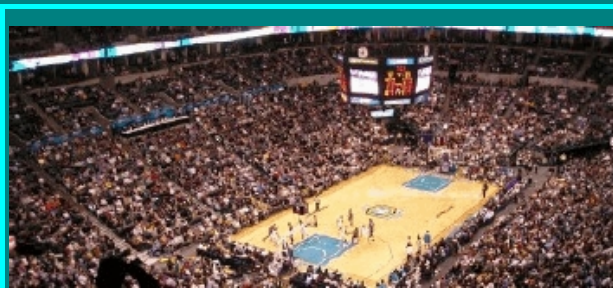


A HORNETS OKLAHOMA CITY READER

THE HORNETS, OKLAHOMA CITY, NEW ORLEANS, AND THE MEDIA 2005-2006



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PREFACE

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Oklahoma City and its arena, the Ford Center, became the temporary home of the New Orleans Hornets after the NBA's September 21, 2005, announcement and it remains the Hornets home through the present time. The team's name was changed to be "New Orleans/Oklahoma City Hornets" when the temporary arrangement was struck. The 1st full season is now done, and the Hornets will return to Oklahoma City for at least the 2006-07 season, with six home games being played in New Orleans and thirty-five in Oklahoma City.

In this watershed NBA season for Oklahoma City, it hosted 36 games at the Ford Center, one tacked on "at the last minute" after the Hornets bailed out on any more games being played in hapless Baton Rouge following the 12/16/05 game at which 7,302 attended the Phoenix game in the Pete Maravich Arena (14,000 or so capacity) -- *way to go, Baton Rouge, for helping out your sister-city in a time of great need – not!* After that, the 5 remaining non-Oklahoma City games were rescheduled – 2 games were moved to Oklahoma (1/13/2006 and 1/18/2006), and 3 March games were moved to New Orleans.

With such late notice, the Ford Center was not available for the 1/13/2006 game and it was instead played at the University of Oklahoma in Norman. In the Norman game, 11,343 watched the Hornets defeat the Sacramento Kings in the 11,528 capacity arena. Five days later, 14,554 watched the Hornets defeat the Memphis Grizzlies at the Ford Center, this being Oklahoma City's low water attendance mark for the season. In the 3 New Orleans March games, 2 were sellouts and the 3rd almost was, a good and far better showing by the New Orleans fans than the Hornets characteristically received in New Orleans, before the storm.

The 2005-2006 Hornets season is now done. It wowed the residents of Oklahoma City from the very beginning. Even in the 2 October preseason games, attendance rivaled "regular" season attendance in New Orleans – 14,475 on October 23 and 15,063 on October 27. In the Hornets 3 years in New Orleans, regular season paid attendance was 14,221 (2004), 14,332 (2003), and 15,650 (2002).

When the “real” season began with a sellout crowd (19,163) in the Ford Center against the Sacramento Kings on November 1, the entire nation started to take notice. “Wow!”, we Okies said, “*this is GREAT STUFF*,” as we were entranced by this ecstatic experience, and “Wow!” said the nation’s press, “*OKC is a great NBA market! Who would have guessed?*”

But, would the euphoria persist throughout the season? None knew then, but now we do since the numbers speak for themselves. Oklahoma City hosted 36 Hornets games this year. Average attendance in the 19,163 capacity Ford Center was 18,718, more than half (18) of those games being sellouts and several others almost being so. If only Oklahoma City games counted as “home games”, the Hornets would have been 9th (instead of 11th) in NBA attendance, just a few seats shy of 8th place San Antonio which averaged 18,797. We earned honorary titles from the nation's press and from visiting NBA players ... “the howling assemblage”, “Homa Court”, and one even went so far as to nominate the entire city as “2006 Sportsman of the Year.”

As for the Hornets, even though they did not make the playoffs with their 38-44 record, the Bugs did come close to doing so, being eliminated from the playoffs in the last week of the season. In the Ford Center the Hornets were 22-14. Did we help the Hornets with our persistently crazy fan support? You betcha we did, and the whole basketball world was watching.

What follows are many, but certainly not all, of the national media reports during this past season which documents this year’s Oklahoma City season with the Hornets. Generally, I’ve tried to avoid press reports from New Orleans and Oklahoma City newspapers to avoid “hometown” perspectives. The exceptions are on the topic of the debate between what *The Oklahoman* and the *Times-Picayune* had to say about the eventual home of the Hornets – whether or not the Hornets return to New Orleans, which debate is part of this season’s lore, as well.

Where will the Hornets find their home after the 2006-2006 season? Many have opinions but no one knows and the debate continues! This season has been a total **thrill ride** for an Oklahoma City guy like me! It has been my pleasure to attend the 2 preseason games and 32 regular season games this year – and I’m **NOT** one of the 10,000 -11,000 season ticket holders.

Some of the “links” below to original sources may not work now and more will not work later since such articles tend to become archived elsewhere and most such links become bad sooner or later. After a month or so, *The Oklahoman* archives its prior articles and you have to pay to access them. The *Times-Picayune*’s articles are also archived, and without a user charge, but, unless you have a specific link, they are hard to find. That said and where available, I’ve provided original source links, nonetheless.

The general focus of this anthology is the Hornets present and future relationship with Oklahoma City. I’ve avoided other interesting mid-to-late season articles speculating about the relocation possibilities of other NBA teams to Oklahoma City (Seattle, Portland, Orlando) which, while fun to read, really haven’t got anything to do with the media attention given to the Hornets and Oklahoma City in 2005-2006, my town’s inaugural NBA year. Some “fun” things have not been included since I didn’t locate existing internet links to articles for them -- most notably the Charles Barkley’s “chickens,” etc. fun stuff on *TNT! Will Charles Barkley and TNT come to Oklahoma City next year?* We shall see!

Although this anthology is not quite done yet, particularly the *Preseason* part, I hope that you enjoy this *Oklahoma City Hornets Reader*!

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Article 01

Official NBA Announcement

9.21.2005

http://www.nba.com/hornets/multimedia/ok_city_050921.html

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Hornets to Play in Oklahoma City

NEW YORK, Sept. 21 -- NBA Commissioner David Stern announced today that Oklahoma City will be home to the New Orleans Hornets for the 2005-06 season, playing host to 35 regular season games. The team will also play six regular season games in Louisiana.

"The devastation of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region has made it necessary for the Hornets to move to a temporary location for the upcoming season," Stern said. "Fortunately, the Hornets have received a gracious invitation from Mayor Mick Cornett and the business leaders and citizens of Oklahoma City to play their home games in the Ford Center, a first-class facility that we hope to fill with new Hornets fans this season."

The team will also play six home games at the Pete Maravich Center on the campus of Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge.

"It was important to the Hornets and the NBA that we maintain a presence in Louisiana in anticipation of a return to New Orleans next season," Stern said. "Few American cities have experienced the level of tragedy as Oklahoma City," Mayor Cornett said. "I think for that reason our community has a heightened sensitivity for those impacted by Hurricane Katrina. We accept that we are the best solution to solve one of the many problems and pledge our best efforts to support the Hornets."

"Like so many businesses and families uprooted by Hurricane Katrina, the Hornets were forced to leave New Orleans while the city recovers from this tragedy," Hornets owner George Shinn said. "Fortunately, Oklahoma City is an ideal home for this season and we greatly appreciate the good will shown by Mayor Cornett and the local business community. We will play a majority of our games in Oklahoma City this season with great pride and gratitude, but remain devoted to our home and have set our sights on returning to a rebuilt and vibrant New Orleans for the 2006-07 season."

Ford Center, built in 2002, is Oklahoma City's state-of-the-art sports and entertainment showcase. The center is home to the Central Hockey League's (CHL) Oklahoma City Blazers and the Arena Football League's (AF2) Oklahoma City Yard Dawgz, and is designed to host major concerts, sporting events, family shows, ice shows and numerous other world-class entertainment experiences.

The 586,000 square-foot facility seats 19,6745 on four seating levels and features 3,380 club seats, seven party suites and 49 private suites. Ford Center is owned by the City of Oklahoma City, a city that has already welcomed thousands of evacuees from the Gulf region. The facility is the premier project of Oklahoma City's visionary capital improvement program (MAPS) to finance new and upgraded sports, entertainment, cultural and convention facilities with a one-cent sales tax.

Ford Center is an SMG-managed facility. Headquartered in Philadelphia, SMG is the world's leading private facility management company. With 168 Facilities, SMG controls over 1.4 million entertainment seats worldwide, and over nine million square feet of exhibit space.

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ESPN

11.02.2005

http://sports.espn.go.com/nba/columns/story?columnist=stein_marc&id=2211077

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Everything's A-OK for Hornets on Opening Night

By Marc Stein
ESPN.com
Archive

OKLAHOMA CITY -- It's a town where the fans cling to the rather scholastic notion of standing until the home team scores a basket.

It's a place where the coach finds himself calling plays with hand signals sometimes because it's a lot louder inside than his team is used to.

It's a college community trying to shed its small-town stigma, but maybe that's why, for at least one night, the youngest starting backcourt tandem of all time looked so comfortable in the pros.

The NBA in OKC?

It's the address where the Hornets, after an evening that bordered on storybook, can say they've never lost.

Which was a pretty satisfying claim to make, however long it lasts, after everything this franchise has lost.

"In a million years I never thought it was going to be like this," said Louisiana's own P.J. Brown, reveling in the Hornets' 93-67 rout of the Sacramento Kings in the game that officially made them the New Orleans/Oklahoma City Hornets.

"Can't paint a prettier picture."

It was hard to argue after Brown, known to his teammates as "Jurassic," rumbled for his first 20-point, 10-rebound game in more than two years. It sparked the NBA's victims of Hurricane Katrina to the largest Opening Night margin of victory in franchise history, and an understandable round of post-game exaggeration.

If ever a team was entitled to get carried away about a 1-0 start, it's this one.

Brown is the only Hornet with the veteran savvy to quickly tack on the "it's only one game" disclaimer, but even the 36-year-old couldn't conceal a broad smile when a familiar face from New Orleans jokingly asked if this was the start of his MVP drive.

Yup. It was that kind of everything-went-right night in this home-away-from-home opener. The Hornets received an unexpected boost when the Kings' flight in Monday had to return to Sacramento because of mechanical trouble, necessitating the use of another plane and delaying the visitors' arrival until just six hours before Tuesday's tipoff. The Kings indeed looked like a tired team and the Hornets, relying on Brown's steadiness and a relentless push from two two 20-year-olds -- with J.R. Smith and rookie Chris Paul forming the youngest starting backcourt in NBA history -- never stopped running.

The crowd, meanwhile, never stopped roaring once it soaked in a jazzy instrumental rendition of the national anthem by former Oklahoma star and NBA veteran Wayman Tisdale. One Oklahoma City newspaper columnist opined in Tuesday's paper that the NBA's arrival finally made this an actual city and, judging by the noise from a sellout of 19,163 at the Ford Center, it means a lot to the locals to be in the big leagues.

"These crowds are going to be like college basketball crowds," said Desmond Mason, the Hornets' newly acquired swingman from Oklahoma State. "It's unlike anything else you'll see at an NBA game."

Yet even the player who knows this terrain best found it a bit strange to be playing a real NBA game in the land of collegiate football. The proximity to the rest of the Southwest Division and the presence of a relatively new NBA-level arena were lures that, for the league and the Hornets, made Oklahoma City an obvious choice to take the Hornets in, but Mason was openly stunned to be back.

"My wife and I have had that conversation a few times already," said Mason, who married a former Oklahoma State soccer player. "I definitely never figured I'd play basketball here again -- period -- much less an NBA game."

Mason wasn't alone. Hornets owner George Shinn recalled, as he was sorting through the options just weeks ago, how shocked he was when NBA commissioner David Stern suggested Oklahoma City as the Hornets' relocation destination.

"My exact words were, 'Oklahoma where?'" Shinn said. "I said, 'You've got to be kidding me, David. Do they have an arena?' I knew nothing about Oklahoma City."

The locals must have thought the same when Shinn addressed them before the opening tip. In his attempts to give thanks for the warm reception his franchise has received, from Oklahoma City and Oklahoma at large, Shinn temporarily forgot where he was and said, "From the state of ... this great state."

The team's start was a bit shaky, too, with a flurry of empty possessions and nearly three scoreless minutes before Brown finally allowed the fans to sit with a putback. Yet you could forgive the stumbles on this night, all the way up to the much-maligned owner. It's a team with an average age under 25, and no team has a manual to turn to for how to handle all this. How many professional sports teams have ever been forced to move by a natural disaster?

As Scott noted, it's impossible for the Hornets -- with an OKC patch on their jerseys and shooting shirts -- to forget that they're not where they're supposed to be. Impossible even when they're throttling a perennial 50-win team to earn a Opening Night share of the Southwest lead with San Antonio.

"I don't think that's going to be done until we know if we're going to be here another year, or if we're going to be here for good," Scott conceded. "I don't think you can let it go until you know exactly what's going on. You're still wondering what the league's going to do. You're still wondering about New Orleans, how quickly the city can rebuild. There's still a lot of questions that probably all of us have."

Said Mason, refusing to let his popularity in the area encroach on his newcomer status: "I've tried not to ask anybody about [New Orleans]. The guys seem to be happy right now. They're moving on. I'm not going to reopen that wound by asking about it."

Those wounds, of course, aren't going away soon no matter what the Hornets try, with so much of their future unclear. Don't forget that there were plenty of questions about this franchise's viability in New Orleans, as well as its management and roster choices, even before Katrina struck.

You can understand, then, why they couldn't resist this unexpected opportunity to trumpet their new

home as First Place, USA.

They won't start 2-29 again, like last season, but the Hornets are realistic enough to know that baby-faced rebuilding teams can't count on a lot of nights like these.

"Everybody is just happy to have us here," Scott said of the OKC welcome. Then, only half-joking, Scott added: "After about three or four months, they might be saying something different."

Said Brown: "I never thought I'd have to leave [Louisiana], especially in these type of circumstances. I'm rooted down there, that's home. But this is starting to feel like home. I definitely want this team to go back to New Orleans, but the region has a long way to go before they even talk about us or the Saints coming back.

"It's a very unique situation, but I'm going to represent two cities."

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ESPN Page 2 Daily Quickie
11.2.2005
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Two Words For You:
'HOMA. COURT.

OKC is OK with the NBA!

And the best fans in the NBA are ...

From Oklahoma City?!

Any fans that can inspire the lousy Hornets to beat a West playoff contender like the Kings by nearly 30 have to be at the top of the argument.

The amazing thing is they have no track record as an NBA fan base; they host the Hornets only because of the disaster in New Orleans.

The Hornets may not want to leave. The sellout crowd was frenzied. The team was inspired.

And, given their brutal support back in New Orleans, who would blame them or the team and the NBA from wanting to make this permanent?

(This isn't the same as the Saints' relocation debacle: New Orleans fans still love their football team, even if Baton Rouge fans boo. The Hornets have been a bad fit since Day One.)

Sure, it's been only one game, but instantly, OKC has morphed the team into the Celtics of '86.

The Hornets might improve last year's overall win total (1 by 50 percent simply off their home games.

I'm so impressed with the fans in OKC that as of today, I'm willing to rank them the best fans in the NBA. I've even got a slogan for them:

"Homa-Court Advantage."

Article 3
Philadelphia Inquirer

11.6.2005

<http://www.philly.com/mld/philly/sports/13091102.htm>

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On the NBA | Oklahoma City should remain Hornets' nest

By David Aldridge
Inquirer Staff Writer

Russ Granik, the NBA's deputy commissioner, recalled the phone call from Oklahoma City mayor Mick Cornett in the days immediately following Hurricane Katrina's making landfall in New Orleans in September.

"We've had tragedy here," Granik recalled Cornett as saying. "We see what's happening in New Orleans. We can help."

And so it came to pass that the Hornets temporarily moved lock, stock and barrel to Oklahoma City, the nation's 45th-largest television market - and a place that knows from tragedy, having gone through the domestic terrorist attack of April 19, 1995, that killed 168 people.

And you know what?

The Hornets should stay there - permanently.

A sports team provides a diversion from reality. In the specific case of New Orleans, it represents a connection to what used to be, providing some semblance of normalcy for a city that has been turned upside down. Surely, the citizens of the city need the team now more than ever.

But what happened in New Orleans trumps standard operating procedure. We are not talking about people who need to take a load off after a hard day's work; we are talking about people without work - and without homes, without schools, and without much hope.

The infrastructure of a city - a tax base, corporate dollars, public transportation, basic emergency services, a middle class with discretionary income - is something New Orleans is currently not capable of providing.

In New Orleans, people have better - and more important - things to do with their time and money than go to games.

Oklahoma City's powerful are trying to do everything not to be viewed as taking advantage of New Orleans.

"Certainly, we're respectful of the series of events that led to the relocation," Cornett said Tuesday, when a sellout crowd of 19,163 filled the Ford Center for Hornets' improbable 93-67 rout of the Sacramento Kings in their regular-season opener.

"But from Oklahoma City's standpoint, this is an opportunity to prove that we're a major-league city. We're excited about it. At the end of this year, the sports world's going to have an opinion. Can Oklahoma City support a major-league franchise? We intend for that answer to be a solid yes."

Support has come from all economic sectors of the city, which is stocked with big companies in the oil and energy businesses as well as such companies as Lopez Foods, one of the country's largest Latino-owned firms. The Hornets have already sold more than 10,000 season tickets in Oklahoma City, putting them in the top 10 league-wide.

"We view it as the ultimate real-time test," said local businessman Clay Bennett, one of the movers and shakers who coalesced the local business community around the Hornets.

"The one great thing about this process was that it didn't require a sales pitch," he said.

The truth of the matter is that it was a tough go for the Hornets in New Orleans before the hurricane. Like Sacramento, Calif.; San Antonio, Texas; and Memphis - and Oklahoma City, for that matter - New Orleans might be too small to support two major-league teams. The more established Saints have four decades of history in New Orleans, and the benefits to a city of having an NFL team, frankly, are greater than those of having an NBA team.

(Along those lines, shouldn't the NFL dip into its stadium building fund and publicly commit to helping build a new football stadium in New Orleans that would assure that the Saints remain there? The league has made untold millions hosting Super Bowls in the Big Easy over the years. It's time to repay that debt.)

No city will support a team with an 18-64 record - the one the Hornets had last season - for long, and Oklahoma City is surely no different. The Hornets are going to continue to be bad for a lot longer than this season. But geographically and financially, it makes sense to leave them in Oklahoma City. Equally important, people in the city are uniquely capable of understanding the pain of loss and shared suffering.

"They were sympathetic because of what they went through," Hornets owner George Shinn said last week. "They understood, and they stepped up. They made it clear to the NBA when they called that [they were not] trying to steal the team. They just want [the Hornets] to have a safe place to land."

And any notion that Oklahoma City isn't a major-league town evaporates the moment you reach the corner of 5th and Robinson.

That's where the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building used to be, before Timothy McVeigh's act of madness reduced much of it to rubble.

Now a wondrous memorial to the dead - and the living - has risen from the ashes. And there is a nearby museum that details every second of that horrible day and many of the seconds that have come and gone since. There also is a serene outdoor mall with a reflecting pool that connects one end of the memorial to the other. There are 168 chairs lined up on one side of the memorial, one for each person killed in the explosion.

And on each wall these words are engraved:

We Come Here To Remember Those Who Were Killed, Those Who Survived, And Those Changed Forever. May All Who Leave Here Know The Impact Of Violence. May This Memorial Offer Comfort, Strength, Peace, Hope And Serenity.

Oh, Oklahoma City is big-league, all right.

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ESPN Insider
11.7.2005
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By Chris Sheridan

The franchise formerly known as the New Orleans Hornets considers Oklahoma City its temporary home, with an emphasis on the word temporary.

But owner George Shinn has an option to stay in Oklahoma City for an extra season, and it's already becoming clear that the team's temporary home might be more viable than New Orleans

as an NBA city.

Shinn and NBA commissioner David Stern both spoke at length Thursday to ESPN.com regarding the future of one of the league's most troubled franchises, allowing for an early handicapping of what's ahead for the Hornets.

Stern and Shinn both sounded committed to returning to New Orleans, though Shinn made the point that the ultimate decision on the team's future rests with the league's board of governors.

"It'll depend on the circumstances, and I'll have to wait and see," Shinn told ESPN.com. "But our goal is to come back. I'm working closely with David Stern on this, and if you know David Stern like I know David Stern, you don't mess with the pope."

Shinn said he wants to do his part to rebuild New Orleans, but he has questions about how much the population base might shrink. He has already paid out more than \$4 million in refunds to ticket holders who wanted their money back.

Shinn also brought up the story of a friend from the New Orleans banking community who moved to Houston after Hurricane Katrina and subsequently decided to make his relocation permanent.

"People in New Orleans accepted us in a positive way, and I have to return the favor. We're going to do our part to make that city come back," Shinn said.

But speaking of the viability of Oklahoma City as an NBA city, Shinn couldn't contain his enthusiasm.

"This is a unique place and a really well-kept secret. I've been extremely impressed," Shinn said. "It reminds me a lot of the early days in Charlotte."

Shinn said the team has sold the equivalent of more than 10,000 full season-ticket packages in Oklahoma City, ranking the Hornets among the league's top eight teams in that category. Last season, in New Orleans, the Hornets ranked last in the league in attendance.

Another hint that the Hornets are quickly warming to their temporary digs came when coach Byron Scott described the atmosphere at the team's home opener as resembling that of a playoff game in Sacramento, where Arco Arena is considered by many the league's foremost home court.

So what happens if Oklahoma City proves itself to be a better NBA city than New Orleans?

"It's unfair to New Orleans to even raise that issue," Stern said. "They are the New Orleans Hornets, and that's our intention. The issue can't be how well they're supported somewhere else. The issue is whether New Orleans is ready to have them back. If they are, they'll be back."

For now, it appears the Hornets have four options: Staying in Oklahoma City for just one season, staying for two seasons, playing a bifurcated home schedule splitting time between the two cities, or trying to make a permanent move to Oklahoma City.

Based upon Insider's reading of Shinn's and Stern's comments, and the overall situation as of Friday, here are the morning line odds on all four scenarios:

Option 1: Play in Oklahoma City for only one season. Odds: 15-1.

