news broke.

"This is deranged behavior by Nico and the boys," pinged a text from an East team executive.

"Unfathomable," an executive from another West team weighed in. "I get the frustration with Luka, but you can't trade *him*."

Another executive from a West contender: "I just don't get it. They must know way more than we do obviously. You just can't trade that guy. Wild stuff."

There were some executives around the league who could grasp "not wanting to be in the Luka business," as one put it. But a poll of a few dozen didn't find any that believed the Mavs came close to maximizing the return for such a coveted talent. Some GMs complained that Dallas didn't reach out to them, including one who said his team's offer would have begun with a young All-Star and four first-round picks. Haralabos Voulgaris, the Mavs' so-called shadow GM before Harrison was hired, declared on social media that the Mavs' decision "will go down as one of (Probably THE) worst trades in the history of sports."

Dončić didn't just get dumped in the dead of the night. Dončić got publicly shamed on his way out of the door, prompting a fierce defense the next day from his father, who was part of the cast for Arena Sport's Slovenian broadcast of the Mavs' European prime time game.

"I understand there comes a moment when you disagree with a certain philosophy," Saša Dončić said in Slovenian while the short-handed, shell-shocked Mavs were getting shellacked by the East-leading Cavaliers. "You don't like this or that player, all good—I get it. But I think that

exactly this secrecy, or should I say from some individuals, maybe even hypocrisy, this hurts me more personally. Because I think that Luka absolutely doesn't deserve this.

"[Conditioning] wasn't even a problem last year since, I am saying again, one individual said he's not fit enough. That he played, I don't know, 100 games—practically forty minutes with two or three players constantly on him. That he was beaten, and you say such things about him—I feel that this is very unfair from certain individuals. You traded him, stand by your actions but don't look for excuses or alibis, that's it."

The reported reasoning made Mavs fans—who seethed the previous spring that Dončić didn't win the MVP vote—even more apoplectic with rage. As Harrison and Kidd held a morning meeting with the team at the Ritz Carlton in Cleveland, when players responded with silence when asked if there were any questions, dozens of fans gathered for an impromptu protest outside the American Airlines Center. It had the feeling of a wake, down to the casket that a few fans brought to the scene, where a Luka shrine was set up in the shadow of Nowitzki's statue.

"I'm sorry they're frustrated, but it's something that we believe in as an organization," Harrison said while meeting with a small group of Dallas-based reporters in Cleveland alongside Kidd during the coach's normal pregame availability. It was the GM's only media session in the aftermath of the most controversial transaction in franchise history. "It's going to make us better. We believe that it sets us up to win, not only now, but also in the future. And when we win, I believe the frustration will go away."

Harrison then clarified that the future timeframe he had in mind is "three, four years from now," making an awkward joke that he and Kidd might be buried in a decade. That math reinforced just how shocking a strategic shift the Mavs had made after six years of desperately attempting to build a contender around the prodigy—and the Mavs managing to achieve that

mission despite an overhaul at the ownership level, front office, coaching staff and many personnel mistakes. Dallas had given up control of its first-round picks from 2027 to '30 in trades over the previous two years. And their closest geographical rivals stood to benefit the most if Dallas declined three or four years down the road. Oklahoma City owns swap rights with the Mavs in 2028, Houston has Dallas' 2029 pick and San Antonio has 2030 swap rights, all unprotected.

A significant segment of NBA fandom refused to accept the reported reasoning at face value. There had to be some sort of ulterior motive, something sinister at play. That set the stage for a conspiracy theory to take off: Dumont, and his multi-billionaire mother-in-law/majority owner Miriam Adelson, must have been behind it. A dot-connecting social media post noted that their lobbying efforts to legalize gambling in Texas had yet to loosen up the state legislators, putting any plans for building a casino resort with a new arena in Dallas on indefinite hold. A Dončić trade would deflate the value of the franchise, giving the ownership group good reason to move the Mavs to Vegas.