Shinn does not have to decide on his second-year option until July, but Stern would like him to make a decision by January. Given the uncertainty over how quickly reconstruction and rebuilding will take place in New Orleans, the earlier timetable enhances Oklahoma City's chances of keeping the team for a second season.

Option 2: Play in Oklahoma City for two seasons, then return permanently to New Orleans. Odds: Even.

Stern appears to be giving Shinn no wiggle room to stay in Oklahoma City for more than two years, and the commissioner does not want to leave a legacy of having failed twice in the Crescent City. (The Jazz played in New Orleans before moving to Utah in 1979.)

If Oklahoma City's support for the Hornets stays strong through two seasons, Stern might push for the city to be the home of a future expansion team.

Option 3: Play in Oklahoma City for one or two seasons, then play a bifurcated home schedule with half the games in Oklahoma and half in Louisiana. Odds: 40-1.

Shinn said he hadn't even considered the possibility, and Stern quickly dismissed it.

"We did that once. It's an unpleasant memory," Stern said, making a reference to the Kings' splitting their home schedule between Kansas City and Omaha for three seasons during the mid-1970s.

Option 4: Move to Oklahoma City permanently. Odds: 40-1.

Shinn has taken up more of Stern's time than any other owner over the past three years, and Shinn sounded as though he was in no mood to pick another fight. If, however, numerous other owners supported a permanent move of the Hornets for the greater good of the NBA, the issue could be brought to the board of governors for a vote.

"Right now, I can't make a decision," Shinn said. "Days, weeks and months need to go by, and lots of things need to fall into place. Then we'll make the best judgment call we can make."

Article 5
Kansas City Star
11.10.2005

<http://www.kansascity.com/mld/kansascity/sports/13127100.htm>

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Kansas City Penguins?
Leiweke eyes possible Sprint Center tenants
By RANDY COVITZ
The Kansas City Star

Keep your eyes on the Pittsburgh Penguins. Tim Leiweke certainly is.

Although Leiweke, president and chief executive officer of Anschutz Entertainment Group, is being careful not to tamper with an existing NHL or NBA franchise, he's aware what clubs could be available when the 18,500-seat Sprint Center his company will manage opens downtown in the fall of 2007.

The NHL's Penguins, who play in antiquated Mellon Arena, remain the most viable candidate, considering their lease expires at the end of the 2006-07 season.

The Penguins are trying to acquire a casino license and use the proceeds for a new building, but if that does not materialize, the club could be sold and moved to another city.

"If Pittsburgh doesn't have an arena deal done a year from now," Leiweke said, "they're gone. The Pittsburgh Penguins can be the Kansas City Penguins, no question about it. That team here ... it will sell out every ticket in advance, end of story. That team will be a huge instant home run here.

"And that kid, Sidney Crosby," he said of the first pick in the 2005 draft, "is unbelievable."

Leiweke was in Kansas City on Wednesday attending a breakfast reception for business leaders and meeting with those working on the Sprint Center. With 60 of the 72 luxury boxes already sold at a cost of \$110,000 to \$115,000, he was buoyant about the city's chances of landing either an NHL or NBA team.

He was impressed with the way Kansas City, with less than six weeks lead time, drew 12,686 at Kemper Arena for an NHL exhibition game between St. Louis and Nashville. The Predators, too, are a possible candidate for relocation.

"The NHL has seen all our blueprints, they've seen all our plans, they know exactly what we're doing here," said Leiweke, who as president of the Los Angeles Kings is a member of the NHL's executive board. "I am bullish on this market for hockey."

Bill Daly, the NHL's deputy commissioner, acknowledged the Sprint Center but did not offer any encouragement concerning a team in Kansas City, where the league had a team during 1974-76.

"While we're pleased that the people in Kansas City have a new, state-of-the-art arena to look forward to," Daly said, "the National Hockey League has no current intention of either relocating an existing franchise or adding an expansion franchise."

If an NHL team doesn't materialize by 2007, Leiweke has not given up on landing an NBA club as an anchor tenant.

The Orlando Magic is unhappy with the outdated TD Waterhouse Centre and could relocate if the community does not come up with a new arena. And the long-term future of the New Orleans Hornets is very much in doubt.

The Hornets, who were displaced by the hurricane damage to the New Orleans Arena, are playing 35 home games in Oklahoma City, but Leiweke is convinced Kansas City would be a better home.

The Hornets toured Kansas City and considered it as a temporary home but preferred Oklahoma City's 19,675-seat Ford Center, which is managed by the same firm that runs the New Orleans Arena, over Kemper Arena.

"My opinion is Oklahoma City is a temporary situation," Leiweke said. "They'll either move back to New Orleans, or they'll move again. With all due respect to Oklahoma, I see what's being built here ..."

To secure the Hornets, Oklahoma City had to make some huge guarantees. If the team does not earn 5 percent more in local revenue than it made in New Orleans last year — when it ranked last in attendance — taxpayers and local businesses must pay the team as much as \$10 million.

Oklahoma City also put up about \$2 million to cover housing expenses, team offices, improvements to the Ford Center and for game-day expenses, they may not recoup.

Before Wednesday night's Hornets-Magic game in Oklahoma City, NBA commissioner David Stern said that although the league has no plans for expansion, the Hornets' success in their temporary home has made Oklahoma City the favorite city if a team were to relocate.

"I can say without reservation that Oklahoma City is now at the top of the list," Stern said.

However, Leiweke is confident the revenue streams created by the Sprint Center would entice an NBA or an NHL tenant. He expects all the suites to be sold by the end of the year, and a large portion of the money from suites and club seats, as well as slices from advertising signage and naming rights, would go to the anchor tenant.

"Whatever Oklahoma City gave away is miniscule in comparison to the opportunity for revenue in this marketplace for an anchor tenant," Leiweke said. "Oklahoma City locked in 10,000 season tickets. Whether it be hockey or basketball, if we went out today and began a campaign to get deposits for season tickets, I think we would get 10,000 ticket deposits.

"This is all about economics, bottom line," Leiweke said. "This is about how much money can a team generate in a given marketplace to stay competitive, and will the marketplace support them long term. If there's an NBA owner who looks at this marketplace, they're going to find it is substantially bigger than, say, Oklahoma City."

Although it's still conjecture on whether the Penguins, Predators, Hornets or some other NBA team will play at the Sprint Center, Leiweke said progress has been made on bringing a WNBA franchise to Kansas City in 2008.

WNBA president Donna Orender was sent to the Sprint Center's groundbreaking by Stern, and Leiweke said a local group is seriously examining pursuing a franchise.

"Anytime you get David Stern's attention," Leiweke said, "that's a good thing."

Article 6
Times-Picayune
11.22.2005

<http://www.nola.com/hornets/t-p/index.ssf?/base/sports-1/1132642952247910.xml>

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TIME ISN'T ON N.O.'S SIDE

NBA wants to see progress, but is city getting a fair shake?

Tuesday, November 22, 2005

John DeShazier

It's not personal, simply business.

That, Hornets owner George Shinn said, is why NBA commissioner David Stern set January as the deadline for the league to determine where the Hornets will play their home games next season.

"All NBA teams start planning for the season and renewing their season tickets in January," said Shinn, who was in New Orleans on Monday to attend the wall raising of the first of 20 houses that the franchise is collaborating with Habitat for Humanity to build for needy families.

I don't know all of the signs of recovery that will sate Stern and give him reason to "re-award" the Hornets to New Orleans and send them to New Orleans Arena for all or part of their home schedule next season. But the likelihood is that two months hardly will be sufficient time for the ravaged region to prove it can support an NBA team, and that the New Orleans/Oklahoma City Hornets could be a lot more Oklahoma City than New Orleans in the immediate, and distant, future.

If the deciding factors are having more businesses reopened and more fans returned home, we can't realistically expect either to be up to Stern scrutiny by the beginning, middle or end of January.

"Your brain will tell you if things are heading in the right direction," Shinn said.

It's already taken longer than it should have for city and state leaders to appear as though they are heading in the same direction -- not necessarily the right direction, just the same direction.

Which means expecting a commitment from Stern, who seems a lot less likely than NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue to bind the pro sports franchise under his watch to Louisiana, is a

long shot.

The Hornets don't have roots as entrenched or as spread out into Louisiana and Gulf Coast soil as the Saints. Passions over their possible relocation haven't erupted on a similar scale as they have with the Saints, partly because of their relative newness, partly because Shinn has had the good sense to say from the start, and at every ensuing opportunity, that it's his intention to return to New Orleans.

Now, if the Saints were allowed to make a break for it, the Hornets would be happy to fill the void. It's a lot easier to be prosperous in a one-horse pro town, like it was for the Hornets in those giddy first years in Charlotte, N.C., before the NFL Panthers came to town and before the relationship between Shinn and fans in Charlotte soured.

But not knowing whether the Saints actually will be allowed to bolt, no matter how vehemently owner Tom Benson wishes it to happen, the Hornets and Stern might be seeking a fast break of their own.

The team could -- emphasis on "could" -- play three games at the Arena in March, moving the last half of its six-game scheduled appearance at the Pete Maravich Assembly Center in Baton Rouge to its home facility. But that, too, contains more liquid than solid.

"I'd really like to play the three games in March (in New Orleans)," Shinn said. "The Arena looks like it will be ready. Will the city be ready? I don't want it to be an embarrassment to the city. I think it would be great, but it would only be great if it can be moderately successful.

"It will be a combination of two things. The Arena has got to be ready, and we've got to use our brain to make sure everything is right."

From New Orleans' perspective, so many factors, so little time.

From the NBA's perspective, just business.

Article 7

Minneapolis Star Tribune

11.22.2005

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Oklahoma City: A host with NBA hopes

An NBA franchise landed in Oklahoma City under the worst circumstances. But the locals have embraced the relocated Hornets and, frankly, wouldn't mind if they made the deal permanent.

Steve Aschburner, Star Tribune

Last update: November 22, 2005 at 11:56 PM

OKLAHOMA CITY - Little did Timberwolves owner Glen Taylor know that, when he stepped in to keep the sputtering NBA franchise in Minnesota in 1995, that he was rescuing it from a season of steamer trunks in Oklahoma.

Seriously, if you connect the dots, you can make a case that the Wolves, not the Hornets, would be the NBA team renting in Oklahoma City, displaced from their home in New Orleans by the trauma and destruction of Hurricane Katrina. That's where the Minnesota club, at least temporarily, was headed before NBA Commissioner David Stern blocked a sale and found Taylor as investor and savior.

Which means that, in some alternate reality, when the Wolves take the court tonight at the Ford Center for the first time, they will be facing ... themselves? Not literally, of course. But the visitors from up north might have a little empathy for players, coaches and support staff who have had a city yanked out from under them.

"They actually have played better, done better, than people expected," Taylor said Tuesday. "People would have been very sympathetic to them if they had started out hardly winning any. But [at 4-6] they have not done that.

"This is one of those times when we're not looking at another team as competition. We look at them as one of our family members. We're part of the NBA, and when a city has a disaster and a team is in trouble, the whole organization steps up to help.

"Now that I've said that, I hope we beat them anyway."

As disruptive as the Hornets' move from New Orleans has been, it pales next to the devastation visited upon that city, and their fans, in late August. Ain't nothin' easy any more about the Big Easy, and hosting 41 NBA games ranks far down its list of priorities. Still, folks there have begun to wonder if they will get their team back at all.

"I've got to be very careful of what I say because I don't want the commissioner to wring my neck," Hornets owner George Shinn said recently. "We're still planning to go back to New Orleans, but this is a situation here that I can't say enough positives about Oklahoma City."

New Orleans' pain has been Oklahoma City's gain in this storm-driven switcheroo, which is looking like equal parts evacuation, relocation, flirtation and infatuation.

Neither the New Orleans Arena nor the battered populace was capable of supporting an NBA season in 2005-06. But the dirty little secret is that the market was no raving success even in the best of times. After leaving Charlotte in 2002, the team blew through its curiosity factor in three seasons, sinking to the bottom in league attendance rankings. Finishing 18-64 last season didn't help, but the Hornets were a 41-41 playoff team in 2003-04 and still ranked 29th out of 30.

So far, through five home-away-from-home games, the Hornets have averaged 18,566. Financially, the franchise has a sweetheart deal with Oklahoma City: free rent at the NBA-worthy Ford Center and a guarantee of \$40 million in revenues, with up to \$10 million in shortfall covered by the city, the state and investors. If income exceeds \$40 million, the city will be compensated for housing and other costs it kicked into the deal, and anything beyond \$42.5 million will be split evenly between the team and the city.

Also, while New Orleans had only one major corporation sponsoring the Hornets, Oklahoma City has five, including Devon Energy Corp., Kerr-McGee and Chesapeake Energy. That's why city officials, even with modest calculations -- average attendance of 12,000 for 35 games, average ticket price of \$50 -- project a boost to the local economy of \$55 million to \$60 million.

City has felt ready

Not a bad windfall (literally) from a deal put together in three weeks in September. But then, Oklahoma City has felt ready for this for some time. It was one of six finalists when the NHL expanded by four teams in 1997, when the Wild landed in St. Paul, and it was considered briefly a few years later when Calgary was looking to move. And in April 2004, mayor Mick Cornett met with Stern to tout Oklahoma City for NBA expansion or relocation.

The Ford Center, after all, was built to NBA specifications, with almost 50 luxury suites and 3,000 club seats. And the league has a healthy history in so-called "one horse" markets, cultivating fan bases in places such as Sacramento, Orlando, San Antonio and Portland.

The basketball part has not been easy. Already referred to in some circles as "NOOCH" -- New Orleans/Oklahoma City Hornets, get it? -- the team might have an identity crisis for months. Lettering on the court at home reads "Oklahoma City," lettering on the road jerseys reads "New Orleans." The home white jerseys straddle, deadlocked simply as "Hornets."

"It's going to feel like we're on the road for all 82 games," guard Speedy Claxton said before the regular season. "Even when we come home, we're going to be living out of a suitcase."

Rookie stirs up excitement

On the court, rookie point guard Chris Paul has generated Allen Iverson-like excitement. But the Hornets traded a one-time All-Star center, Jamaal Magloire, as the season began for Milwaukee swingman Desmond Mason, a solid player but possibly marketing insurance (Mason attended Oklahoma State).

Said forward P.J. Brown, a Louisiana native: "This is new territory, new ground for everybody. ... These are tough circumstances but we'll have to manage them and do the best job we can do."

Should New Orleans be nervous? For now, Stern, Shinn and city officials are saying the right things. Oklahoma City knows what it is to suffer unexpectedly, tragically, and doesn't want to be seen as capitalizing on someone else's plight. Make no mistake, though: This is business as much as it is charity. For the puffed-up civic leaders, if this isn't an abduction, at least it is an audition.

"New Orleans is down and out," Taylor said. "There's a lot of pressure, even if you say business-wise it makes better sense to stay, where you don't want to pull a team under those circumstances.

"But Oklahoma City has done a lot of good work already. They shouldn't have to compete real hard after stepping up so well this year."

Article 8

USA TODAY

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http://www.usatoday.com/sports/basketball/nba/hornets/2005-11-22-oklahoma-city_x.htm

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Oklahoma City all abuzz over the Hornets

By Greg Boeck, USA TODAY

OKLAHOMA CITY — "Live your life so that whenever you lose, you are ahead."— Will Rogers, humorist and political satirist, 1879-1935

Oklahoma's favorite son would be proud of this city, 140 miles southwest of his Oologah birthplace. Some 80 years after he doled out that down-home advice, this reborn city has bear-hugged a team it will one day lose — but be ahead.

Fueling a vibrant renaissance of a downtown rocked by the federal building bombing that claimed 168 lives in 1995, Oklahoma City, almost overnight, has stamped itself as a red-hot big league sports property with its rousing embrace of the New Orleans Hornets. They're the NBA team displaced by Hurricane Katrina in September.

Love at first dribble. That's one way to explain this western-flaired city's instant attachment to a team relocated from the Deep South. Another is the kinship born out of shared tragedies.

"We can identify with New Orleans, big time," says Oklahoma City native Mike Wilson, 55.

Mayor Mick Cornett agrees. "It made us more sensitive to what they were going through. One (tragedy) was man-made, the other wasn't. But both cities probably went through a 'why us?' that's tough to come out of."

The Hornets sold 10,000 season tickets after the move was announced. After five games of 35 set for NBA-ready Ford Center, the team is playing to 97% of its 19,163-seat capacity — and feeding off the crowd with a surprising 4-6 start entering tonight's home game against the Minnesota Timberwolves.

"They've made us feel at home," says center P.J. Brown, whose flooded home in Slidell, La., sent his family to live in Humble, Texas, outside Houston. "There's energy throughout the whole city."

The major league sports-starved locals have so taken to the young Hornets, who were 18-64 and averaged a league-low 14,221 last season in New Orleans Arena, that coach Byron Scott marveled at the cheers his team heard coming off the court — after a loss.

"It was because of our effort," he says. "The people have been fantastic."

How rabid are fans, who line up at games to buy \$20 T-shirts and \$25 caps emblazoned with "Oklahoma City Hornets"? According to The Daily Oklahoman, two teens arrested last week for allegedly robbing a convenience store at knifepoint told police they wanted money for Hornets tickets so they could see professional basketball players.

Exceeding expectations

The NBA team is targeted to return to its flood-ravaged home, perhaps as early as March for three games. Owner George Shinn, who bought a home in Oklahoma City and comes to games in cowboy boots, has promised to bring home the team when the time is right.

But Oklahoma City, with a metropolitan population of 1.1 million that ranks it as the second-smallest market in the NBA ahead of only the Salt Lake City-based Utah Jazz, isn't expected to be left out in the NBA cold for long.

Once a sleepy cowboy town that rooted for college football teams in Norman (Oklahoma) and Stillwater (Oklahoma State) and claimed state-grown stars Mickey Mantle and Johnny Bench, the city has irreversibly proven itself a vital major league destination.

"It's beyond anything we expected or hoped for," NBA commissioner David Stern says. "The community stepped up big time — elected officials, the corporate sector and fans. In my view, they've moved to the top of the list if an NBA team were ready to move."

Prime prospects, with expansion not on the horizon: The Seattle Supersonics and Sacramento Kings, if neither resolves its lease negotiations, and the Orlando Magic if they fail to get the new arena they want.

"We had expectations, but they've been exceeded," says Clay Bennett, who championed the courtship of the Hornets on the business front. "There's pent-up demand in a much more sophisticated market than we even gave ourselves credit for."

"This," said Cornett, "is validation."

Hospitality 'overwhelming'

Originally, leaders at the forefront of the city's renaissance in the late '90s targeted the NHL for an expansion team in 1999 but came up empty-handed with the \$89 million Ford Center under construction. It opened in 2002 with the Blazers, a Central Hockey League team, and the Yard

Dawgz, an Arena Football League team, its main tenants.

Coupled with the '98 opening of SBC Bricktown Ballpark, home of the Class AAA Redhawks, and development of Bricktown, crown jewel of the downtown entertainment district, the city had everything but a big-league tenant.

That changed after Hurricane Katrina, just four months after Cornett left Stern's office in New York with no encouragement from the commissioner for an NBA team relocating.

Although Shinn pushed for Las Vegas, where the NBA will hold the 2007 All-Star Game, Stern convinced him to consider Oklahoma City. When he did, it was a slam dunk.

"It's been like a godsend," says Shinn, "short of a miracle. I've been overwhelmed by everything. To put a deal together like this in three weeks' time is unbelievable."

For Shinn, it's a sweetheart deal in which he bears no financial risks. If the Hornets fall short of earning \$40 million this season, the state, city and group of local investors will make up the difference up to \$10 million. Cornett, however, says the city is heading toward a break-even deal. Also, the deal provides 108 furnished apartments and a \$500,000 allowance to cover housing costs for employees, to be reimbursed by grants from FEMA, and furnished office space for staff, with rent and utilities provided by the city.

"The owners," says Shinn, "are very pleased."

He has embraced the city back. Shinn mandated all employees and players visit the memorial where the bombing occurred. "I want them to understand what this community went through, to see firsthand why they embraced us so much. They've been through it."

Shinn says he hasn't forgotten New Orleans. He returned Monday for groundbreaking on 20 houses the Hornets are building with Habitat for Humanity to help in the recovery project.

"Friends call and ask me when I'm coming back," he says. "I ask them, 'Are you coming back?' They say, 'Well, I'm coming back if New Orleans comes back.' And I say that's the wrong attitude. You can't wait and see. You have to do your part, help make this happen. That's why we're building the homes."

Twin followings boost team

Stern has set a Jan. 31 deadline for deciding whether to exercise the Hornets' option for returning to Oklahoma City next season. That's when the ticket drive for 2006-2007 starts. Although New Orleans Arena, which suffered minor damage, is expected to be ready as early as March, Stern says he doesn't want to return to the city full time if it's not in position to support the Hornets.

Also in January, Stern says he will consider playing three of the six games set for Baton Rouge in New Orleans Arena, starting in March.

Both Oklahoma City and New Orleans are following the Hornets on telecasts provided by Cox Communications TV Sports, the first time two markets are televising the same team. Ratings aren't available yet, says Cox's Rod Mickler, "But my gut is games are being viewed well in both markets. The numbers are high, if not higher than normal."

Newspapers in both towns are covering the team. Asked about interest in the Hornets in New Orleans, Doug Tatum, sports editor of The Times-Picayune, says it is hard to gauge. "So many people are focused on the recovery aspect. There is still a segment of the community interested in them, but it's not to the level of the Saints. We won't really be able to judge until a game in March is moved from Baton Rouge."

Although Shinn has promised the Hornets will return to the city they moved to from Charlotte in 2002, Tatum says there remains "definite concern" the team might never come home.

"Shinn has been positive, but Stern has been guarded, rightfully so," says Tatum. "There are concerns whether they can sell their suites, get the sponsorship needed and sustain a fan base."

Brown, who attended Louisiana Tech, says the players want to return home. "The people want us back, and we want to get back. But most importantly, people have to get their lives together, get jobs, get the economy going."

He says friends back home say they're watching the Hornets. "That's 21/2 hours they can get away from everything."

In Oklahoma City, locals celebrated the opener with a street party, and a rowdy, sell-out crowd watched the Hornets win. Big crowds followed the next four games. Not only was the appetite there for an NBA team, the price is right: Season tickets were available for \$999 in the lower bowl.

"We're proving to people we love sports other than football," says Charles Greene, 67.

"There's nothing like this here," says Jared Wilson, 22.

The team has responded in turn. "We owe them so much for coming out and supporting us," says rookie point guard Chris Paul. "It's like a college atmosphere here."

Cornett expects fan support to remain strong, even though the Hornets, with seven players with one year or less of NBA experience, are long shots to challenge for a playoff spot.

"They get a free pass from us," he says. "They're young, and they hustle. That's about all you can ask."

Swingman Desmond Mason played at nearby Oklahoma State. He knows about the divided college loyalty here. But that's changed with the arrival of the Hornets. "Now it's an opportunity to root for one team," he says.

Will Rogers would be proud.

Article 9

Seattle News Tribune

11.23.2005

<http://www.thenewstribune.com/sports/sonics/nba/story/5351615p-4844247c.html>

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Oklahoma City embraces displaced Hornets

News Tribune news services

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Herald News Daily

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Oklahoma City trying to be a major league draw

City has embraced relocated Hornets, wants to be permanent home

Updated: 2:15 p.m. ET Nov. 25, 2005

OKLAHOMA CITY - After years of quietly working to reinvent its downtown and shed its image as bombing victim, Oklahoma City has started screaming for attention.

The roar erupts on game nights at the Ford Center, where nearly 19,000 basketball fans leap to their feet, wave signs and drown out the announcer's call to welcome "your hometown Hornets!"

As the temporary home to New Orleans' displaced NBA team, Oklahoma City is seizing a rare chance in the national spotlight, hoping to show off a transformation that city leaders consider worthy of the major leagues.

Embracing the moment as a sales pitch, Mayor Mick Cornett has called for the city to "support this team with everything we've got."

The three-year-old downtown arena and the rest of a massive revitalization project has done much to lift the cloud of the 1995 federal building bombing from the state capital's heart.

A national memorial at the bomb site attracts visitors with its graceful and somber tribute to the 168 dead. But more uplifting changes are a few blocks south — where water taxis cruise past the canal-side dining of the Bricktown entertainment district's refurbished warehouses and families can take in a movie, a Triple-A baseball game and, since Nov. 1, NBA basketball.

"What people are finding when they come to Oklahoma City is that they'll be back," said Frank Sims, executive director of the Bricktown Association. "They can't get it all done."

The chance to highlight the city's efforts came, ironically enough, through another tragedy.

Two days after Hurricane Katrina knocked the Hornets from New Orleans, Cornett was on the phone with the NBA, offering up the arena that has hosted Britney Spears, the Rolling Stones and NCAA regional basketball tournament.

After the first five of 35 games planned in Oklahoma City this year, the Hornets ranked eighth in the NBA in attendance, drawing an average 18,566 fans. Cornett said the team is expected to boost the city's economy by \$50 million to \$150 million.

Doris Bell, a neatly coifed 64-year-old from nearby Norman, "wasn't even an NBA fan." But now she comes to the games with a turquoise "H" plastered on her face.

Hornets forward Brandon Bass, who sees little playing time but is nevertheless mobbed by fans, attests: "I get a lot of love in Oklahoma City just for being a Hornet."

Much of the renewal was funded by a temporary sales tax that voters approved in 1993. Public and private investment, including projects completed and those planned, add up to more than \$1.3 billion since 1996, said Dave Lopez, president of Downtown Oklahoma City Inc.

In the early 1990s, the city was still mired in the aftermath of the 1980s oil bust. Its convention center was outdated, and major concert tours passed up this metropolitan hub of more than 1 million people.

Even downtown's sometimes-dry North Canadian River was an embarrassment, prompting jokes about being the only river that had to be mowed twice a year.

The city built a new baseball park, updated the convention center, constructed the arena and dug a mile-long water canal to link Bricktown's restaurants and the entertainment venues. A new system of locks and dams has allowed the river — renamed the Oklahoma River — to host regattas.

The city's downtown turnaround is considered a model among other cities experiencing similar rebirths, including Little Rock, Ark., Nashville, Tenn. and Memphis, Tenn., said Christopher B. Leinberger, a Brookings Institution fellow who has helped transform more than 20 downtowns.

But Oklahoma City is only "halfway there," he said. The crux of downtown redevelopment is returning people there to live.

Projects that would add roughly 1,500 townhouses, homes, condos and apartments for downtown are in various stages of development. City leaders believe retail will follow.

The city also has long-term big-league aspirations, even though the mayor said no one is out to steal the Hornets from New Orleans.

If the NBA ever decides to expand, Commissioner David Stern recently said, "Oklahoma City is now at the top of the list."

Article 11
Ft. Worth Star-Telegram
11.25.2005
<http://www.dfw.com/ml/dfw/13255106.htm>

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MEDIA INSIDER

N'awlins to return, but will Hornets?

By JAN HUBBARD

Star-Telegram Staff Writer

The story of how the New Orleans Times-Picayune continued to publish in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is a riveting one. At first, the staff was going to stick it out in New Orleans. When it was obvious that reporters and editors would be over their heads - literally - they evacuated to nearby Houma, La.

A team of 12 reporters stayed in the city so that first-hand accounts could be authored. And the Times-Picayune never missed an edition, thanks in part to the Internet because it published online for three days.

The news was vital for regular readers, particularly those who had been evacuated and were living in shelters and couldn't wait to get the latest information from back home. And although there were issues of life and death and lost homes, the importance of sports became evident quickly.

One day, life in New Orleans would be at least close to normal. What was the future of the Saints? The Hornets? There were other issues - certainly the future of Tulane, not only the athletic department, but also the university as a whole.

But like corporations, it is the professional teams that can leave. And the passion engulfing that issue - particularly as it applies to the Saints, who came to New Orleans in 1966 - is profound.

So it was never a question of whether the Times-Picayune sports department would cover teams. It was how they would do it.

"We haven't backed off in any major kind of way," Doug Tatum, the sports editor, said by phone last week. "The paper has been great in saying: 'We're going to cover teams the way we've always covered them.' We're not sending as many people to Saints games as we did before. But we always have at least one."

The Saints, of course, have been toiled around terribly by the NFL, which required them to play a "home" game in New York against the Giants and will not have one time this year when they play back-to-back home games in a city where the players are living. So they travel every week - even to home games.

But while that causes competitive hardships, it's no better for the Saints beat writers. Brian Allee-Walsh lost his home in the hurricane, but has had little time to recover and has been living in a two-bedroom, one-bath apartment in San Antonio with Mike Triplett, the other beat writer, and covering the team while trying to rebuild his life.

The question, of course, is: Is it all in vain? Will the Saints ever be New Orleans' home team again? Saints owner Tom Benson has made some insensitive, although perhaps honest and realistic, comments about the Saints' future. To the civilized and uncivilized sports world, the following scenario makes perfect sense:

Next year, the Saints play the full season in San Antonio.

In 2007, they either stay in San Antonio or move to Los Angeles, the city of Angels, where "Saints" will be an appropriate nickname. (Actually, "Saints" works pretty well in San Antonio, too).

Tatum, however, is convinced that the Saints will return to New Orleans.

"Everything we're hearing from the NFL - and we'll know in January because they're going to release the Saints' schedule early - is that they're going to play in Louisiana in 2006," he said. "They say the Superdome is going to be ready in October, although it might not be until December. The

Sugar Bowl may be the first game played there. But I think they'll play here in 2006. We'll see. It's so hard to predict how fast the city will recover."

If there is one certainty, it is that New Orleans will eventually lose the Hornets, who are infinitely less important because they've been in New Orleans only three years. Last season, they ranked 30th in the 30-team league in attendance. This year in Oklahoma City, they rank sixth in the league in season ticket sales.

New Orleans city officials have stated that the Hornets have a contract to play next season in New Orleans if the facility is operable, which it will be. But the opinion here is that it won't matter. The Hornets may have to go back to New Orleans for one year, then move to Oklahoma City in 2007-08. You can bet lawyers for the NBA and the Hornets have already dissected the lease and know exactly how to get out of it.

But it makes sense. Why would the Hornets want to go back to being 30th in attendance? The NBA is simply being smarter about the issue than the NFL and the Saints, although NBA commissioner David Stern did slip when he said before a game in Oklahoma City: "I can say without reservation that Oklahoma City is now at the top of the list," for the next team.

Let's see. Oklahoma City is at the top of the list - a list that apparently didn't exist before, except, perhaps, for Las Vegas. But which team is most likely to move while Oklahoma City is at the top of the list?

Regardless of the Hornets' future, the Times-Picayune continues its coverage. Reporters Jimmy Smith and John Reid cover the team and alternate months living in Oklahoma City to cover "home" games. Smith also lost his house in the hurricane.

"It's been tough because people are out of town and unable to see their families," Tatum said. "But I think everyone is dedicated to their job and to seeing the city rebuilt. It's coming back slowly, but it's coming back. I was named sports editor on Oct. 24 and I've been trying to hire a deputy. I took three people out to lunch this week, and took them to the [French] Quarter. We had great meals. The Quarter's doing fine. It's not 100 percent, but it's open.

"I'm an optimist. I think city is going to bounce back pretty quickly. But a big part of our story has been what's going to happen with the future of the Saints because it impacts the city. When you rebuild a city, sports is part of it."

And when you are the newspaper covering that city, making sure readers are informed about the future is part of the job. So is covering the team every day and every game, no matter the cost monetarily or the sacrifices required of writers. The Times-Picayune has been determined and responsible in its coverage, which is more than you can say for some of the teams and institutions that it is covering.

Article 12

Fox Sports

11.26.2005

<http://msn.foxsports.com/other/story/5090372>

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These franchises are in need of a makeover

Jeff Gordon / Special to FOXSports.com

Every professional sports team requires repair from time to time because change is inevitable in such a brutally competitive business.

But there are some sad-sack franchises that need extreme makeovers. There are teams that need to see sledgehammers, jackhammers and the wrecking ball ASAP — like, say, the Tampa Bay Devil Rays.

* * *

New Orleans/Oklahoma City Hornets

Owner George Shinn is what you would call a newsmaker. In Charlotte, he lost his protracted fight to get a new arena built for him. He also had a variety of other headline-grabbing problems, including a civil sexual assault suit and an ugly divorce.

He moved the team to New Orleans in 2002, briefly causing a stir. Last year, the Hornets finished 18-64 and ranked at the bottom of the NBA in attendance. The team's future seemed pretty bleak.

Sadly, Hurricane Katrina gave this team an extreme makeover — forcing its move to a more affluent city starved for professional sports. But now the Hornets play most of their home games in Oklahoma City ... before raucous sellout crowds.

That is helping speed the building process. "We have to learn how to win, how to keep playing and keep fighting," coach Byron Scott said.

It's unknown if the NBA will let Shinn keep his team in Oklahoma City, but it seems like a good idea.

Article 13

Houston Chronicle

11.27.2005

<http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/sports/3486103.html>

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Shinn still set on going back to N.O.

By FRAN BLINEBURY

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OKLAHOMA CITY - They'll be walking to New Orleans. Eventually.

That's what Hornets owner George Shinn says about his NBA franchise, despite the warm reception he has received in Oklahoma.

"We're going back," Shinn said. "No question about it. We're going home to New Orleans as soon as it's possible."

It is that kind of talk — even if it's only wishful thinking, for now — that has kept Shinn from getting the criticism that has been heaped on waffling New Orleans Saints owner Tom Benson.

Shinn and the Hornets are working with Habitat For Humanity and broke ground this month to build 20 homes in New Orleans.

"It is our plan to have the Hornets representing New Orleans and playing in New Orleans," NBA commissioner David Stern said.

The Hornets have an option to return to Oklahoma City for a second season and likely will have to make that decision by February. The team has six games this season scheduled to be played in Baton Rouge, but there is talk of moving the final three games to New Orleans.

"We need to make sure we're going to have a good crowd and that they're pumped up, because the national media's going to be there," Shinn said.

[Preseason](#)[November](#)[DECEMBER](#)[January](#)[February](#)[March](#)[April](#)**Article 14****Mercury News**

12.1.2005

<http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/sports/13291490.htm>

(now a bad link)

[Top](#)[Back](#)[Next](#)**Oklahoma City has caught the pro basketball bug**

BY MARK EMMONS

Knight Ridder Newspapers

SAN JOSE, Calif. - Their road uniforms still are emblazoned with "New Orleans." But forgive the NBA's Hornets for being a little confused about where exactly to call home.

This vagabond franchise, just a few years removed from Charlotte, was chased out of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, which ravaged The Big Easy with heartbreaking fury. It found shelter from the storm, and a welcoming red carpet, in Oklahoma City.

But the Hornets don't know where they will play next year. And while their official temporary name is the New Orleans/Oklahoma City Hornets, it hasn't exactly stuck.

"No one has created a perfect moniker yet that's caught on," said Roy Williams, head of the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce. "Sometimes you see Oklahoma City/N.O. Other times it's New Orleans/OKC. Or it will be just New Orleans or Oklahoma City. Right now, they're still Jekyll and Hyde."

Here's another label to attach to the Hornets: surprising. In O-kla-homa, where the wind comes sweeping down the plain, the Hornets also have managed to find some victories. The team, which started last season 2-29 en route to an 18-64 year, is 6-7.

And the silver lining to this story of a team caught up in a natural disaster is that Oklahoma City - eager to make a statement about being a big-league town - has gone crazy over the Hornets. The team is averaging 18,656 spectators and has sold out three of its first six home games.

That warm reception has prompted the question of whether the Hornets will ever return to New Orleans. In many ways, the franchise is symbolic of the larger discussion about the city's future.

"From strictly a business standpoint, maybe it seems like a slam-dunk to stay here," said team spokesman Michael Thompson. "But we're from New Orleans. Our homes were under water and our friends are in dire straits. The last thing New Orleans needs to hear right now is that it's going to lose something else because of the storm."

Unlike the NFL, which has suffered a public-relations disaster with Saints owner Tom Benson seeming to posture for a move in the hurricane's wake, the NBA and the Hornets are being careful to take a wait-and-see approach about a return. Oklahoma City officials, who know all about tragedy after enduring the 1995 federal courthouse bombing, also are sensitive.

"From Day One we have acknowledged that this is New Orleans' team," Williams said. "If they go back to New Orleans, they'll return with our fondest memories and best wishes. But if circumstances arise where that can't happen, then our door is open."

In fact, it's wide open.

Oklahoma City is only the 45th-largest TV market and has about 1.25 million residents in the metro area. It also has no national standing.

When the Hornets had to relocate, Oklahoma City offered its 19,675-seat Ford Center, which was built as part of a failed attempt to lure an NHL expansion team and opened in 2002. The city also provided office space, employee housing and up to \$10 million in guarantees to cover any revenue shortfalls. But the Hornets have been so popular - selling 10,000 season tickets - that the city will make money.

"What we've always suffered from here is a sort of non-image," Williams said. "But being able to support an NBA franchise conveys a message. It tells people that there's a real city there. It makes us a player."

If the Hornets do go home, Oklahoma City has proved - like other one-horse NBA cities such as Sacramento - that it has caught the pro basketball bug. Commissioner David Stern said if any other team were to move, Oklahoma would be the top destination.

The fan support has been off the charts. The Hornets traded former All-Star center Jamaal Magloire to Milwaukee for swingman Desmond Mason - a move that gave the locals more interest in the team (Mason attended Oklahoma State). But the Hornets also have played far better than expected.

Chris Paul, a candidate for rookie of the year, is averaging 16.8 points, 6.6 assists and 5.3 rebounds. Speedy Claxton, who came to the Hornets in the deal last season that brought Baron Davis to the Warriors, has been a revelation, averaging 13.2 points and 4.5 assists off the bench.

It's been a honeymoon - and one noticed by New Orleans' newspaper, the Times-Picayune. It noted Sunday that the temporary home could become a permanent one because "the NBA can't close its eyes to what's going on in a city where there's no competition for the entertainment dollar and very little to do in a city for night-time enjoyment. In that sense, New Orleans can't compete with Oklahoma City ..."

The Hornets leaving New Orleans would be much easier to take than a Saints departure because the NBA team arrived in 2002, while the NFL franchise has been part of the city's fabric for decades. Hornets owner George Shinn, who knows what it's like to be a community pariah after wearing out his welcome in Charlotte, has bought a house in Oklahoma. But with six games later this season scheduled to be played in Louisiana, Shinn says publicly that the team belongs to New Orleans.

It's still where the hearts of team employees reside. Thompson lived less than a mile from where the 17th Street Canal levee broke. He returned to his condo for the first time over the Thanksgiving weekend to find it an almost total loss. Now he, his wife and 6-week-old daughter - born just after the hurricane - are in corporate housing in Norman, Okla.

"All of us have those moments, where it's 2 a.m. in the morning and you think, 'Man, how did we end up here?'" Thompson said. "Oklahoma City has been great to us, but this is not our house and it's not our stuff. You think sometimes, 'I just want to go home. Can I do that please?'"

Article 15

Rocky Mountain News

12.5.2005

http://rockymountainnews.com/drmn/nba/article/0,2777,DRMN_23922_4289896,00.html (now a bad link)

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For the record, crowds are coming out in droves

December 5, 2005

NEW YORK - The NBA is on pace to set an attendance record for the third consecutive season after drawing a league-record average of 17,222 a game in November.

More than 3.7 million spectators have attended NBA games this season. The record was set last season, when the league drew more than 23 million combined for regular-season and playoff games.

Scott O'Neil, the league's senior vice president of marketing and team business, praised players for being more active in undertakings such as welcoming spectators to games and signing autographs.

"We've spent a lot of time and energy talking to teams and coaches and GMs about how important the fans are," he said. "Players are as invested in fans as we are."

Detroit, Chicago and Dallas all have averaged more than 20,000 at home. The most impressive figure has been in Oklahoma City, where the Hornets are among the league leaders in home attendance after being forced out of New Orleans because of Hurricane Katrina.

Article 16
Boston Globe

12.11.2005

[http://www.boston.com/sports/basketball/articles/2005/12/11/buzz_is_go
od_in_oklahoma/](http://www.boston.com/sports/basketball/articles/2005/12/11/buzz_is_go_od_in_oklahoma/)

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Buzz is good in Oklahoma

By Peter May | December 11, 2005

You're doing fine, Oklahoma.

Sure, it could be the NBA version of First Baby Syndrome, sort of like the Red Sox last year. But something is going on in Oklahoma City that leads to one of two inescapable scenarios: Either the Hornets remain there or someone else relocates there.

The mayor of Oklahoma City, Mick Cornett, thinks that his city may well end up hosting the Hornets for another season. As Cornett put it last week in a telephone interview, "I'm hearing there's a decent chance the team will be here for another year."

The NBA sees Oklahoma City, for now anyway, as the interim home of the Hornets. In a chat on ESPN.com last week, commissioner David Stern said, the Hornets "are indeed doing great in OKC. But as far as we're concerned, it's an interim, temporary home. It is our present intention to keep the team in New Orleans."

Stern has promised the Oklahoma City folks he will let them know in January as to what is at stake for 2006-07. That's because in some cases, season-ticket renewals go out in February. It makes sense, then, to send the renewals to the right people. The people of Oklahoma City have spoken loud and clear: Send them to us. We will buy them and we will come.

They make a compelling case. The Hornets of OKC sold more than 11,000 season tickets, which, according to a team official, ranked them sixth in the NBA. The Hornets of NO were 29th in season-ticket sales. The Hornets of OKC were ranked seventh in attendance as of last week. The Hornets of NO were ranked 30th -- dead last -- in 2004-05. The OKC Hornets are drawing more than 4,000 fans a game more than the NO Hornets did.

It's been a remarkable tale. In a matter of weeks, the movers and shakers in Oklahoma City put together a number of lucrative sponsorships and the franchise now broadcasts games into two

territories. The fans appear to be genuinely exuberant (although standing until the first Hornets basket is scored is a bit much) and more than 18,000 braved brutal weather last Wednesday to catch the Celtics in their only visit. The Ford Center was designed with NBA and NHL specifications and is a top-notch venue.

"It's real. It's there," local businessman/rainmaker Clay Bennett said of the breadth and depth of the community support for the team. "We need to be cautious. But we want a team."

The return to New Orleans is a sticky wicket, both politically and economically. Much of the city and its environs are still in ruins. Some employees of the New Orleans Hornets, who were each given \$1,000 in storm support money by owner George Shinn (and another \$1,000 if they moved to Oklahoma City) still cannot return to their homes. The team's broadcasting director, Lew Shuman, has turned over his house in Slidell, which suffered minimal damage, to the team's equipment manager, whose family has moved in because its house is uninhabitable.

According to The New York Times, the post-Katrina unemployment rate was 15.5 percent, only 10 percent of the city's operational buses are up and running, and only one public school (out of 116) was open. While Shinn has said he sees the team returning to the Big Easy, how can the NBA go marchin' back in to that tune? I can't see it. Not when the decision has to be made in January.

Down the road, of course, there is the Shinn Issue: Specifically, if the league doesn't go back to New Orleans, is he free to move his team somewhere else (La\$ Vega\$)?

For now, you have a city supporting a relocated team with a fervor unseen in New Orleans or, for that matter, in Charlotte the last couple of years. That should count for something.

"It is my opinion," said Cornett, "that the NBA will find us a franchise. If it's not this one, there are always a number of teams looking for that better lease or a better opportunity. We can support one pro team, not two. We could be a one-team city like a Utah or a Portland. We can do the NBA or the NHL. I've told Stern and [NHL commissioner Gary] Bettman that the first one wins. We can't do both."

Agreed Bennett, "We hope and expect that New Orleans does rebound in a healthy way. That aside, we have cultivated a very serious market for the NBA. And unlike [college] football, it's a central, unifying thing that the whole state embraces."

Article 17

Salt Lake City Tribune

12.12.2005

http://www.sltrib.com/sports/ci_3299444 (no longer available)

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Clemons: Fans make difference for struggling teams

By Jim Clemons

This season, my team, the New Orleans Hornets, is playing its home games in Oklahoma City and, frankly, we're not the greatest team in the NBA. Yet the smallest home crowd we have played before thus far is 17,500 people.

From the perspective of a professional coach, that's a heck of a statement.

It takes a lot of energy to support a team that is struggling, like mine. Fans who stick with their teams during lean years should be commended for their faithfulness.

You can't overestimate what it means to the team.

My team, one of the league's worst last season, has been hovering around .500, and I think that's at least partially due to the support we have received from the fans.