Never mind that the NBA would never allow it. The conspiracy theory picked up enough steam that Dumont decided that he needed to publicly shoot it down, doing so in an interview with *The Dallas Morning News* eight days after the trade. Dumont also expressed unflinching support for Harrison, noting his track record of making trades that didn't receive instant positive feedback but proved to be wise decisions. Dumont made some perfunctory comments about Dončić being a "Mav for life" and wishing him well in L.A. And then Dumont proceeded to put his foot in his mouth while essentially confirming that Dončić's conditioning issues and approach prompted the Mavs' decision to trade him.

“In my mind the way teams win is by focus, by having the right character, by having the right culture, and having the right dedication to work as hard as possible to create a championship-winning outcome,” Dumont told the newspaper’s Brad Townsend. “And if you’re not doing that, you’re going to lose.”

Dumont’s tone intensified as he continued: “If you look at the greats in the league, the people you and I grew up with—Jordan, Bird, Kobe, Shaq—they worked really hard, every day, with a singular focus to win. And if you don’t have that, it doesn’t work. And if you don’t have that, you shouldn’t be part of the Dallas Mavericks.

“That’s who we want. I’m unwavering on this. The entire organization knows this. This is how I operate outside of basketball. This is the only way to be competitive and win. If you want to take a vacation, don’t do it with us.”

Dumont’s comments weren’t only tone deaf. They opened him up for ridicule by revealing a lack of common knowledge among casual basketball fans. Larry Bird enjoyed a postgame beer or six just as much as Dončić did. There are legendary tales of Michael Jordan gambling into the wee hours of the morning before game nights. Shaquille O’Neal is Exhibit A that some guys are so gifted that they can be all-time greats despite playing their way into shape each season. His indifference to offseason conditioning was a major factor in the rift that led to his breakup with Bryant after winning three championships together.

And a notable omission to that list branded Dumont as an outsider among Dallas basketball fans. A day earlier, before Davis made his Dallas debut that was breathtakingly dominant until it was cut short by an adductor strain, approximately 1,000 fans met for a planned protest. They gathered in Victory Plaza, which faces a street named Nowitzki Way. It’s also the site of Dirk’s statue depicting the Dallas legend launching his famous, one-legged fadeaway. The

inscription reads: “Loyalty never fades away,” 21 letters that encapsulate his 21-year run with the Mavericks, a record for a player with any franchise. Dončić didn’t make it to one-third the length of that tenure, breaking the hearts of fans who looked forward to watching his entire career unfold.

Nowitzki had passed the torch to Dončić, and to use a clever turn of phrase from one of the protestors’ posterboard signs, “Nico blew it out.” Another sign read: “LOYALTY FADED AWAY.” Many others called for the termination of Harrison, whose address had been posted on social media and whose email had been flooded with death threats and racial epithets in the aftermath of the trade, prompting him to hire full-time security and not attend that afternoon’s game.

“He’s not fat! Bring him back!” fans chanted, many wearing Dončić’s No. 77 jerseys, both from the Mavs and the Slovenian national team. Some fans taped over the “DALLAS” across their chest.

The three guys carrying their coffin showed back up again. After a dog from the Dallas Police Department’s K-9 unit sniffed the coffin and didn’t discover any explosives, the men addressed the crowd via a megaphone and invited others to do the same.

“I’ve been a Mavs fan my whole life!” a boy who stood maybe 5 feet tall shouted in a high-pitched holler. “This is the equivalent of goddamn JFK!”

The crowd roared. Chants broke out as the megaphone was passed from person to person.

“LUKA IS THE CULTURE! LUKA IS THE CULTURE! LUKA IS THE CULTURE!”

“FUCK NICO! FUCK NICO! FUCK NICO!”

“SELL THE TEAM! SELL THE TEAM! SELL THE TEAM!”

“BRING LUKA HOME! BRING LUKA HOME! BRING LUKA HOME!”