Fans should know that players and coaches don't take them for granted, that they want and know they need their support to succeed.

There are a number of teams in the league in the same boat as mine, striving to successfully compete. Unfortunately, a lot of fans think their team is better than it really is, especially if it's getting beaten up night in and night out, and have unrealistic expectations. A lot of fans just don't really understand and appreciate what it takes to build a consistent winner in this league, and what a team has to endure in order to become competitive again.

One thing that's very important for fans to understand is that there's nobody out on the court trying to lose games. The players, the coaches, the organization itself, they all do truly feel the fans' pain from losing.

In fact, we feel it more profoundly than anyone.

The problem for many franchises is that they've drafted young players who are not yet ready to assume the type of responsibility it takes to win. When you have a young team, it's simply going to take time for it to mature. You have to look beyond tomorrow.

If I were to attend a game as a fan, I would not boo my struggling team. What I would insist on knowing, first off, is the big picture for my team. What's the owner's vision? Has he hired the right basketball people? What's the coach's philosophy? Have the players bought into it?

If so, then I see my job as being supportive of my team. I wouldn't get on the officials or the players. I'd support my guys, because this is the time they need it most.

Remember, when you have a bad day at the office, you suffer through it on your own. When ballplayers have a bad day, as they will as they are only human, then it's on display for the entire world. A fan's job, I believe, is to have empathy for his team and players on those days. Some nights they're just going to stink it up. That's when I'd be the biggest cheerleader that team has. Maybe two days from now, that team will find a way to get through a bad night, to win anyway, to mature.

There's an old saying in my profession: When things are going well, you're not as good as you think; when you're down, you're not as bad as you think.

Article 18
Times-Picayune
12.14.2005
<http://www.nola.com/sports/t-p/index.ssf?/base/sports-21/1134543356245240.xml>

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SOONER SURPRISE

The Hornets were wary of what to expect when displaced to Oklahoma City, but they have captivated the normally football-zany fans

Wednesday, December 14, 2005

By John Reid
Staff writer

OKLAHOMA CITY -- Throughout Oklahoma City last week, frigid temperatures forced the cancellation of several social events. But on the night the Boston Celtics were in town, a near sellout crowd of 18,753 still came out to cheer on the Hornets.

It was another example of the success the team has enjoyed in Oklahoma City.

Despite their temporary relocation from New Orleans because of Hurricane Katrina and having just 45 days for a ticket-sales campaign before the opening game, the Hornets now have a season-ticket base approaching 11,500 when full- and mini- plans are combined.

Entering tonight's home game against the Los Angeles Clippers, the Hornets are averaging an attendance of 18,738 per game and rank seventh in the 30-team league. That puts them ahead of larger-market teams such as the Cleveland Cavaliers (18,560), New York Knicks (18,130) and Washington Wizards (17,093).

The Hornets are also among the league's leaders in sellouts, with four in the first seven games played at the 19,163-seat Ford Center.

"We expected nothing like this," team president Paul Mott said. "The difference is all the season tickets we've sold. If you're going to try and build toward a sellout, it starts with full-season tickets."

That kind of support has turned the Ford Center into one of the loudest venues in the league, making it a difficult place for opponents to play.

"They're great fans for us and not for the visitors," Hornets coach Byron Scott said. "They're not throwing obscene gestures or anything like that, but they are loud and it's been a treat. I can't remember one game where I didn't have to scream out instructions to Chris (Paul) or had to use hand signals because he couldn't hear me."

Veteran P.J. Brown said it makes a difference, something he didn't expect when the Hornets initially made the move.

"I thought after football, there is nothing else," Brown said. "But people have another option, and they've shown big-time support for us. Everywhere we go people tell us how glad they are that we are here. It shows you how popular the NBA is around the country."

Until this season, the Hornets have not averaged crowds of more than 18,000 since the strike-shortened 1998-99 season, when they averaged 19,232 in Charlotte, N.C.

The Hornets led the NBA in attendance from 1990 to 1997 in Charlotte, averaging more than 23,000 per game. By the team's final season in Charlotte, Hornets owner George Shinn had begun to rub fans the wrong way and attendance dropped to an average of 11,286.

The Hornets averaged 15,651 and ranked 19th in the league during their inaugural season in New Orleans in 2002-03. By their second season, though, the Hornets had dropped to 28th with a 14,332 average. In their third year, the Hornets finished 18-64 and an average attendance of 14,221, worst in the league.

The Hornets were one of the eight teams that needed to improve sales and marketing strategies that was assigned to Mott, who was working in the NBA office as senior director of team marketing and business development.

"When I first started, I didn't feel the Hornets organization had done a good enough job of identifying existing fans and then making some new fans," said Mott, who was hired by Shinn as team president in April, eight days after the regular season ended.

"But I believed, over time, we were going to build our fan base in New Orleans. Like here, there are great sports fans in New Orleans, and all the fans I talked to knew the game, knew the players and were excited about it."

Some fans in Oklahoma City specifically purchased season tickets to help the city's chances of

landing the Hornets permanently. There are others with no motive other than to see quality teams and all-star-caliber players, regardless of whether the Hornets stay beyond one season.

Before the Hornets' came, Oklahoma City was known as a metro area that supported its minor league hockey team and Triple-A baseball team, but the college football programs at Oklahoma and Oklahoma State garnered the most attention. Now nothing in town is bigger than a Hornets game.

"My wife and I are just basketball fans," said David Pagels, a season-ticket holder from Oklahoma City. "Before the Hornets came, we used to go down to Dallas and make a weekend by watching the Mavericks play. We're going to support the Hornets if they are back next year. If they're not back, we'll have to drive to Dallas."

Like in New Orleans before Katrina, the Hornets offered the same \$999 lower bowl season ticket to Oklahoma City fans until the packages sold out. Most of the seating sections are priced almost identical to what was offered in New Orleans.

The attraction of seeing some of the top stars for the first time is what brought Oklahoma City resident Aaron Nees out last Wednesday to see Boston's Paul Pierce, despite a weather forecast calling for two inches of snow for the area.

"Hopefully, they be here again next year," Nees said. "I know they have an option in their contract to come back if they don't get New Orleans reconstructed. I don't think they'll get it done by next year. Maybe they will."

Article 19
Times-Picayune
12.17.2005
<http://www.nola.com/sports/t-p/index.ssf?/base/sports-21/1134808175125770.xml>

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Shinn: Hornets aim to return
Saturday, December 17, 2005
By Benjamin Hochman
Staff writer

BATON ROUGE -- Hornets owner George Shinn said Friday it's possible the team could split its home games next season between New Orleans and Oklahoma City, and he said a decision should be made by early February.

Speaking at the Hornets' first regular-season game in Louisiana since Hurricane Katrina, Shinn said his goal is to bring the team back to New Orleans.

"Fortunately, we're generating enough revenues (in Oklahoma City)," Shinn said. "And if we have to stay another year, it will help us so we can be strong so we can come back and be strong here. We're building and getting ourselves solid and strong, and we want New Orleans to help and do the same thing."

The Hornets have five more games scheduled for the Pete Maravich Assembly Center, where they lost 101-88 against the Phoenix Suns before 7,302 fans Friday night. Shinn said the two games scheduled for January will be played in Baton Rouge, but it is possible the three in March could be played at New Orleans Arena, which sustained minor damage from Katrina.

Shinn said it is imperative the team makes a thorough decision and doesn't rush back to New Orleans when the city isn't ready.

"It's important that we do the right thing, because if we play a game in New Orleans and 1,500 people show up, that's not going to look good for anyone, not the NBA or New Orleans," Shinn said. "What we've got to do is put our heads together with the state, city and NBA to make the right decision about what's best not only for us but New Orleans."

Hornets president Paul Mott, who toured damaged areas of New Orleans with NBA deputy commissioner Russ Granik on Friday, said he hopes that by mid-January a decision could be made on the Hornets' home for next season.

"I think the media in other parts of the country has portrayed a city that's dead and gone," Mott said. "And Russ Granik said it very well, when he was glad to see there are people here, business is proceeding, and the city is building and growing."

The hurricane displacement was frustrating for Shinn, who felt the team was economically rejuvenated after the hiring of Mott and other key marketing administrators.

"It turned that thing around," Shinn said. "So the potential's there."

In Oklahoma City, the Hornets have become the hottest ticket in town -- in a city where they're the only ticket in town. The Hornets, who finished 30th in the league in attendance last season, are seventh in attendance this season. But when Mott was asked if success in the Sooner State will affect a decision about moving to New Orleans, Shinn stepped in and said no.

"I look at that whole situation as us being blessed. We have been through hell," Shinn said. "And a lot of us, we're on our knees asking for help. And during this difficult time, if we weren't generating the revenues we're generating now, we'd really be suffering. We have a staff of people, and we have to pay everything from housing to cell phone to food. Plus their salaries."

"I've got all the confidence in the world that New Orleans is coming back. I think the question all of us have to answer is -- when?"

Article 20

San Antonio Express-News

12.18.2005

<http://www.mysanantonio.com/sports/stories/MYSA121805.12C.COL.BK.Nmonroe.2a691f3.html>

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Mike Monroe: Oklahoma City emerges a gallant host

Web Posted: 12/18/2005 12:00 AM CST

San Antonio Express-News

One of the best story lines of the first quarter of the regular season — time flies when you're checking hemlines — has been the improved play of the Hornets, the NBA's Orphans of the Storm.

Oklahoma City opened its hearts — not to mention its pocketbooks — to the displaced franchise after Hurricane Katrina, offering a sweetheart deal for the team to play at its downtown Ford Center.

Politicians there were careful not to seem, ahem, like vultures, saying only that they understood civic tragedy, wanted to do what they could to help, and if the community could prove itself capable of having its own major league pro sports franchise some day, well, that would be a nice bonus.

The Ford Center has become a tough place for visitors to play, and Oklahomans filled it, even when it snowed. The Hornets' Ford Center attendance average of 18,559 ranks seventh in the league.

The first of six games the Hornets are scheduled to play in Baton Rouge took place Friday night. Only 7,300 showed up at Pete Maravich Assembly Center on the LSU campus to see it.

The Suns outscored the Hornets 37-10 in the fourth quarter in Baton Rouge to score a 101-88 victory, and you have to wonder if they would have been able to accomplish the same kind of comeback had the game been played before the howling assemblage typical of Ford Center.

This underscores the question the Hornets and the NBA now face: Should the team return to New Orleans Arena for three games scheduled for Baton Rouge in March?

Don't bet against it. For one thing, there seems to be little question the arena can be game-ready by March.

NBA deputy commissioner Russ Granik visited New Orleans Arena, along with Hornets president Paul Mott and officials of the SMG arena management company and the state of Louisiana, which owns the 3--year-old facility located just a few blocks from the Superdome.

Granik chose his words carefully in discussing the possibility of playing games in New Orleans Arena this season.

"I'm not certain about that," Granik said in a telephone interview Saturday. "They (SMG officials) certainly are very confident, and I have high regard for the SMG people. They seem very, very confident they'll have it ready by March 1. There are a couple of additional pieces of information they will provide us in the coming weeks, and we should make a judgment on that by the early part of January."

But having the Hornets play games at New Orleans Arena this season involves a lot more than just having the arena in shape to host the games. Given the tragedy the city endured when Katrina hit Aug. 29, team, league, city and state officials fret about the possibility of sending the wrong message if the Hornets do play a home game there and nobody turns out to see it.

"It's important we do the right thing," Hornets owner George Shinn told reporters who covered Friday's game in Baton Rouge, "because if we play a game in New Orleans and 1,500 people show up, that's not going to look good for anyone, not the NBA or New Orleans. What we've got to do is put our heads together with the state, city and NBA to make the right decision about what's best, not only for us, but for New Orleans."

By all accounts, the vast majority of the 7,300 who turned out for Friday's game had made the drive from New Orleans to Baton Rouge, so Shinn's pessimism about drawing only 1,500 in the Big Easy in March seems misplaced.

More to the point: The Hornets have a lease to play at New Orleans Arena. If they play there in March, could they reasonably assert next season they need to return to Oklahoma City?

Then there are the logistical problems associated with changing venues in midseason.

"We just have to make a decision about the building," Granik said Saturday, "and then with the state and arena people we have to decide what makes most sense, just from a practical matter. To be moving games around, back and forth, is not the ideal thing to do. In addition to whether the arena is ready, we have to decide what is practical."

The guess here is that the Hornets will, indeed, play in their true home arena this season, even if it is only for one game. Such a return would be an emotional, symbolic benchmark for a city trying to revive itself after Katrina's devastation.

A game like that might even draw a full house.

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The Oklahoman
12.20.2005
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By Berry Tramel
The Oklahoman

Hornets owner George Shinn soon plans to solicit local investors for his NBA franchise that has been a stunning success in its three months in Oklahoma City.

Shinn, who took on a big debt when he bought out partner Ray Wooldridge last year when the franchise was in New Orleans, is seeking limited partners.

He does not want to relinquish control of the team that relocated to Oklahoma City after Hurricane Katrina swamped New Orleans.

"I think it's important, if you're going to have owners, have 'em from the community where you are," Shinn said.

Calls to Oklahoma City business leaders were not returned.

The New Orleans Times-Picayune reported that Shinn took on significant debt to buy out Wooldridge's 35 percent of the team.

Shinn paid Wooldridge at least \$67 million, according to the reports, which would place the Hornets' value at approximately \$191 million.

In Forbes magazine's 2004 list of NBA franchise values, the Hornets were estimated to be worth \$225 million.

The three most recently sold franchises went for much more: the Phoenix Suns for \$401 million in 2004; the Cleveland Cavaliers for \$375 million in 2005; and the Boston Celtics for \$365 million in 2004.

The Charlotte Bobcats became an expansion franchise for \$300 million.

Hornets President Paul Mott said it probably is impossible to determine the franchise's worth, since it is in flux.

Shinn and NBA Commissioner David Stern have said the Hornets will return to New Orleans, if possible.

But the Hornets were 30th out of 30 NBA teams in attendance in 2004-05. With the rebuilding of New Orleans moving slowly and the success of the Hornets in Oklahoma City, there is speculation the franchise could remain here permanently.

Shinn said he would commit to buying back the shares of local investors should the Hornets leave Oklahoma City.

Shinn and Mott had begun a similar process in New Orleans but had not entered into any commitments when the storm struck that city.

Mott said the minimum investment level is two percent, which could range anywhere from \$4 million to \$6 million, depending on the settled value of the franchise.

Mott said the Hornets will present plans to prospective investors beginning in January.

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ESPN

12.21.2005

<http://sports.espn.go.com/nba/news/story?id=2266712>

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Hornets owner says he's selling shares in team

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY -- New Orleans Hornets owner George Shinn acknowledged Tuesday that he is looking to bring aboard investors for a minority stake in the NBA franchise.

Shinn said he has been seeking investors since he bought out Roy Woodriddle's 35 percent share of the team last year.

"Before I left New Orleans, I bought out my partner over a year ago and I was looking to retire that debt and to find investors," Shinn said Tuesday at the City Rescue Mission, where the team was distributing shoes to homeless people.

"I like to have investors. I like to have people I can consult with, talk to, get advice from because it does get lonely at the top when you're by yourself making multimillion dollar decisions."

Shinn disputed a report that he was seeking investors specifically from the Oklahoma City area, saying instead that they could come from anywhere.

"I'm looking for investors, not necessarily in Oklahoma, but all over the country," Shinn said. "There's people all over the country that are interested in investing."

Shinn said he had been looking for investors even before the Aug. 29 hurricane caused the team to relocate, and an investment group is resuming that effort now.

"I haven't called on one soul in this community. It's not a situation that I'm out here soliciting in this market," Shinn said. "It's something that we're doing nationally and have been doing before the storm and will continue to do."

Shinn and the NBA have both said they plan for the Hornets to return to New Orleans if possible. The team has a one-year agreement to play in Oklahoma City, with a team option for next season. He said the plan does "not to mean that I'm trying to get investors here so I'll stay here" and said investors could even come from New Orleans.

"We do have candidates from New Orleans that are very interested and the investment group that's working with us is talking to people there," he said.

The Hornets ranked last in the NBA in attendance last season in New Orleans, but have sold out five of their 10 games in Oklahoma City. Their average attendance of 18,669 at Oklahoma City games would rank seventh out of the 30 NBA teams.

If anyone in Oklahoma City invested in the Hornets on the contingency that the team remain there, Shinn said he would commit to buying back their shares.

"Community ownership is no doubt a key factor in the success of sports franchises," Clayton Bennett, the leader of a local business group that took on \$3.3 million of risk if the Hornets' move to Oklahoma City was a financial failure, said in a statement.

"At this moment the NBA is engaged in a thoughtful process to determine where the Hornets will play next year. Until that decision is made, any discussion about local ownership is premature in my opinion."

Shinn said he didn't have a specific share of the team that he planned to sell.

"I would sell up to 49 percent," Shinn said. "I'm going to always maintain control, as long as I'm alive anyway."

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The Oklahoman

12.21.2005

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Area businessmen willing to talk to Hornets

By Berry Tramel

Two prominent Oklahoma City businessmen say they would be willing to talk with Hornets owner George Shinn, who is seeking local investors for his NBA franchise, but both expressed reservations.

Clay Bennett, who headed the corporate push that helped bring the Hornets to town, said Tuesday that local ownership is important for a franchise but it is premature, considering the Hornets' unsettled fate.

Bob Funk, who owns Express Personnel, the Oklahoma City Blazers hockey team and Oklahoma RedHawks baseball club, said Tuesday that he and Shinn would be in contact. But Funk said he generally is not excited about being a minority partner.

Shinn does not want to sell controlling interest in his franchise, which relocated from New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and has been a box-office sensation in Oklahoma City's Ford Center. Shinn had been seeking investors to the team before its relocation.

Tuesday, Bennett, president of private investment firm Dorchester Capital, released a statement that said: "We are focused on this year and making it a complete success for our city. The support the Hornets continue to receive from fans, sponsors and pioneer partners in Oklahoma City has exceeded expectations. Every indication so far points to success.

"Community ownership is no doubt a key factor in the success of sports franchises. At this moment, the NBA is engaged in a thoughtful process to determine where the Hornets will play next year. Until that decision is made, any discussion about local ownership is premature, in my opinion."

Article 24

Times-Picayune

12.31.2005

<http://www.nola.com/sports/t-p/index.ssf?base/sports-21/113603656455090.xml>

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CREATING A BUZZ -- ELSEWHERE

The Hornets say they are committed to returning to the city, but the success of the team in Oklahoma City -- on the court and financially -- could make for a difficult decision

Saturday, December 31, 2005

By Jimmy Smith

Staff writer

Murky or clear?

As it is with so many questions in the post-Katrina world, whether the Hornets return to New Orleans Arena will remain somewhat unanswerable in the short term.

But the long-term outlook is looking bleaker with every sellout, or near-sellout crowd the team draws in its temporary home in Oklahoma City.

NBA officials, and Hornets owner George Shinn, have continued to take the high road in the comments about the team returning to the Crescent City, saying the team will be back when New Orleans is ready to accommodate the club structurally and aesthetically.

Contractually, the Hornets are bound to return to the Arena when it is repaired to pre-storm conditions, as spelled out in the "force majeure" or "act of God" clause in the 10-year lease agreement with the state. The Arena would have to be approved for play by SMG, the facility's manager, and the league.

Since temporarily relocating to Oklahoma City in Katrina's aftermath -- when minor flooding on the Arena's first floor damaged the court and locker-room facilities, while major flooding devastated the city's infrastructure and shrunk its population -- Shinn, along with NBA commissioner David Stern, have stressed the "temporary" aspect of the stay in Oklahoma City.

The league negotiated a one-year option to renew the current deal in Oklahoma City that must be exercised by July, though Stern is pushing for a decision in January.

On Nov. 9, however, Stern, when asked specifically about the language in the Hornets' lease with the state, said: "I don't trust lawyers. The bigger question to me is not whether there's a building there that's structurally sound, but if there's a community around it. I would hope that there would be. I think that's the important thing."

Shinn has said he hoped to play one to three games scheduled for Baton Rouge in March at the Arena, which is expected to be repaired by then.

On Dec. 16, the first time the Hornets returned to Louisiana for a regular-season game in Baton Rouge, Shinn reiterated that hope with what has become his customary caveat.

"It's important that we do the right thing, because if we play a game in New Orleans and 1,500 people show up, that's not going to look good for anyone, not the NBA or New Orleans," Shinn said. "What we've got to do is put our heads together with the state, city and NBA to make the right decision about what's best not only for us but New Orleans."

Just as with the terms of their contract with the state of Louisiana, the Hornets cannot lose money during their stay in Oklahoma City.

But they can make more money in Oklahoma City than they can in New Orleans.

The Oklahoma City contract, heavily laced with incentives, includes language that the city will make up the difference if revenues from tickets, concessions and sponsorships fall below \$40 million this season. A consortium of local business leaders have pledged their support in the guarantee, as has the city and Oklahoma.

The Hornets' lease with Louisiana expires in 2012, with two five-year options. It also is quite generous. The Hornets pay \$2 million annually in rent if attendance is 11,000 or greater, a figure subject to adjustment, depending upon attendance, not to be less than \$1 million per season.

The team gets 100 percent of revenue from premium seating, advertising, concessions, novelties and parking and if the Arena secures a naming rights deal, the Hornets would receive that money, up to \$1.5 million annually. The state guarantees the Hornets would receive \$18 million a year from premium seating and advertising, a figure that rises five percent each year of the contract, with the state making up any shortfall up to \$2 million per year.

Louisiana also paid the NBA's \$250,000 application fee, moving expenses, temporary office space up to \$1.75 million and in-kind services and made \$10 million in Arena upgrades before the Hornets relocated from Charlotte in 2002.

Breaking the lease in Louisiana would incur a \$10 million penalty.

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Hornets to move two games to Oklahoma

By Berry Tramel
The Oklahoman

The Hornets plan to move two January games scheduled for Baton Rouge, La., back to Oklahoma, including one possibly in Norman at OU's Lloyd Noble Center.

The games to be moved are Jan. 13 against Sacramento and Jan. 18 against Memphis. An announcement from the Hornets is expected today.

A Bon Jovi concert is scheduled for Jan. 14 at the Ford Center, but Ford Center manager Gary Dejardins said the Bon Jovi contract stipulates that the arena be used for rehearsal on Jan. 13.

A source close to the Hornets said OU has been approached about hosting the Jan. 13 game.

The Hornets have six games scheduled at LSU's Maravich Center in Baton Rouge. They played Phoenix there on Dec. 16 and drew 7,301 fans, more than 11,000 below their Ford Center average.

The Hornets' remaining games scheduled for Baton Rouge are March 8 against the Los Angeles Lakers, March 18 against Denver and March 21 against the LA Clippers.

Hornets officials had said the last three Baton Rouge games could be moved to New Orleans Arena, where the Hornets played their home games until Hurricane Katrina swamped the city in August.

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ESPN
1.6.2006
<http://sports.espn.go.com/nba/news/story?id=2281843>

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Hornets will play three March games in New Orleans
Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY -- The New Orleans Hornets on Thursday reached an agreement to play three games at the New Orleans Arena in March and move two other games scheduled in Baton Rouge this month to their temporary home in Oklahoma.

In their first games in New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina, the Hornets will face the Los Angeles Lakers on March 8, the Denver Nuggets on March 18 and the Los Angeles Clippers on March 21.

"I'm looking forward to seeing New Orleans rebuilt," Hornets President Paul Mott said by telephone after the announcement. "This is not a city that is going to vanish. ... I think this is a city that is going to come back better and stronger, and I want to be a part of it."

The NBA, which announced the schedule change Thursday, also said it plans to announce the Hornets' home for next season by the end of January.

Mott said scheduling the games in Baton Rouge was the best option prior to the season, but he's now confident that management company SMG will have the New Orleans Arena ready in time for the March games. He's hoping there will be enough fans in attendance to provide a noticeable home-court advantage.

"We're doing this because I think it's the right thing to do," said Mott, who toured the arena in November and December.

Also, the Hornets will play their games Jan. 13 against Sacramento and Jan. 18 against Memphis in Oklahoma instead of at Louisiana State University's Pete Maravich Center in Baton Rouge.

The Hornets were disappointed by turnout last month at the first of six games scheduled in Baton Rouge, which were considered a gesture toward maintaining the team's connection to Louisiana and its intended return to New Orleans next season.

Only 7,302 fans -- or just more than half of capacity -- were in attendance Dec. 16 when the Hornets squandered a 15-point lead in a 101-88 loss to Phoenix in Baton Rouge. Afterward, Hornets coach Byron Scott approached general manager Jeff Bower about moving the other games.

"We had that game in hand," Scott said. "We thoroughly outplayed them for 36 minutes. In the back of my mind when I went into the locker room, I said, 'If this game would have been in Oklahoma City, it wouldn't have been this close.' If we would have had a 14-point lead going into the fourth quarter, we'd have won the game."

Scott said he doesn't think moving the two games out of Louisiana will alienate fans in the state, noting that hurricane victims probably have better things to spend their money on than attending an NBA game.

"I think they would understand," Scott said. "All the people that were in Louisiana before the hurricane are not there right now, so I don't think the fan base is there right now for our basketball team, especially right now in this month. It might change in March."

Moving the games also eliminates a span of seven consecutive games scheduled outside Oklahoma for the Hornets. After a game against Detroit on Tuesday, the Hornets weren't scheduled to play in Oklahoma City for 15 days despite having two "home" games.

Scott said the Hornets' success made it more important to move the games. New Orleans entered Thursday 1½ games behind Utah for the final Western Conference playoff spot.

"It would have been a killer trip for us," Scott said.

Due to a conflict with a Bon Jovi concert rehearsal at the Ford Center, the Hornets are still seeking a site for their Jan. 13 game against Sacramento.

The Memphis game will be played at the Ford Center, where the Hornets have sold out eight of their 14 games so far this season. The Hornets are averaging 18,720 fans at their Oklahoma City games this season.

After winning only 18 games all last season, the Hornets are off to a 14-17 start this season and are 9-5 at the Ford Center. San Antonio, Miami and the Los Angeles Clippers were all in first place when they lost at the Ford Center, where the Hornets also beat current Northwest Division leader Minnesota.

"Our guys feel real comfortable here. I think the fans have made them feel that this is their team, and our players feel that this is our home," Scott said.

The Hornets moved to Oklahoma City in September after Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and damaged the arena. The team was to play 35 regular-season games, plus two preseason games and any playoff games, at the 19,163-seat Ford Center.

Article 27
Times-Picayune

1.6.2006

<http://www.nola.com/sports/t-p/index.ssf?/base/sports-21/1136531029233490.xml>

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Silent treatment not a good way for city, state to keep NBA team

Friday, January 06, 2006

John DeShazier

Hear all that silence?

Deafening, isn't it?

It represents the noise created by the fight the city and state have to put up in the effort to keep the Hornets in New Orleans. And it explains, as much as anything, why the Hornets already seem to have one sneaker out the door.

The next two games to be played in Baton Rouge, at LSU's Pete Maravich Assembly Center, have been relocated. Now they'll be staged in Oklahoma City, which is looking less like a home-away-from-home, and more like a new hive for the bees.

The final three games of the Hornets' proposed six-game dip into Louisiana, team officials maintain, will be played at New Orleans Arena in the spring. But don't pant after that bone. The cameo depends on more variables than can be found in math class, perhaps the most significant of which is the kind of reception (read: attendance) the team can expect upon its arrival.

And if it's anything close to what it was greeted by in Baton Rouge, let's just say we probably have seen the Hornets our one and only time this season, and perhaps for the last time.

That turnout, for a December game against highly entertaining Phoenix, was an embarrassment, even when viewed through the rosiest-colored glasses. The attendance (7,302) was shameful by college standards; it absolutely, positively was grotesque by NBA standards.

Now if at this point you counter that by saying attendance also was spectacularly miserable for three of the Saints' four games in Baton Rouge -- and neither statement reflects particularly well on Baton Rouge's willingness to lend support, in the form of fannies in seats, to the efforts to keep the Saints and Hornets in the state -- you'd have a point. But, too, there's a counter to the counterpoint.

The Saints have done just about every imaginable thing to sabotage their return.

It was clear early that owner Tom Benson never wanted to return to New Orleans, that he wanted to relocate his Saints to San Antonio, that he and his allies were willing to go so far as to allege extensive damage to the team's clearly undamaged practice facility as a reason it could not go home.

Toss in a less-than-aggressive sales pitch in Baton Rouge, and Benson's apparently bogus allegation that he felt threatened after the first game and never wanted to return to the city because he feared for his safety, and you have a recipe for disaster.

If not for the muscle of NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue, the Saints likely never would have returned. But with a firm shove in the back, and the promise that the league would help subsidize the Saints and help out the franchise with free agents, the franchise is returning to its Metairie training facility.

No such shove has been executed, or likely will be, by NBA czar David Stern.

By indicating that the league likely would announce this month where the Hornets will be playing next season, he pretty much guaranteed they would be returning to Oklahoma City.

Still, though, from a public-relations standpoint, the Hornets have talked the talk, and walked the walk. Owner George Shinn always has stressed that Oklahoma City is a temporary pot of gold, that he intends for New Orleans to be the home for his franchise, that he would be on the front lines of the rebuilding effort, which he has.

The team, 14-17 after a victory over Miami on Wednesday night, is greatly improved. The response in Louisiana, in terms of support, hasn't even been lukewarm.

We have wailed and gnashed teeth over the franchise that would leave if it had half a chance, and barely made a peep over the one that, from the beginning, consistently and fervently has maintained it had no desire to go anywhere.

True, one has deep roots in the state and the other recently was planted. Still, though, it's a striking contrast -- the pursuit of unrequited love vs. the rejection of open arms.

The assumption is that it's rejection. It could be that there's a real passion out there for the Hornets, a real desire to see them return to New Orleans Arena.

Hard to tell, though, because it's so quiet. Which makes it a lot easier for them to skip town, almost unnoticed.

Article 28

Mike Barrett Trail Blazers Blog [Portland's Play-By-Play Guy]

1.6.2006

http://www.nba.com/blazers/special_features/Mike_Barrett_Trail_Blazers_Tra-152688-41.html

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Oklahoma City: Tennis, A Crowd, and yes... County Music (1.6.06)

It's the final day of this 5-day road trip, and tonight in concludes with the Trail Blazers taking on the New Orleans / Oklahoma City Hornets at the Ford Center. We'll fly home following this game tonight, and will get to actually unpack and put the suitcase in the closet for a few weeks. Sunday, the Blazers begin their longest homestand of the season, eight games, against Shaquille O'Neal and the Miami Heat.

The Trail Blazers practiced yesterday, and had to drive to the University of Oklahoma in Norman, to do it. It was only about a 30-minute drive and wasn't too far out of the way. It was a fairly light practice, as Nate McMillan most likely sensed the veterans didn't have it in them to pound through a long, physical practice after playing back-to-back nights in Dallas and San Antonio. Following practice McMillan took the team out to dinner, which is fairly rare. They went to Toby Keith's restaurant here in Oklahoma City. I talked to several players in the lobby upon their return and a couple of them said it was great, "until they started playing country music." Wow, what a shock. I was upset that at B.B. King's in Memphis they didn't play any Metallica. The guys did say they had a good time.

I'm looking forward to seeing the atmosphere at the Ford Center tonight for this game. The community has really embraced this Hornets franchise and they've been drawing very, very well. Everyone here, of course, is hoping for a permanent move for the franchise, but that battle is far from over. The local paper has certainly joined the fight. Following Hornets games, they list the attendance, and then compare it to what the team drew last season, and how the home court results compare. It's obviously a better situation here. It'll be a delicate political move for the NBA if they move this team out of ailing New Orleans, but it's business, and this team never drew flies in New Orleans. Now, post hurricane, I can't imagine the fans would flock back, being they were never there in the first place. The corporate dollars aren't there either. They did announce yesterday the Hornets will return to New Orleans Arena for three games in early March. That's a good move, but I'd be surprised if they moved back there permanently next season. It's a tough situation, and could be a legal battle getting out of the lease at the arena in New Orleans if it is deemed to be inhabitable, which they think it will be. [Emphasis supplied]

I mentioned yesterday that we were going to get out and see a little bit of Oklahoma City. The only thing I really knew about the city, and I'm probably not alone here, was that horrible bombing back in 1995 took place here. Turns out the Murrah Federal Building stood only a few blocks from our hotel. We walked over there yesterday and saw the memorial and museum they now have. It's very well done. They've got a reflecting pool, where the street once went through, and a "field of empty chairs" where the building once stood. They've got 168 chairs placed in nine rows to symbolize each person lost in the attack. The hardest thing was seeing the 19 little chairs representing the absence of 19 children.

Rice and I did get a chance to play tennis yesterday, and did so at Oklahoma City University. Among Rice's excuses on this day were "it was too windy," and "the sun was in my eyes." Judging by the condition of the courts the tennis program at the college has really gone downhill since Brock Connelly won the 1994 NAIA Singles title (I saw an old wooden plaque hanging sideways on the fence).

In NBA news, the Ron Artest sweepstakes continues. I continue to get a kick out of NBA general managers who offer trades to the Indiana Pacers, and then after they become public, have to scramble back to the players rumored to be in the deal, and assure them they aren't on the block. I guess Denver now has the best chance at Artest right now, but Memphis and Minnesota are also taking a shot. It certainly sounds to me like Artest is headed to the Western Conference. I haven't heard much that makes sense coming from the East.

Seattle players continue to celebrate their new head coach, Bob Hill. This is so interesting to me, since it was the players who went to bat so hard for Bob Weiss after Nate left for Portland. Vladimir Radmanovic even said "it's a new start, and it's like Santa Claus for me." I still remember after Weiss was hired, the players talking about how things were too tough under Nate, and that Weiss was more of a player's coach. You tell me, what style do you think worked better? The lesson here is never let the players choose your head coach.

Congratulations to Shaun Alexander of the Seahawks, by the way, for winning the AP's NFL MVP award. I wasn't aware writers in the East knew there was a team in Seattle.

We get to come home following this game tonight, and Sunday, the Blazers open an 8-game homestand against Miami.

Article 29

Salt Lake Tribune

1.8.2006

http://www.sltrib.com/sports/cj_338258 (link no longer works)

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Cleamons: Options abound in Oklahoma

By Jim Cleamons

Earlier this week, the league announced that my team, the New Orleans Hornets, will play three games back in our home city later this season.

Hurricane Katrina forced us to abandon our namesake city. We've been based in Oklahoma City this season and, frankly, it's been a huge success. We're right on the cusp of a playoff spot - admittedly, there are 50 games to go - but that's nonetheless notable, given we had the league's worst record last season.

Not surprisingly, our average attendance last season - 14,221 - also was the league's worst. In the coming months, many key decisions about this franchise will be made.

One of the questions is whether Louisiana can simply support a professional basketball team. The state government was basically helping subsidize our team and the NFL's Saints already. Now you've got a city that will be as half as big as it was and is facing bigger problems than its sports teams. New Orleans is a much different place than it was. In addition, when we played a home game in Baton Rouge on Dec. 16, the attendance was only 7,302.

As an assistant coach, my job is to coach my ballplayers and help my team get better, so I'm far removed from these issues. But you have to wonder about professional basketball's future there. I can say how thankful we are to be in Oklahoma. Oklahoma City itself has welcomed us with open arms and is overwhelming, really, with its enthusiasm and encouragement. They've been wonderful hosts, and we appreciate that a lot.

Our average attendance now ranks about 10th in the league and, believe me, that makes a difference on the court.

The crowds have been terrific and the energy the fans bring makes it a real joy to come to the arena to play. There is such enthusiasm in the building. We've had six sellouts already. By comparison, the Jazz - who've always have had one of the best average attendances in the league - have had one.

One thing that's interesting about our team is that, with so many young players, a lot of our guys have never lived in New Orleans. They've been told about New Orleans, but as far as they know, Oklahoma City is where we're supposed to be.

Another thing is that Oklahoma City has a real collegiate environment, with fans who actually participate in creating the energy.

And although that's not typical in the league, it does help make our young players feel more comfortable because that's the environment in which they've had the most experience.

But, this is a business as well. We had one corporate sponsor in our old city, we have five here in Oklahoma. Doing the math, you have to wonder.

Still, we certainly are proud of New Orleans and feel a special responsibility as the city's representatives. We hope playing three games in the New Orleans Arena in March will make a

small contribution toward this city's recovery.

We certainly will do our best.

Article 30

Detroit Free Press

1.10.2006

<http://www.freep.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060110/SPORTS03/601100334/1051>

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THEY'RE OK NOW

Hurricane Katrina left the New Orleans Hornets without a home, but Oklahoma City has embraced the team.

January 10, 2006

BY SHAWN WINDSOR

FREE PRESS SPORTS WRITER

OKLAHOMA CITY -- It was a sunny morning, play-by-play radio announcer Sean Kelley recalled. And cold.

Especially for late November. Especially in Oklahoma City.

Kelley and the rest of the staff of the New Orleans Hornets were huddled together, making their way through the Oklahoma City bombing memorial on the north edge of downtown, watching old news footage, gazing at photos of the rubble, walking among empty chairs symbolizing 168 people killed by a truck bomb in April 1995.

Hurricane Katrina had forced the team out of New Orleans. The Hornets landed in another city familiar with tragedy. On this chilly day, they were learning about it.

"There was a somber silence," Kelley said. "We were collectively dealing with what we had gone through (in New Orleans) while learning what they had gone through" 10 years earlier.

It was then that the staff began to understand why the Hornets' presence in Oklahoma City meant so much. It wasn't just the arrival -- however temporary -- of the state's first big league sports team, or the NBA stars staying at downtown hotels, or the ESPN crawl at the bottom of television screens that lumped Oklahoma City with New York and Los Angeles and Detroit.

It was that residents thought no other city, with the exception of New York, could relate to New Orleans like they could.

Said Kelley: "As the season has gone on, they are not bashful about saying they'd really like us to stay, but -- and they always follow it with but -- 'If you guys go back, we understand.' "

Home for now is Oklahoma City, but the NBA will decide by the end of the month where the Hornets will be based next season. Publicly, everyone points to an eventual return to New Orleans. Commissioner David Stern, owner George Shinn, coach Byron Scott, players, staff, even fans all say it is the right thing to do. Three games scheduled this season for Baton Rouge, La., already have been moved to New Orleans Arena.

But the sellouts, the college-like noise at Oklahoma City's Ford Center, the season-ticket sales, the corporate sponsorships and the political reception have surprised the NBA and left its brass in a quandary. Before Katrina, the Hornets ranked last in the league in attendance. Now they're in the top 10, despite a 15-18 record entering tonight's game against the Pistons.

For sentimental reasons, the league doesn't want to move a team from a devastated city. But the Hornets might have found better economic success in Oklahoma City, tapping into a surprisingly pent-up desire for the NBA.

Neither the league nor Hornets management wants the negative publicity that surrounded the New Orleans Saints, whose owner wasn't so subtle about his wish to stay in San Antonio, his team's temporary home this season.

Stern was so mindful of avoiding a bad rap he persuaded the flamboyant Shinn to let his less-recognizable people tour the city's arena when the team was considering a move to Oklahoma City.

"David didn't want us to look like vultures," Shinn said.

Oklahoma City is the country's 45th-largest television market -- New Orleans and Memphis are ranked just above it. Roughly 1.2 million people live in the metropolitan area.

So far, no one in Oklahoma City is outwardly competing for the team. Besides, who knows how long the fans will pack the 19,000-seat Ford Center? Is the town another Sacramento, which has supported the Kings through good and bad for two decades? Or another Vancouver, whose Grizzlies were popular for a short time before fan interest waned and the team moved to Memphis?

Stern is betting on the former and has said the city is next in line for an NBA franchise.

What might make Oklahoma City different is what happened 10 years ago on an April morning, when a region without a national identity became known because of tragedy.

Great atmosphere

Three months ago, any contemplation of Oklahoma City beyond a Ryder Truck and a bombed-out federal building fell to Dust Bowl memories or clichés: cowboys, oil, God, an empty expanse bordering Texas. And Sooner football. (Norman, home to the University of Oklahoma, is 25 miles south.)

Last Wednesday night, in a standing-room-only arena, Shaquille O'Neal played his first professional basketball game in Oklahoma City. That same night, Texas -- Oklahoma's hated rival -- and USC unspooled one of the great college football games in the past 20 years.

The public-address announcer occasionally provided updates on the Texas/USC score, and a few televisions in the concourse offered the game. For the most part, fans stayed in their seats, and showered the Miami Heat with three hours of jet engine-like noise.

The night began with smoke, a thumping bass and a prayer -- Shinn invited ministers to say a few words on the court before tip-off when he started the team in Charlotte. He brought the invocation to New Orleans and Oklahoma City.

"Two things I've seen more of here than anywhere else are flags and people praying when I go out to dinner," he said last week.

When the Hornets scored their first basket, the crowd rose, and fans high-fived. Juiced on the vibe, the young Hornets dove and flew around the court, embarrassing the more talented, but uninspired Heat. Miami coach Pat Riley, all scowl and gel, kept calling time-outs to lash his team. The breaks in play only gave 19,326 throaty Oklahomans more inspiration.

The Hornets were up 19 at halftime. Bob Masterson caught his breath in the concourse.

"It's the buzz right now," he said. "Oklahoma has never been known for much."

But the NBA?

"Hard to believe," he said.

Masterson, who lives in nearby Edmond, owns a Ford dealership close to the arena. He was one of 10,000 who bought season tickets the first 10 days they went on sale. Now, he's a few rows from the biggest happening in town.

"I've been in the league 13 years and I've never seen anything like this," said Hornets forward P.J. Brown, a Louisiana native. "It's special."

Mick Cornett always believed it could be. Oklahoma City's mayor began selling his city to Stern long before Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans. If he hadn't, the Hornets could be playing in Las Vegas now. Perhaps not the best place to offer courtside invocations.

TOUGH SELL

Cornett, elected in 2004, flew to New York a few months after he took office to pitch his booming city to Stern. Eight years earlier the town began a massive capital improvement project using funds collected from a one-cent sales tax.

They built the Ford Center. Rebuilt the convention center. Opened a new Triple-A baseball stadium. Dug a San Antonio-like canal in an old warehouse district known as Bricktown and populated it with restaurants, bars and movie theaters. The economy was booming, benefiting from the high price of oil.

All that was missing was a big league team. And Cornett, a former local television sportscaster and news anchor, was convinced the city was ready.

"We were branded by our tragedy," he said. "But what people didn't know outside of the region is how much we had changed since then."

Cornett also knew that the city had narrowly lost out on an NHL franchise in the late 1990s, when the league awarded teams to Columbus and Nashville. Still, when he met with Stern in August 2004, the commissioner, though impressed by the city's growth and demographics, told Cornett he had a better chance with hockey.

Then the hurricane hit. Two days later, Cornett called Stern.

"I offered up our town as a temporary home," he said.

Cornett also called local investment capitalist Clay Bennett, who had once owned part of the San Antonio Spurs, and who knew Stern. Shinn, meanwhile, was taking calls from San Diego, Nashville, Kansas City, Anaheim, and, of course, Vegas.

When Stern called him about Oklahoma City, "I said, 'Oklahoma where?'"

Two weeks later a deal was done. The state, city and local businessmen put up \$10 million to cover any revenue losses by the team. The city also agreed to pay relocation expenses, provide housing for the team's staff in Norman and find a practice facility -- Southern Nazarene University offered its gym.

Sellouts and the season-ticket rush might actually help the city make money.

"This is a free shot," Cornett said. "Never before has a city had the opportunity to be given a trial run."

Or an owner a clean slate.

When Shinn's expansion Charlotte Hornets began play in 1988, they led the league in attendance for eight years. Then Shinn, who grew up in nearby Kannapolis (home of NASCAR legend Dale Earnhardt), was charged with sexual assault and became the star of a sordid sex scandal on Court TV. He was exonerated, but not before admitting to an affair with a team cheerleader.

His wife left him. He quit attending games. He refused to talk to media. In 2002, after Shinn's personal controversy and a failed bid for a new arena, the team moved to New Orleans.

"Never have I been so humiliated in my life," he says now. "I made mistakes."

When he arrived in Oklahoma -- remarried -- he openly talked about his mistakes. Now he's the talk of the town, a colorful, cowboy boot-wearing, self-made millionaire fond of his courtside seat and pregame meals in the media room.

"Fans are familiar with the story and don't judge him," Cornett said.

In 16 games, Oklahoma City's Ford Center has become one of the toughest stops in the league -- the team is 10-6 there. (The Hornets also lost a home game at Baton Rouge.)

The Hornets are led by Chris Paul, a charismatic rookie who Willis Reed, the vice president of basketball operations, said reminds him of Isiah Thomas.

Paul leads the team in scoring, assists and grins.

"I had never been to Oklahoma City before," said Paul, who suffered a thumb injury Friday night but wasn't expected to miss more than two weeks. "I had no clue. Just heard there were a lot of tornadoes."

And now?

"Love every minute of it. We are the luckiest team in the NBA."

All of which will make the Hornets' return to New Orleans, if it happens, difficult.

At the bombing memorial last week, park rangers and security guards guided visitors around the reflecting pond and through the chairs, telling the story of the city's darkest moment.

A basketball team won't change that. Still, said Todd Cook, a guard who works at the memorial, "it's given us something to talk about."

And the rest of the country a different association.

Article 31

Ft. Worth Star Telegram

1.15.2006

<http://www.dfw.com/ml/dfw/sports/basketball/13632916.htm>

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NBA Insider

New Orleans has enough to deal with without NBA

By Dwain Price

Star-Telegram Staff Writer

It doesn't make any sense for the Hornets to play games in New Orleans this season. Don't the

good people of New Orleans have more pertinent things to worry about?

When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans on Aug. 29, many homes were destroyed and lives were shattered. What's important now for the citizens of New Orleans is to get their lives in order.

Attending a Hornets game is not high on their to-do list.

After Hornets president Paul Mott toured the New Orleans Arena two months ago, he wasn't so sure playing basketball there this season was a bright idea. Mott should have followed his first instinct.

"It smelled, and when I came out, my eyes were itching and my nose got clogged up, and I was bothered by it and concerned," Mott said. "It was still really wet, and I didn't think it was healthy -- at least for the athletes."

We all want New Orleans to be rebuilt.

Still, the fact that the Hornets have announced plans to play three games there this season -- starting with a March 8 contest against the LA Lakers -- is disturbing.

Memo to the Hornets: The folks in New Orleans didn't come to your games pre-Katrina, and they sure won't be coming post-Katrina.

If the truth be told, New Orleans has never shown signs of wanting to embrace the NBA.

The Jazz didn't draw in five seasons, so they left in 1979 for Salt Lake City and haven't regretted it a bit.

The Hornets also have been unsuccessful at the gate since moving from Charlotte in 2002. The Hornets averaged 15,651 fans in their first season in New Orleans, 14,332 two years ago and 14,221 last year.

This season, the Hornets are 10th in the league in attendance, averaging 18,096 fans per game in Oklahoma City. And that takes into account the meager 7,301 fans that showed up when the Hornets played the Phoenix Suns last month in Baton Rouge -- another Louisiana city that has other matters on its mind.

In addition to the Lakers game, the Hornets will play in New Orleans on March 18 against Denver and on March 21 against the LA Clippers.

It's a noble gesture trying to give the folks in New Orleans some NBA entertainment. But you can't force-feed fans.

As Mott returned to check on the New Orleans Arena last month, he saw some progress.

"What I was pleased to see was they got that wet stuff out," Mott said. "The ceiling tiles had gathered humidity and were buckled, even though the water hadn't got up there. They pulled all of that out, and it probably helped a lot."

Maybe it did, but will families really pay to see the Hornets play this season?

New Orleans is a city in distress. Many of its citizens might never return to live there again.

And if they do, the last thing on their minds will be the NBA.

They need jobs, schools for their kids, a roof over their heads and someone to repair the levees so they can withstand a Category 5 hurricane.

They don't need the Hornets.

Article 32

Charlotte Observer

1.15.2006

http://www.charlotte.com/mld/charlotte/sports/basketball/nba/charlotte_bobcats/13630547.htm

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Posted on Sun, Jan. 15, 2006

IN MY OPINION

Shinn's next team move the right one

RICK BONNELL

George Shinn isn't foolish enough to move his team back to New Orleans.

The Hornets will make their only trip to Charlotte on Monday, for a Martin Luther King Day matinee. Right now their name sounds like a run-on sentence: "The New Orleans-Oklahoma City Hornets." I suspect the best the Big Easy can hope for from the Hornets is a handful of games annually in the future.

That wouldn't be unprecedented in the NBA. When the Kings were in Kansas City, they played some regular-season games in Omaha, Neb., and the Celtics once did the same in Hartford, Conn.

Oklahoma City is already a phenomenon. Ford Center is packed or nearly packed every night and the volume would remind you of Charlotte Coliseum, circa 1990. The NBA loves virgin territory -- that was Shinn's original sales patch for expansion to Charlotte -- and OKC is just large enough to support one major-league team.

From what I hear, the Hornets generate about \$1 million in revenue every home game there. Their lucrative cable-television deal with Cox transferred to Oklahoma City, because Cox operates both there and in New Orleans.

Shinn is genuinely conflicted about New Orleans for practical and sentimental reasons. I'm sure he doesn't want to be remembered as the guy who moved a team twice in five years.

But this time he bears no fault. Hurricane Katrina didn't just wreck New Orleans, it emptied the city. The arena can be fixed, and will be in time to host three Hornets games this season. But will there again be the population and corporate base to support a team, particularly with the NFL pressuring the Saints to stay there as well?

Whatever you think of Shinn, the man knows a good business deal. Whatever flaws the Ford Center has as an NBA venue can be fixed. Oklahoma City sees the Hornets as validation, and that town will keep buying tickets and T-shirts.

Who would turn his back on that?

Article 33

Memphis Commercial Appeal

1.19.2006

http://www.commercialappeal.com/mca/grizzlies/article/0,1426,MCA_475_4398979,00.html (link may not work)

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OKLAHOMA CITY -- Everybody in the NBA has been talking about the spirited crowds at the Ford Center in Oklahoma City. There was another such crowd here Wednesday night.

Unfortunately, it was mostly around Pau Gasol.

The Hornets lived up to their name and swarmed Gasol with double teams -- and sometimes triple teams -- and held him to nine points on 4-for-8 shooting in an 87-79 win that gave the Grizzlies a three-game losing streak for only the second time this season.

Yet despite the Grizzlies' failures on offense, the game was still there for the taking late in the fourth quarter. Trailing 79-76 with around a minute to go, point guard Bobby Jackson launched a 3-point shot.

He missed.

Eddie Jones ran down the offensive rebound and then Jackson fired an even quicker 3-pointer that also missed. The Hornets' Chris Paul then knocked down a 3-pointer with 37 seconds left and the deed was done.

"We had a chance to win the game," Jackson said. "We didn't shoot the ball well (37.8 percent). I didn't shoot the ball well.

"And Pau didn't shoot a lot. I need to be smarter about getting him the ball. I think I cost us the game by jacking up threes (he was 0-for-6) and not getting into our offense.

"But it's a learning experience. I can put that on my shoulders and bounce back from there."

Grizzlies coach Mike Fratello conceded that after the offensive rebound "we didn't get a good look at the basket."

Ideally, the Grizzlies would have either found Gasol inside -- a challenge all night -- or Mike Miller on the perimeter. Miller led the Grizzlies with 21 points and was 5-for-7 from 3-point range.

Meantime, Gasol's frustration was as evident as at any time this season.

"They were digging so hard and trapping me and trying to get the ball out of my hands," said Gasol, who is averaging 19.6 points. "We've got to make something happen offensively ... penetrate, get to the line, create something, because otherwise they're going to keep double-teaming me."

Jackson, too, feels that pain. This was the second time in the last four games that Gasol was held to nine points.

While the loss dropped the Grizzlies to 23-14, the Hornets reached .500 at 19-19. Hornets coach Bryon Scott pointed to the defensive job his team did on Gasol as another sign of development.

"We've really matured defensively since the start of the year," Scott said. "We played great defense against Gasol."

Even so, Gasol had five assists and might have had more had the Grizzlies shot better -- they were 8-of-22 for 36.4 percent from 3-point range.

"Pau takes what the game gives to him and what the team gives to him," said Shane Battier. "Pau's a smart basketball player and he's not going to force shots in double-teams."

Just to have a chance to win, the Grizzlies had to come back from a nine-point halftime deficit. Chris Andersen threw down four dunks in the second quarter when, as Fratello put it, "our defense disappeared."

After a third quarter in which the Grizzlies had two nine-point runs and the Hornets had one 6-0 spurt, the fourth quarter started with the teams tied at 62-62.

"All square and we had a shot to win," Battier said.

But as the Hornets started with a 5-0 run on the way to a 25-17 advantage in the quarter, several things stood out: Gasol played all 12 minutes and didn't take a shot or get to the free-throw line, and the Hornets' David West had seven rebounds -- six of them on the offensive glass.

The combination of those two things and Paul's eight points and three assists in the quarter doomed the Grizzlies.

Article 34

Times-Picayune

1.19.2006

<http://www.nola.com/hornets/t-p/index.ssf?/base/sports-1/1137655757115780.xml>

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Stern: NBA to return in long term

Thursday, January 19, 2006

Two weeks after the Hornets announced they will play three games at New Orleans Arena in March, the first professional sporting events to be held in the city since Hurricane Katrina hit Aug. 29, NBA commissioner David Stern said no decision has been made on where the Hornets will play next season.

Stern, in a telephone interview with Times-Picayune staff writer John Reid on Tuesday night, said the repeated sellout crowds the Hornets have gotten in Oklahoma City wouldn't play a factor in the league's decision. As for as the long-term future of the Hornets, Stern said he thinks repopulation projections for New Orleans will be sufficient to support an NBA team.

Your counterpart in the NFL, Paul Tagliabue, has been to Louisiana four times since Hurricane Katrina devastated the region. Why haven't you been able to find time to visit once?

Actually, I considered the priority to be to work hard to get the team settled, to play individual games in New Orleans, the need to raise money for the hurricane victims and send the appropriate people down there to make sure we could get back into the Arena, so there will be some entertainment as soon as possible. My own presence there would not have any particular meaning.

The NFL says extraordinary events demand extraordinary responses. What plans have the NBA developed to make the Hornets return to New Orleans successful this March and for the 2006-07 season?

We're working with the LSED (Louisiana Stadium and Exposition District) and the governor's office, the mayor's office. Obviously as soon as we got word that the Arena would be playable, we moved to put the (three) games back into New Orleans. They are going to be successful because we are going to make them successful, and that doesn't mean they have to be sellouts. But the important thing is that they are there.

Do you want a team in New Orleans?

The answer to that is yes.

According to the lease agreement, if the Hornets play the three games in March in the Arena, then they are obligated to return to play in New Orleans next season. The Hornets said they are not necessarily sure that clause is in their lease agreement. What is your take on the situation?

When the Arena is playable, we're supposed to come back. That's just the way it is.

How close is the league toward finalizing a decision on whether the Hornets will remain in Oklahoma City next season or return to New Orleans?

As I have said to everyone, we're going to make the decision by the end of the month. We're still consulting with the appropriate authorities in Louisiana. We're involved in discussions on an ongoing basis.

How will this decision be decided?

It will be a vote by an appropriate committee of the Board of Governors. It's called the advisory findings committee, and it has at least 10 members on it. That will be the group that will handle it.

Do you have concerns about a potential lost fan base and businesses in New Orleans because of Hurricane Katrina?

I think ultimately there will be two things. One is repopulation and the progress made in the short term, which means for next year. The other one is the repopulation in the long term. We're operating on the assumption that the repopulation on the long term will be complete in terms of having a population base that will support an NBA team.

Are you monitoring the repopulation that's occurring now in the metro area?

We are gathering data, and we're watching it and getting all the reports. We're keeping a close eye on it, and we're getting information from the (state) government.

You said from the start the team's relocation to Oklahoma City was only temporary, but how impressed have you been in regard to the enormous support the team has received from fans in Oklahoma, and will it have an impact on the decision for the Hornets to return to New Orleans?

They've done a great job in demonstrating they can support an NBA team. But that doesn't change our view that they will be coming back to Louisiana.

Would the Hornets return to New Orleans even if the decision was made to play next season in Oklahoma City?

We have an extra-year option (in the Oklahoma City agreement) for the questions that would be asked about whether (New Orleans) is repopulated, whether the concentration on the Saints or dealing with capping resources or the like. But those are separate issues for the short term. That's why we've got a one-year option. For the long term, our plans are to come back.

What was the result of the final report you received from deputy commissioner Russ Granik after he toured the Arena and visited devastated areas of the city last month?

The report was that there are some respects in which the Arena is not yet ready and won't be ready, but we decided that it didn't matter. We were going to somehow make do to play there.

What do you want to get from these three games played at the Arena in March?

It's really what we want to give. We want to have on-the-ground entertainment taking place in New Orleans at the earliest possible time, and those were the dates when they said they could get the building close enough to ready. And we said great, we're coming.

Can you talk about the response of many of the league's players to the hurricane?

Our players have responded with respect to goods and services, our league office, our owners, etc. We've raised well over \$10 million, and they were deeply moved by the events and visited shelters in Houston and Louisiana. And they've done just a wonderful group of things to help people in need.

I think it's their finest moment and they did it because it was the right thing to do and not because it was a photo opportunity. I'm proud to be associated for that effort.

Your league has never been in a situation like this before, one of your teams displaced because of a natural disaster. What are the real issues you have dealt with?

Actually, for us and for the Hornets, the real issue was the suffering of the people (in New Orleans), the devastation and the loss of life. It really made the sports issue, the relocation issues, really seem trivial by comparison. It proves that it's all about human life and being able to help others, and not the way you play the game.

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The Oklahoman
1.21.2006
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Hornets' future? Only Stern knows

By Berry Tramel
The Oklahoman

When David Stern speaks, people with an interest in the Hornets listen. That would include most of us here in the Great American Desert.

Before the drought set Oklahoma ablaze, the Hornets set us on fire. We took in the homeless NBA team and quickly grew right fond of it, so much so that many of us are willing to admit what you're not supposed to say in polite circles. Sorry, New Orleans, but we don't want the Hornets to leave.

Of course, what we want doesn't count. Stern, after much counsel from his cabinet, will decide.

The royal commish is the Oracle of Delphi. Oz's great wizard. Moses on the mount. We wait on word from him.

Stern gave our brothers at the New Orleans Times-Picayune an interview this week, and as usual, interesting stuff emerged.

That will have to suffice, for now. The last time I called the NBA office for comment, I didn't get past the PR people.

So what to make of Stern's latest words, in which he was fairly encouraging for New Orleans' NBA future?

Well, it's all in code, of course. Stern is a wise owl. A sly fox. Smarter than the average bear. He reveals no clues he wants unrevealed.

You have to microscopically dissect Stern's words, then put on a blindfold and throw a dart. So here's my take on the latest cryptics from the commissioner:

On whether he wants a team in New Orleans?, Stern said, "The answer to that is yes."

Short answer. Strangely short. Remarkably short. Historically short.

Stern is like a defendant on the witness stand. The less said the better. Don't show your cards.

On whether the Hornets' lease with the New Orleans Arena requires them to play there if the Hornets are able to play their three scheduled games there in March, Stern said, "When the Arena

is playable, we're supposed to come back. That's just the way it is."

Stern is dancing here. That New Orleans lease seems to have some teeth to it, even though two months ago in Oklahoma City, Stern said the Hornets are not necessarily bound by the agreement. Key words: playable and supposed.

Stern could be playing it coy, mapping out an exit strategy from New Orleans that could be difficult legally and would require plenty of sensitivity.

On when the NBA will decide the Hornets' fate for the 2006-07 season, Stern said, "We're going to make the decision by the end of the month. We're still consulting with the appropriate authorities in Louisiana."

No news there. The Hornets need to know by Feb. 1 so they can begin season-ticket campaigns, either here or in New Orleans.

But here's something to consider. If there is no decision made by Feb. 1, that's not a good sign for OKC. I can't see the Hornets announcing they're going back to New Orleans next season, with half of this season still to go.

The Hornets are in playoff contention. They don't want to do anything to disrupt the support and homecourt advantage they've built at the Ford Center.

On whether he is concerned about a potential lost fan base and corporate base in New Orleans, Stern said, "I think ultimately there will be two things. One is repopulation and the progress made in the short term, which means for next year. The other one is the repopulation in the long term. We're operating on the assumption that the repopulation on the long term will be complete in terms of having a population base that will support an NBA team."

This is classic double talk here. Long term? What does that mean? The only two time frames relevant are 2006-07 and 2007-08. What New Orleans looks like in 2012 is not particularly germane to the Hornets. This isn't the NFL; the NBA can't subsidize a team while it waits five years for a city to possibly return.

Stern has taken the high ground since September, always being supportive of New Orleans. He's politically savvy, which means he's ultra sensitive to the greatest natural disaster in American history.

He's also sharp. I think he knows that New Orleans is not coming back as a major metropolitan city.

I said it the week of the flood, before the Hornets were a gleam in Oklahoma City's eye. The majority of those hundreds of thousands of New Orleans residents who migrated elsewhere are not coming back.

New Orleans' pre-flood city population was 462,000; today it is 144,000, and city officials estimate it will rise to only 247,000 by September 2008. New Orleans still has a substantial suburban population, but again, the old New Orleans wasn't adequately supporting both the NFL Saints and the NBA Hornets. How could a smaller, weaker New Orleans do so?

But don't listen to a hack out here on the frontier. Listen to the Washington Post's Eugene Robinson, who visited New Orleans earlier this month.

"Assemble the brass band and let the funeral march begin, because the old New Orleans is dead," Robinson wrote.

"The passing of our most distinctive city ... became official (last week) when a blue-ribbon commission presented its plan to rebuild on the mud-caked ruins.

“One way or another - through a proposed moratorium on rebuilding in the areas flooded when the levees failed, or through protracted argument over whether to have a moratorium - the plan all but guarantees additional months of delay and rot. Every day, meanwhile, more evacuees will decide to make new lives for themselves elsewhere.”

On how impressed he's been with Oklahoma City's response to the NBA and whether that will impact the Hornet decision, Stern said, “They've done a great job in demonstrating they can support an NBA team. But that doesn't change our view that they will be coming back to Louisiana.”

These are Stern's strongest words that the New Orleans Hornets will live again and why some Oklahoma City officials are bummed by the Times-Picayune interview.

For those of us who believe if the Hornets leave town, they're not going to New Orleans, this is the most solid rebuttal since September.

On the result of the final report from NBA officials after touring the New Orleans Arena and visiting devastated areas of the city in December, Stern said, “The report was that there are some respects in which the Arena is not yet ready and won't be ready, but we decided that it didn't matter. We were going to somehow make do to play there.”

Loophole city. The New Orleans lease says the Hornets have to play there if the arena is playable, but Stern says the arena isn't completely ready, the NBA is just willing to overlook some things. That could be important at the bargaining table.

And Stern didn't address the state of the city. That's probably just a humanitarian gesture on his part.

So what does it all mean? Nothing really that we didn't know before.

Stern did seem more verbally committed to New Orleans than in the past. Whether that means for the Hornets in the near future, or another franchise down the road, or an NBA All-Star Game to make up for a lost team, who knows?

Only the Oracle knows for sure.

Article 36**San Antonio Express News**

1.22.2006

<http://www.mysanantonio.com/sports/stories/MYSA012206.12C.COL.BK.Nmonroe.27e586e.html>[Top](#)[Back](#)[Next](#)**Mike Monroe: Hornets gauge options**

Web Posted: 01/22/2006 12:00 AM CST

San Antonio Express-News

Random, but meaningful, thoughts as the first half of the regular season is about to end ...

The league has promised a decision by month's end on the short-term future of the Hornets' locale.

A subgroup of the Board of Governors, an Advisory Findings Committee made up of at least 10 governors, will meet to discuss the advisability of having the Hornets return to New Orleans for the 2006-07 season, or return for another season in Oklahoma City, which has done a remarkable job of looking a whole lot like a community entirely capable of being host to a major league franchise.

The Hornets are going to play three games at New Orleans Arena in March, but it will be a surprise if the committee does not recommend an additional season in Oklahoma. Feel free to presume there have been some back-channel communications from Hornets ownership to fellow governors urging such a return. The team has a sweetheart deal with Oklahoma City to play in the Ford Center, which has turned into such a nice home-court advantage that Byron Scott would have to be a fool not to have lobbied owner George Shinn to push the board to let the Hornets return to Oklahoma City next season. And Scott is no fool.

John Reid of the New Orleans Times-Picayune had an interesting Q&A session with David Stern last week that provided a hint, if you know how to interpret Stern-speak, that the team will go back to Oklahoma City next season.

When Reid asked Stern if he had concerns about a potential lost fan base and businesses in New Orleans because of Hurricane Katrina, this was Stern's response: "I think ultimately there will be two things. One is repopulation and the progress made in the short term, which means for next year. The other one is the repopulation in the long term. We're operating on the assumption that the repopulation on the long term will be complete in terms of having a population base that will support an NBA team."

Translation: No way we're going back to a diminished fan base next season and try to compete with the Saints, being subsidized by the NFL to play at the Superdome. But we're committed to the Hornets' eventual return, as long as that long-term repopulation gets The Big Easy back to a population approximating pre-Katrina level.

Here's one more question we'd like Stern to answer: Should the Hornets make this year's playoff field — don't laugh, they went into Saturday's game at New York just one game below .500 — would the league split their home playoff games between Oklahoma City and New Orleans?

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Ford Center crowds energize Hornets

By Andrew Gilman
The Oklahoman

The old Charlotte Coliseum was rocking that day back in November of 1988.

The PA system blared "Shout," a favorite tune of fans that first season, when the Charlotte Hornets joined the NBA as an expansion team in 1988.

The place wasn't full, but it was loud, said Leonard Laye, the reporter assigned to cover the Hornets that season for the Charlotte Observer.

It was always loud at the Charlotte Coliseum, a place that would be so full, so often, later when the Hornets led the league in attendance for seven years running. The Hornets beat the woeful Los Angeles Clippers that day, but the crowd treated the win as if it were the Lakers instead.

"It was just crazy," Laye said. "The place was going nuts. Everyone was happy, and a friend turned to me and said, 'Forgive them, Lord. They know not what they are cheering for.'"

What they were cheering for was the same thing folks in Oklahoma City are clamoring about these days. And the result is a home-crowd advantage that will certainly take hold again tonight when the Memphis Grizzlies come to town for a 7 p.m. tip at the Ford Center.

But what makes a home court rock and visiting teams roll (over)?

It may be the winning - the Hornets are 18-19 headed into tonight's game - but it may be the uniqueness of the NBA in Oklahoma City, a new market for the league and a new experience for local fans.

As of Tuesday, the Hornets are 11th in the NBA in attendance, getting 17,721 fans per game. But take away the two "home" games in Norman and Baton Rouge, La., and the average jumps to 18,773 - eighth-best.

"Maybe it's the newness," said Hornets coach Byron Scott of the NBA landing in Oklahoma City for the first time. "Maybe it's the winning. I don't know, but the players love the energy they get from the crowd and the coaches love it because the guys are feeding off that."

This season, the Hornets are 10-6 in the Ford Center, with wins against San Antonio and Miami, but just 8-13 away from downtown OKC, including a loss to hapless Atlanta.

"The fans are up and they are loud no matter what," Hornets forward Desmond Mason said. "A lot of the fans at the Ford Center are college basketball fans and are bringing that atmosphere for us."

And there it is. The Hornets' home advantage was born out of a body of a college sports town and born at just the right time. This season, the college sports scene has been more down than in years past. No national championship contender at Oklahoma, no bowl game at Oklahoma State. NCAA Tournament prospects dimming at both places. And with no other major-league franchises around, fans have come out in a way not seen in very many places around the NBA.

"They're not used to seeing NBA games," Hornets guard Speedy Claxton said. "That's what's got

them so hyped.”

Hyped because the team is winning at the Ford Center at a higher-than-anticipated rate and hyped thanks to prodding from the Hornets’ game-operations crew.

No team in the NBA on game nights is as involved in getting the fans involved as the Hornets are.

While NBA commissioner David Stern has suggested there is too much piped-in music in NBA arenas, the Hornets apparently haven’t gotten that message. At the Ford Center, the crowd is really loud, but the music is louder, and plays longer than other arenas. Public-address announcer Michael Thompson keeps a running dialogue throughout the game, unmatched by other announcers, while fans stand and cheer at all the right times.

Meanwhile, fans who sit in the cheap seats are embraced at the Ford Center, but are just an afterthought in other places.

In Oklahoma City, a ride up the Ford Center escalator means a trip to “Loud City,” where there are giveaways reserved for those who bought the \$10 seats.

Hornets officials say they are playing the same music and running the same routines they did back in New Orleans, but the team didn’t win and didn’t draw fans the same way they are here. The Hornets were last in the league in attendance a year ago.

“When you’re almost the only game in town, the fans get behind you and are a little more interested in what you are doing,” said Scott. “A lot of it is because it was a small community and a college-type atmosphere, that’s what we have in Oklahoma City.

“When you’re the only pro team in town, the fans have a starvation for entertainment, or pro sports, it makes it easier.”

Easier to fill the arena, easier to cheer and in turn, easier for the home team to win.

“Having that new team in town creates a status that evokes civic pride,” said Laye, once again comparing the new Hornets to the old Charlotte Hornets, a team that took over in North Carolina. “When you can say you have a major-league team in town, it means something.”

It used to mean something in Charlotte, but eventually those Hornets lost it.

In 2002, the last year the Hornets were in Charlotte, the team made it to the second round of the playoffs, but had a crowd of 9,505 in one playoff game and never had a home crowd of more than 14,000 in four other playoff games.

Two seasons ago in New Orleans, the Hornets went 41-41, but didn’t even sell out their home opener. And the two times the Hornets made the playoffs while in New Orleans, they managed two sellouts in five home games.

But in Oklahoma City, the Hornets are not only benefitting from the newness of the NBA, but they are getting wins at a rate no one expected.

“I don’t really care why they are there,” Mason said. “It doesn’t matter the reason, whether they say it’s new or there’s nothing to do, it doesn’t matter how you look at it. Our fans are coming out and cheering for us, and for a team that’s so young, for them to support this way, makes it really good.”

And it’s made the team pretty good, too. Good enough that Scott asked team officials to move games. Tonight’s game was supposed to be played in Baton Rouge. Scott’s concerned about wins, and the best way to get more, as evidenced by this season, is to use that home-court advantage.

"Winning always makes it easier to support the team," Scott said. "Now, it's not always that way. Some places they will support the team no matter what."

That remains to be seen in Oklahoma City. But for now, the Hornets' home-court advantage is alive because of a packed house, good players and a lot of noise.

"Winning means more fans are in the seats," Mason said. "And the more fans there are, the louder it gets."

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Boston Globe

1.24.2006

http://www.boston.com/sports/basketball/celtics/articles/2006/01/24/entire_season_blow_off_course/

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Entire season blown off course

By Dan Shaughnessy, Globe Columnist | January 24, 2006

Some of them left on Friday night and drove to Houston. Some of them waited until Saturday, then went to higher ground in Lafayette, La. None of the New Orleans Hornets anticipated the magnitude of nature's fury.

It's been almost five months since Hurricane Katrina made landfall, and the New Orleans Hornets haven't been back to their own gym yet. They've played home games in Oklahoma City, Baton Rouge, and Norman, Okla. They won't play their first game in New Orleans until March 8 against the Lakers (wonder how many Kobe will get? Larry Bird once went for 60 in New Orleans). It will be one of only three true "home" games for the Hornets this year.

"That will be special," veteran forward P.J. Brown said before last night's game against the Celtics at the Garden. "It'll be the first professional sporting event in New Orleans since the storm. It will be symbolic to show that the city is coming back. It will send a message around the country."

The Hornets were the second-worst team in the NBA last year (thank you, Atlanta), winning only 18 games, but they left Boston with a 20-21 record and would be a veritable lock for the playoffs if they played in the Eastern Conference. It's a pretty good showing considering their status as true NBA Globetrotters.

Coach Byron Scott said, "We've just got a group of young guys who understand exactly what's going on in New Orleans. Basketball's been a safe haven. It's the one place where we could go where this did not touch us. All of us have friends and loved ones in New Orleans. It's been a tragedy, but it also brought us closer together."

Training camp was still a month away when Katrina brought hell on earth to the Big Easy. Many of the Hornets scattered around the United States. Rookie-to-be Chris Paul had yet to find an apartment in the city where he'd had his party after being picked third in the 2005 NBA Draft.

Brown, getting ready for his 13th NBA season, had more at stake than most of his teammates. He went to high school and college in Louisiana and he was at home with his wife and four children when the mayor told everybody to get out of town.

"We're used to it," said the 6-foot-11-inch franchise anchor. "We thought there was going to be some damage but we thought it would be minimal. So I waited until the last minute, but Saturday night, we left. We drove to Lafayette. Four days later, I came back. I'd seen a lot on TV, of course, but it's not the same as when you go back in. We were lucky. We had some damage, but none of the total devastation that so many had."

Coach Scott was similarly fortunate.

"The mayor was already saying to get out on Thursday, but I'm hard-headed and we waited until Saturday night," said the former Laker guard. "My wife and kids and I drove to Houston. About 5 1/2 hours. We were there for a week."

It was a little different for equipment manager David Jovanovic, who's been with the Hornets since their first days in Charlotte in 1988.

"People don't realize how little time there was," said Jovanovic, who lived in Slidell, La. "We left on Friday in our minivan. My wife, two kids, and me. We didn't bring the four cats. You take what you think you will need and you drive thinking that when you come home everything will be OK. That's what had happened in the past.

"But this was the big one. When I finally got back three weeks later, my house was half-destroyed. The wind took off three sides. We lost everything downstairs. The cats survived, but they were pissed off."

Jovanovic's family is staying in another New Orleans home while theirs is rebuilt. A pile of insurance claim forms has been filled out and the home is almost habitable again. Brown's family has temporarily relocated to Houston. The Scotts are in Oklahoma City, where the Hornet players and front office workers have been living since September.

A lot of other NBA-hungry cities offered shelter to the team, but Oklahoma City had the arena (the 19,163-seat Ford Center) and the location. The NBA schedule was already set when Katrina struck, so moving the Hornets to the West Coast was not feasible. The temporary site had to be somewhere near New Orleans.

Celtics radio announcer Sean Grande was impressed with the home crowd when the Green visited Oklahoma City in December.

"It was refreshing and cleansing," said Grande. "The way you'd treat a new girlfriend, that's the way they were treating the Hornets. There's a certain purity about it. Almost a college atmosphere. And I think it's a huge part of their resurgence."

The Hornets are averaging more than 17,500 at home and have had 10 sellouts.

"Good people there," said Brown. "They've embraced us."

Still, it's a strange situation. The front of the uniforms reads, "New Orleans." The standings indicate that "New Orleans" ranks fourth in the Southwest Division, below Memphis and above Houston. The Hornets are covered by the New Orleans Times-Picayune, and their games are broadcast on WODT radio in New Orleans.

They have New Orleans written all over them, but the NBA season is exactly half-over and they haven't been home yet. Not even close.

Article 39
Loyola Maroon
1.27.2006

<http://maroon.loyno.edu/media/paper542/news/2006/01/27/Sports/Support.The.Home.Team-1514273.shtml>

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Support the home team
By Melanie Newman

Published: Friday, January 27, 2006

The Oklahoma City Hornets and the San Antonio Saints?

It just doesn't seem right. For the Hornets, there has to be something to the turnaround, considering they were the lowest scoring team in the NBA last year. This year is a little different. They are 20-21, with a surprising hope of a playoff birth. While in New Orleans, they were 18-64.

In Oklahoma City, attendance at Hornets games is up by more than 4,000 from the 14,221 average attendance in New Orleans. The Saints were also warmly welcomed by San Antonio and rumors surfaced that the team might relocate to Texas, but the Saints announced a return to the Superdome next season.

In an interview with The Times-Picayune, NBA Commissioner David Stern said that the repeated sellouts in Oklahoma won't factor into the league's decision to bring the Hornets back to Louisiana. An agreement was made in early January to play three home games at the New Orleans Arena in March.

On March 8, the Hornets will play the Los Angeles Lakers in the first professional sporting event in the city since Hurricane Katrina. They face the Denver Nuggets on March 18 and the Los Angeles Clippers on March 21. The final decision on the Hornets' home next season is expected to be announced by next week.

An easy thing anyone can do, for the love of sports, for the love of New Orleans, will be to attend one, or all, of these three games and support the Saints this fall. New Orleans has to show our athletic teams and their leagues that we can and will support professional sports or else we run the risk of losing them. Oklahoma City and San Antonio, two relatively sleepy towns, have given our teams tremendous support.

We can do much better, and I'm optimistic that we will. Everyone talks about the necessity of New Orleans to return to normalcy, but how normal will it be if our professional sports teams leave us? Before the hurricane, the possibility of the Saints jumping ship was plausible. Though it is true that both teams had dismal seasons in New Orleans, this city isn't exactly home to the greatest fans in the leagues.

Pre-Katrina, we certainly took our NBA and NFL franchises for granted at times, and I hope that changes. After everything that we have been through, city pride should be at an all-time high, and that pride should be reflected in attendance at sports events.

Losing a sports team may seem trivial compared to everything else this city has lost. But through supporting our professional sports teams, we can gain a lot as a city. We can gain respect because, as evidenced by the Hornets massive improvement, teams play a lot better when they have a community behind them.

We can only hope that the improvement will continue and the national media will look beyond pitying New Orleans and begin to praise us for our victories on the field and court. A winning team will also bring self-respect and increase city pride.

We all came back to New Orleans. Our professional sports teams will come back, as well, despite tempting offers from Oklahoma City and San Antonio.

We all love this city, and so we, as fans, should show our sports teams more love.

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Times-Picayune

1.27.2006

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Scott explains desire for OKC
Coach doubts N.O. can back team in '06-07

Friday, January 27, 2006

By Benjamin Hochman
Staff writer

OKLAHOMA CITY -- Hornets coach Byron Scott, enraptured by fan support in Oklahoma City and wary of what awaits him in New Orleans, elaborated on why he said Wednesday night that he wants the Hornets to play in Oklahoma City next season.

"I think we have an obligation to be back to New Orleans when economically they can support a team," Scott said Thursday. "And the reason I said I feel comfortable here (in Oklahoma City) and would like to play here next year, is because I don't see that happening next year. I really don't think they'll have the residency, the economics to support a second franchise. I think our attendance would probably be worse because I don't think you have enough people.

"That's my main concern," added Scott, who has been in New Orleans once since the season started. "(The Hornets players) are getting used to playing in front of a nice, packed crowd every night, where fans are really into the game. It would be a big letdown if you don't have the type of fans back in New Orleans that we hope we would get."

A decision is expected from the NBA by the end of the month about the Hornets' plans for next season. Team owner George Shinn said he ultimately wants to return to New Orleans, but it's possible the team will remain in Oklahoma City for another season.

The team started selling tickets Wednesday to the three games it has scheduled for New Orleans Arena in March. Team officials said they were cautiously optimistic that they will have good crowds for the games against the Los Angeles Lakers (March 8), Denver Nuggets (March 18) and Los Angeles Clippers (March 21).

Although Scott, who is in his second season as Hornets coach, has little influence over the decision, he is the day-to-day face of the team, and Wednesday was the second time he's indicated a preference for Oklahoma.

A few weeks after the Hornets lost the first regular-season game they played in Louisiana, 101-88 to the Phoenix Suns on Dec. 16 before a sparse crowd at the Pete Maravich Assembly Center in Baton Rouge, Scott said he thought the Hornets would have won if the game had been played in Oklahoma City.

"When that game was over," Scott said then, "I was upset at the players and myself for allowing that game to get away from us. But in the back of my mind, when I went to the locker room, I thought, if this game was in Oklahoma City, it wouldn't have been this close. If we would have had a 14-point lead going into the fourth quarter, we would have won the game."

The Hornets announced Jan. 5 that they were moving the remaining five games that had been scheduled for Baton Rouge to Oklahoma and New Orleans. The proceeds from the two games played in Oklahoma went to the team's Hoops for Homes program in New Orleans.

With the drafting of stellar point guard Chris Paul and several other key offseason moves, the Hornets are a much improved team from the 2004-05 season. A big reason for this season's 20-22 record, Scott and some players said, has been the home fans. The team is 12-7 in the Sooner

State. On Wednesday night, after a home loss to the San Antonio Spurs, Scott said, "I would love to play here, stay here and play in Oklahoma City. I think our guys are enjoying it. I think the fans have been unbelievable. Out of our 12 home wins, I think the fans have won half of them, just with their energy."

The Hornets are 11th in the NBA in attendance with an average of 17,641, a number skewed by two games in college venues: 7,302 fans at LSU, and 11,343 at the University of Oklahoma in Norman on Jan. 13. On Wednesday against the defending-champion Spurs, the Hornets had a sellout crowd of 19,289 at the Ford Center.

Of course, the NBA is the first major league team to call Oklahoma City home, and the novelty of the NBA has made the Hornets a hit. While future sustainability is up for debate, Scott looks at the present. And the present is -- his team is pushing for a playoff spot, and his team plays well in Oklahoma City.

"It's a college atmosphere," Scott said of home games. "The fans are crazy about the Hornets."

Last season in New Orleans, the Hornets were dismal. At one point they won two of 31 games and were on pace to set the league record for fewest wins in a season before finishing with a franchise-worst 18-64 record. The Hornets averaged 14,221 fans last season with three sellouts, last in the NBA. But from a business standpoint, the team felt a corner was turned in the spring when Paul Mott became team president and rejuvenated the executive office. Last June, Hornets officials said the team was recording its highest sales figures since the franchise relocated to New Orleans in 2002.

"(New Orleans) is where we're supposed to be, but the most extreme disaster in the history of our country forced us to leave," said Hornets center P.J. Brown, a Louisiana native who lives in Slidell. "Right now, they're trying to do things to get their lives back on track. Would I prefer the team to eventually go back there one day? Yes. But as of right now, I just don't know if we're able to support a team right now. That's the question I don't know (the answer to)."

Scott admits he is in a "sticky situation" trying to be politically correct, but also trying to do what's best for his players.

Asked if the Hornets have an obligation to be part of the city's rebuilding process, Scott said: "That's probably true, but I also say the NBA is in the business of making money, and Mr. Shinn is in the business of making money -- he's the owner of the team. If we go back there, even if we're only getting (a smaller number of fans), that means he's losing a ton of money -- and so is the NBA. I do understand the obligation. We're all in a tough situation because this is New Orleans' basketball team. You had something that drastically changed that in Hurricane Katrina. . . ."

"But the truth of the matter is -- can they support a basketball team? And a lot of people are saying by next year, they don't think there's any way the city will be rebuilt enough to where they can support two (professional) franchises. As a coach, that's my concern. I want these guys to be able to play in an environment where it generates the energy. We went to Atlanta to play, and we all looked around, and even the players were like, 'Geez.' There were like 7,000-8,000 fans there. It's tough to get up and play every single night when you don't have the type of fan base we have here right now (in Oklahoma City)."

Because of a dramatic reshaping of the roster last offseason, most of the Hornets' players don't have ties to New Orleans. Five of the 14 Hornets were attained in the summer or fall and spent only days in the city.

Brown, in his 13th season in the NBA, understands the mindset of New Orleanians: "From a mental standpoint, just having the team back there, it's showing the country that we're taking steps to get back to where we were. And the Hornets were becoming a big part of the business community..."

"I know the Hornets are going to be OK, no matter what. I want what's best for the state of Louisiana and the city of New Orleans. That's where I'm from, and that's where my heart is. Not only just now, but I mean 10 years from now, 20 years from now."

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Some Hornet players wouldn't mind staying in Oklahoma City

By Andrew Gilman and Darnell Mayberry
The Oklahoman

Hornets players are being careful about what they say concerning matters of location for next season.

Advisors to suggest Hornets' fate

Notes

But when it comes down to on-court issues, those same Hornets are speaking their minds.

"I just hope they (the decision makers) are taking into account the response we've gotten here," said Hornet forward David West. "They keep telling us playing in Oklahoma City is temporary, it's temporary, it's temporary, but we want to win and we want to perform in front of people."

When asked about where they want the team to be next season, not one player on the Hornets roster said New Orleans, without also mentioning the positives of Oklahoma City. Coach Byron Scott has already said he would prefer the team return to Oklahoma City next season.

While the players want to avoid offending fans in New Orleans and Oklahoma City, the bottom line is the importance of wins and losses.

The Hornets' record is important enough that the league has taken notice, already moving a pair of games out of Baton Rouge, La., due in part to low turnouts for a preseason game and a regular-season game in December.

And with the Hornets averaging 18,565 in 18 games in Oklahoma City (eighth-best in the NBA), a season-ticket base of more than 10,000, the home court is the main reason the players are saying they want to come back.

While some players, like forward Rasual Butler suggested the team should return to New Orleans, the comments were tempered by affection for Oklahoma City.

"This team belongs to New Orleans," Butler said. "I would think it would be better for the city of New Orleans to go back. But at the same time, Oklahoma City is a great host to us right now. It's showing a lot of hospitality with their fan support."

Scott said Wednesday night, after the Hornets were ripped by San Antonio 84-68, that the fans were responsible for at least half the team's 12 home wins.

"So I would prefer to stay here," he admitted.

His team seems to feel the same way.

"Right now, I'd say here (would be better)," said guard J.R. Smith. "I don't think New Orleans is ready, especially for a pro team right now. And I think Oklahoma City has really embraced us with sold-out crowds every night. So from a team standpoint, I think we need to stay here."

The players feelings aren't being considered by the league, and even PJ Brown, who is the NBA Players Association representative, said he hasn't been asked. Brown, who is from Louisiana, did not offer an opinion on what he prefers for the Hornets next season.

"Ask me in five months," Brown said. "I can tell you then."

But the decision is expected to come much sooner. The NBA's finance committee, made up of 13 owners from around the league, is expected to make a decision by next week. By Wednesday, the Hornets should know where they are playing next year.

"I like the way Oklahoma has been," said guard Speedy Claxton, who was one of the few Hornets who was opposed to the team moving to Oklahoma City in the first place. "I would like to stay here, but I really don't have that much of a preference. It isn't my decision."

Even Brandon Bass, who is from Baton Rouge, and played at LSU, has mixed feelings.

"I'd rather it be New Orleans because it's close to home," Bass said. "But I'd rather stay here because of the fans. They're crazy here."

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Hornets, fans wait for news about home

By Bill Haisten World Sports Writer

1/27/2006

Commissioner Stern to announce where the team will play next season.

OKLAHOMA CITY -- Byron Scott owns homes in Los Angeles and New Orleans. The Hornets' head coach is renting a house in Oklahoma City. He would prefer to buy -- and stay.

"I think all of those guys in that locker room like playing in front of 19,000 people every night," Scott said after the Hornets' Tuesday night loss to San Antonio at the Ford Center. "I would like to stay here next year."

Every aspect of the Hornets' Oklahoma City experience has been positive, but the team and its fans are shackled by uncertainty.

Within days, NBA Commissioner David Stern is expected to announce whether the Hornets will remain in Oklahoma City or return to New Orleans for the 2006-07 season.

"The announcement will come soon, and I don't like to comment on what it's going to be," Hornets owner George Shinn said. "If I do that, I might get some people upset or mad. It's very, very sensitive.

"I have a plan in place. If we can stay here another year, it will give us some breathing room. I want to meet with the powers that be in Louisiana and say, 'Hey, I've got a business here and I want it to work.' If the state (of Louisiana) is willing to backstop me (by providing financial assurances), then we can do business."

According to the Hornets' lease agreement with the New Orleans Arena, if they play three games in the arena in March, as they are scheduled to do, then they are obligated to play in New Orleans next season. The overriding issue is whether the New Orleans area, devastated by Hurricane Katrina, has the population and economic ability to support an NBA franchise.

"When the arena is playable, we're supposed to come back," Stern told the New Orleans Times-Picayune. "That's just the way it is."

At the midway mark of the season, the Hornets already have two more victories (20) than they recorded during the entire 2004-05 season. In New Orleans last season, the Hornets were last in the NBA in home attendance (14,221 average). This season, the Hornets are 11th with an average of 17,641. That figure is misleading. Two of the team's designated home games were played elsewhere, drawing crowds of 11,343 in Norman and 7,302 in Baton Rouge, La.

For 18 Ford Center dates, the Hornet average is 18,565. That's a number that would rank eighth in the league.

"Obviously, I think the Hornets will be (in Oklahoma City) next season. After that, we'll just have to see what happens," said Bill Land, a former Tulsa broadcaster who now does Spurs television play-by-play. "The Hornets weren't drawing in New Orleans, anyway. People didn't care about the team. If you're just very honest, I don't think most of the people in New Orleans would care at all if this team left.

"Early in the season, I traveled with the Spurs, and I'd talk with people around the league who had seen games in Oklahoma City. They all said, 'You won't believe it. It's just like a college game.' One thing I notice is that the fans are all here when the game starts. In most NBA cities, a lot of fans are fashionably late. Here, the fans don't want to miss a moment of it."

Scott said most of his NBA associates have been "shocked" by the Hornets' popularity in Oklahoma City. Reminded that Oklahoma is known as a football state, Scott said, "Yeah, I know, but you couldn't tell by the way the crowd comes to our games. What I love about (the Ford Center) is that you get that college atmosphere."

On Tuesday, the Hornets played before their 10th Ford Center sellout. In 41 New Orleans dates last season, the Hornets managed only three sellouts.

"We're thankful and blessed with the way this community and state have helped us," said Tim Hinchey, the Hornets' senior vice president of corporate development. "But at the same time, we're not prepared yet to just shutter the doors down (in New Orleans).

"Somebody's going to make a good decision at some point. What this is, I have no idea."

Among the 19,289 fans who attended Tuesday's Spurs-Hornets contest was Oklahoma Secretary of State Susan Savage, the former Tulsa mayor. She sampled an NBA game for the first time since the 1980s, when she lived in Philadelphia and watched the Julius Erving-led 76ers play at the Spectrum.

"It was great fun," Savage said. "Very fast-paced. Great family entertainment. I saw several people from Tulsa at the game, so I know the Hornets are being supported by citizens throughout the state."

From a business standpoint, the Hornets are paralyzed until Stern makes a decision. Shinn would consider selling a percentage of the team to Oklahoma investors, but, he says, "you can't even really proceed on that deal because you're not sure where you'll be next season."

"Everything is on hold," Shinn said. "For the next season, everybody in the league launches their campaign in the very beginning of February. We've got to get rolling."

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Saturday, January 28, 2006
By John Reid
and Benjamin Hochman

With an NBA-imposed deadline just days away, it appears likely that the Hornets will be based in Oklahoma City next season and visit New Orleans for just a handful of games with an understanding the team would return to the Crescent City for the 2007-08 season, league sources said Friday.

It's not known how many games will be played in New Orleans, the Hornets' home since the 2002-03 season until Hurricane Katrina forced the team to relocate to Oklahoma, but league sources indicate it likely will be six to eight games.

Earlier this season, Hornets officials said playing a split schedule for the 2006-07 season was a possibility, but this week they said dividing the 41-game home schedule equally between the two cities would be impractical because the team would have to keep a sizable work force in both markets.

Though team owner George Shinn has consistently said he wants to be part of the city's rebuilding efforts, he also has consistently said he wants to bring the team back when the city is ready to support it. Last week, NBA commissioner David Stern said the league is operating on the assumption that the city's long-term repopulation projections will be sufficient to support an NBA team. "Our plans are to come back," he said.

But Hornets coach Byron Scott questioned this week whether next season is the time to return.

"I really don't think they'll have the residency, the economics to support a second franchise," Scott said Thursday. "I think our attendance would probably be worse, because I don't think you have enough people. That's my main concern."

Hornets and NBA officials have been in discussions with state and SMG officials since mid-December about possible options. The Hornets do not have an out clause in their 10-year agreement, but if they decide to leave after the final year of the contract, 2012, they would have to pay a \$10 million penalty.

"We believe the Hornets' lease agreement requires them to return to New Orleans for the 2006-07 season," Superdome Commission chairman Tim Coulon said in a statement. "We are aware of their concern regarding the ability of the market to support a 41-game season."

"The state, through the LSED and SMG, has been diligently working with the Hornets and the NBA toward the same mutual goal: to assure the long-term success of NBA basketball in New Orleans. We have made every effort to make accurate, objective information and projections available to them. We believe they have made a long-term-commitment to New Orleans."

The Hornets will play three games at New Orleans Arena this season, beginning March 8 against the Los Angeles Lakers. Tickets for the three games went on sale Wednesday, and in a statement issued by the team, the Hornets said they are cautiously optimistic they will have good crowds for what will be the first professional sporting events in New Orleans since Katrina.

Arena general manager Glenn Menard said the Arena is on schedule to be ready for the March 8 game. The most extensive work involves the two locker room areas, which suffered water damage from Katrina.

As part of its lease agreement with the Hornets, there is a clause that if the Arena is deemed playable for the three games scheduled, the Hornets are obligated to return to New Orleans next season. But it appears state officials are willing to work with the Hornets to accommodate their wishes for the short term as long as they commit to returning after the 2006-07 season.

When the Hornets signed their lease agreement with Oklahoma City in October, they had an option to return for the 2006-07 season if the league determined that New Orleans had not fully recovered economically from Katrina or repopulated to a sufficient level to support an NBA team. The team's lease deal in Oklahoma is generous, and fan support has been very strong at the Ford Center. The franchise is guaranteed to earn between \$35 million to \$40 million, and the deal pays for housing the team's employees and the team's furnished office space, which is within walking distance of the Ford Center. The Hornets can extend the lease for another season with the same revenue guarantees. The team also has signed five major sponsorship deals with Oklahoma City-based companies.

The Hornets have concerns about their corporate sponsorships in New Orleans. The team said that all but three of their corporate sponsors either suspended or canceled their deals. Team officials also said one in three season ticket-holders no longer lives in Louisiana, according to information they gathered when refunds were made available for New Orleans season ticket-holders for the 2005-06 season.

"Sports partnerships and sponsorships, in a lot of the cases, are going to take a back seat," said Michael Thompson, the Hornets' director of corporate communications. ". . . There's a lot of that adjustment going on in New Orleans. I have every reason to believe they're going to come back. Eventually, the population base is going to return."

"It comes down to business," said Hornets center P.J. Brown, a Louisiana native. "That's a business decision for Mr. Shinn and David Stern. If the team goes back there, they're going to want the team to make money. We all know that.

"If the fans are not able to come to the games and support the team, they're not making any money. I don't know if that's in the best interest of the team or the city of New Orleans -- I don't know yet."

Oklahoma City mayor Mick Cornett said the city has not been involved in any negotiations with the Hornets regarding next season, nor has he received any information regarding the league's pending decision on where the Hornets will be based next season.

"If this team is going to return to Oklahoma City next season, it needs to be because the city of New Orleans is not yet ready," Cornett said. "We have not been negotiating for next year, and it wouldn't be appropriate to do so until they determine that they cannot play in New Orleans. And I haven't heard that word yet."

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Yahoo Sports

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http://sports.yahoo.com/nba/news;_ylt=AkpdmdB9.2sOF.VtqgnLR728vLYF?slug=ap-hornets-neworleans&prov=ap&type=lgns

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Shinn says best for Hornets to stay in Oklahoma next season

January 28, 2006

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (AP) -- New Orleans Hornets owner George Shinn said Saturday the team should remain in Oklahoma City next season.

"Right now, I think everybody's got to accept the fact that New Orleans is not ready for this coming season," Shinn said. "They're not ready, so we should play in Oklahoma City next year, and then start working and putting everything together to come back."

The NBA said that commissioner David Stern has planned to announce a decision on the Hornets' status by the end of this month.

"The NBA said we'll be announcing it at the end of the month, and I'm predicting a few days after that," Shinn said before the Hornets played the Memphis Grizzlies. "The end of the month is not until Tuesday, I think, so just hold your breath until then."

The Times-Picayune reported Saturday that the Hornets would be based in Oklahoma City next season and play "a handful of games" in New Orleans.

Shinn initially downplayed the report and continually referred to the legal wrangling between his representatives and the state, at one point saying lawyers are "overpaid and underworked."

Shinn added that the Hornets have "already agreed" to play six games in New Orleans next season, but as for the rest of the matter, nothing is settled. He said until he hears from his attorney or the NBA, "that a deal's done, there's no deal."

The Hornets have played almost all of their games this season in Oklahoma City because of the damage to New Orleans and the surrounding Gulf Coast from Hurricane Katrina.

Coach Byron Scott said last week he also hopes the Hornets remain in Oklahoma City next season.

Shinn said the Hornets have a signed lease to play in New Orleans and he will honor that, but he wants to make sure the agreement is fair to all parties, including himself. And with the city's future uncertain, he wants to make sure he is not forced into something unfair to his franchise.

"What if next October there's 10 feet of water in the city?" Shinn asked. "You expect me to come back? Give me a break. Just be reasonable about things. That's all I'm asking."

Shinn expects his attorneys, and possibly even himself, to continue discussing the deal with Louisiana officials. Shinn said he is even willing to fly to Baton Rouge early next week to discuss the matter with Gov. Kathleen Blanco. And, at times, he sounded frustrated by the process.

"I feel like the guy that's got two women that's fighting over him," Shinn said. "It would be nice if it was two women instead of two states."

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Times-Picayune
1.28.2006

<http://www.nola.com/sports/t-p/index.ssf?/base/sports-22/1138431413243320.xml>

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Coach's remarks about next season aren't OK

Saturday, January 28, 2006

John DeShazier

Hornets owner George Shinn has professed an undying love for, and every intention to return his franchise as soon as possible to, New Orleans.

All he has to do now is make sure Byron Scott has the memo and advise his head coach to, at least publicly, toe the company line. Because for all the wonderful things Scott has done with the Hornets

on the court this season -- taking a team with some not-so-great parts and molding it into a competitive 20-22 team when everyone would've bet good money the Hornets would've been 10 or 15 games under .500 by now -- he's at the point where it'd be in his best interests, and the best interests of the franchise, that he turn mute about things off the court.

First, Scott implied that the Hornets lost their December game in Baton Rouge against Phoenix because of a lack of enthusiasm by the 7,302 fans in attendance, rather than his team's reluctance to guard with a little more zest than a fence post in the fourth quarter.

Now, he has stated that he'd prefer to stay and play in Oklahoma City next season, where the Hornets have been warmly received and buoyed by an average attendance of about 19,000 per game at the Ford Center.

It's a double-edged sword, Scott's honesty, because we love him for it when he applies it to players he's disappointed with, etc. He doesn't turn it on and off like a faucet, isn't a player of politics.

And in this case it's probably not even wise to place an excessive amount of emphasis on what he has said about staying put. Ultimately, Shinn calls the shots for the Hornets and NBA commissioner David Stern will call the shots for Shinn. Where the Hornets will or won't play next season won't be a decision made by Scott.

But, that said, it's not exactly a boost to New Orleans' collective psyche that the coach of New Orleans' NBA franchise seems not to be in the least bit of a hurry to return to the city that his franchise calls home.

Imagine the effect Scott's desire to return to OKC might have on ticket sales for the three games that will be in New Orleans. Who wants to date a person who's salivating over someone else?

You'd hope that, at least, Scott and every Hornet would be expressing a desire to return to New Orleans and to play in New Orleans Arena as soon as possible. That, after witnessing how callous and detached the Saints' players looked after professing a desire not to return to New Orleans while the city struggles to regain its footing, everyone in the Hornets' organization would understand how much it means to the community that everyone associated with it show and express an intent to return and help rebuild.

True, support and attendance in OKC are undeniable. From all that can be seen and has been reported, the Hornets have been recipients of a suffocating hug, and OKC doesn't want to pry loose. The city wants an NBA team; logically, it would want to keep the one it's already familiar with even though it hasn't publicly made a play.

But, too, it would be wise to remember that the Hornets still are New Orleans' franchise. Attendance wasn't booming last season when the city was at full strength, but perhaps there was an extenuating circumstance.

The Hornets stunk.

An 18-64 team, which more often than not seemed to have no clue what it was supposed to be doing on the court, isn't going to play to rousing crowds and packed houses at home. Whatever attendance was last season, in which the Hornets had the worst record in franchise history, should be considered a blessing.

The same theory can apply for this season, with regard to the three games that will be played in New Orleans.

Considering all that has happened -- and all the other, more important things that money is needed for these days -- the people who show up for those games are the ones who should be applauded, not put in position to feel unappreciated or forgotten or brushed aside, yet again.

There'll be time enough to worry about the repopulation of New Orleans, the possible Hornets fan base, whether or not the region can support two major pro sports franchises. Stern and Shinn will address those issues, make a decision and, hopefully, it'll be one that plays to the best interests of the city and franchise.

Of more immediate importance is the fact that everyone in the organization at least should be willing to show support to the people who supported it when it was at its lowest point.

You'd hope they'd at least say something nice, or nothing at all.

Article 46
Times-Picayune

1.29.2006

<http://www.nola.com/sports/t-p/index.ssf?/base/sports-22/11385775703340.xml>

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Shinn won't commit for '07-'08
He wants state to be 'reasonable'

Sunday, January 29, 2006

By John Reid
Staff writer

MEMPHIS -- Hornets owner George Shinn said Saturday he's not opposed to playing six games in New Orleans next season. But he doesn't want to be forced to sign a guarantee that the franchise will honor its lease agreement and return to New Orleans for the 2007-08 season, after it plays a majority of its games again in Oklahoma City next season.

The Hornets' current lease with the state does not expire until 2012 and has no out clause. But if the team decides to leave after the final year of the contract, they would have to pay a \$10 million penalty.

"We already have a contract, and if they want to go court, they have a right because I signed the (lease) deal," Shinn said. "To put something in that ties me down that much more is unfair. I can't predict what's going to happen to New Orleans. What if next October, there is 10 feet of water in the city, do they expect me to come back? If they want to put on the gloves, I can put on the gloves, too. Just be reasonable about things, that's all I'm doing.

"I want to work with them, and I want to do everything I can to make this thing good. But it's got to be good for everybody, not just this person or that community but everybody. I want it to work. I want people to work with me. I don't want people to say you've got to do this and you've got to do that. I don't have to do that."

The Hornets and the state remain in negotiations, and Shinn said he may request a meeting with Gov. Blanco on Monday to clear unresolved issues.

The league is likely to announce Tuesday that the Hornets will play 35 games in Oklahoma City and six in New Orleans next season, but Shinn said that announcement could be delayed by a day or two.

"As far as I'm concerned, we do not have a deal with the state of Louisiana and will not until I hear from the NBA or from my attorneys," Shinn said. "My attorneys and the attorneys from the state are talking and discussing it, but I have to make the final decision and they know what guidelines and parameters they have from me. We're not there yet.

"Until we get there, there is nothing to announce. The NBA said we'll be announcing it at the end

of the month and I'm predicting maybe a little bit, two days after that. But the end of the month is not until Tuesday. So just hold your breath until then."

Larry Roedel, an attorney for the Louisiana Stadium & Exposition District (LSED), said negotiations with the Hornets and the NBA have been productive.

"The exchange of proposals for next season and beyond has been in good faith and the NBA staff and the Hornets are both professional and helpful," Roedel said by e-mail Saturday. "We do not yet have a definitive agreement on all key issues with the NBA and the team. Where the team will play its schedule next season has not been set. Jan 31st was the date set by the NBA for that decision to be made. Neither the state nor the Hornets selected that date."

But Shinn said everybody must accept that New Orleans will not be ready by next season, from a business or population standpoint, to adequately support a 41-game home schedule at New Orleans Arena.

"They're not ready, so we should play in Oklahoma City next year and then start working to put everything together to come back," Shinn said.

Shinn said, "I feel like the guy that's got two women that's fighting over him," when describing the pursuit of his franchise between Oklahoma City and New Orleans. "It would be nice if it was two women and not two states. It's a situation that I want to do what's best."

The Hornets' lease with Oklahoma City, signed in October, gives the team an option to return for the 2006-07 season if the league determines that New Orleans has not fully recovered economically from Katrina, or repopulated to a sufficient level to support an NBA team. The team's lease deal in Oklahoma is generous, and fan support has been very strong at the Ford Center.

The franchise is guaranteed to earn between \$35 million to \$40 million, and the deal pays for housing the team's employees and the team's furnished office space, which is within walking distance of the Ford Center. The Hornets can extend the lease for another season with the same revenue guarantees. The team also has signed five major sponsorship deals with Oklahoma City-based companies.

"We believe the Hornets' lease agreement requires them to return to New Orleans for the 2006-07 season," Superdome Commission chairman Tim Coulon said Friday. "We are aware of their concern regarding the ability of the market to support a 41-game season."

"The state, through the LSED and SMG, has been diligently working with the Hornets and the NBA toward the same mutual goal: to assure the long-term success of NBA basketball in New Orleans. We have made every effort to make accurate, objective information and projections available to them. We believe they have made a long-term-commitment to New Orleans."

Article 47

USA Today

1.30.2006

http://www.usatoday.com/sports/basketball/nba/hornets/2006-01-30-20-second-time-out_x.htm

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20-second timeout: Brown says city comes first, Hornets 2nd

The NBA has said it would decide by today if the Hornets, who relocated to Oklahoma City this season after Hurricane Katrina, will return to New Orleans next season or remain in their temporary home. The Hornets are 12-6 at "home" this season and averaging 17,541 fans. But forward P.J. Brown's interest in the decision goes beyond the basketball court. He is a native of Louisiana and

had relatives who were displaced by the storm as well having his home in Slidell, La., damaged. Brown talked with USA TODAY NBA reporter Roscoe Nance about the Hornets' future.

Q: How trying has this season been?

A: The toughest part of it was when the storm first hit and not knowing where we were going to be. For a couple of weeks we didn't know if we were going to be in Oklahoma City, Kansas City or St. Louis. After getting (to Oklahoma City), the people embraced us with open arms. That's what has made the transition a little bit easier, their courtesy and their graciousness. Oklahoma City has been a lot better than I thought. You got 17,000, 18,000, 19,000 people every night. It's like a college atmosphere. They don't sit until we score our first basket. You don't see that in the NBA. They're excited and enthusiastic. It's been a good combination. We're in a unique situation. We're playing for two cities.

Q: Would you prefer to stay in Oklahoma City or return to New Orleans?

A: That's a tough question. You're asking a Louisiana guy. Who knows what's going to happen. In my mind, the No. 1 thing is trying to get things right in New Orleans, get the region back on its feet. It's tough living conditions down there. A lot of people who had jobs are jobless. You have to get schools rebuilt and get them back to where they need to be. There are a lot of priorities that are more important than a professional sports franchise. If we can fit back in the stream of things economically and it's good, I'm all for going back. But I want to see those other things in place and taken care of before people are talking about teams going back because money is hard to come by.

Q: Do you think New Orleans' economy would be able to support the Hornets?

A: As of right now I don't think so. I think everybody would agree right now, no. In the future, that's the question — how soon would they be able to support us? I don't know what the political powers feel and what they think. But as of right now it would be pretty tough for us to be there.

Q: How excited are you about returning to New Orleans to play three games?

A: I'm excited. That's home. I have friends and family I'll be looking forward to playing in front of. It will mean a lot to have us back in the city. Hopefully it will uplift the city even more than where they are and help people feel a little bit better about the situation.

Q: How disappointing was the reception for the game in Baton Rouge that drew 7,302 fans?

A: It was tough. But me living there and knowing the situation, I understood. People are trying to live. Money is tough. People are trying to get their lives back on track. The ones who could make it came out to support us as much as they could.

Article 48

USA Today

1.30.2006

http://www.usatoday.com/sports/basketball/nba/hornets/2006-01-30-future-location-decision_x.htm

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Hornets' future now in hands of NBA

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — The owner and head coach of the New Orleans Hornets have already said where they think the team should play next year. The NBA will have the final say.

A decision is expected this week, perhaps as early as Tuesday, on where the Hornets will play their 41 home games next season.

Owner George Shinn and coach Byron Scott took turns last week expressing their desire to return to Oklahoma City, where the Hornets are 12-6 and averaging 17,541 fans since being displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

After Scott said that "fans have been unbelievable" in Oklahoma City, Shinn added that "New Orleans is not ready for this coming season" — a combination that would seemingly point to a second season in Oklahoma City.

The Hornets have until July to exercise an option to return to Oklahoma City for the 2006-07 season. But NBA commissioner David Stern has said he wants a decision by the end of January, enabling the Hornets to begin season-ticket sales for next season.

Even in a shortened time span, the Hornets had no trouble selling tickets in Oklahoma City following the September relocation. By opening day, a SportsBusiness Journal report ranked the team sixth in the NBA in season ticket sales. The Ford Center has been sold out for 10 of the team's first 18 games.

Still, the NBA and Hornets officials have said they want the team to eventually return to New Orleans, although the team ranked last in attendance last season while finishing 18-64. What's uncertain is when a full-time return to the city will be feasible from a business standpoint, especially given the strength of fan support in Oklahoma City.

However, a return to Oklahoma City could require some work on the legal end.

The team's lease agreement with the New Orleans Arena contains a covenant requiring that all home games be played at the arena if it meets the NBA's standards. The Hornets are scheduled to play three games at the New Orleans Arena in March, and Shinn said this weekend that the Hornets "already agreed" to play six games in New Orleans next season.

The rest of the schedule is in the NBA's hands.

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Strong N.O. turnout essential to send right message

Tuesday, January 31, 2006
John DeShazier

OKLAHOMA CITY -- Take George Shinn's contrition however you like. Believe the Hornets owner as far as you can toss him.

But understand that it's important to show up for the team's three-game cameo at New Orleans Arena in March. Understand, New Orleans, that when the curtains open against the Los Angeles Lakers on March 8, the nation will tune in and, fairly or unfairly, will equate it with the level of recovery.

Know that because it really is New Orleans' first "big" sporting event since Hurricane Katrina, the spotlight will shine bigger and brighter than it did even in the Hornets' first game in New Orleans, after the franchise relocated from Charlotte.

So the biggest thing is to show.

Even if you don't like what Shinn said last week about taking off the gloves and scrapping with the state about his lease agreement. Even if you cringed when Coach Byron Scott said his preference was to return to Oklahoma City for the 2006-07 season.

"I just want the people to understand, this thing has been stressful for me," Shinn said Monday night from the Ford Center, where the Hornets beat Milwaukee 94-93 on David West's jumper with a tenth of a second left.

"I'm trying my best not to upset anybody."

Fact is, though, it's going to be impossible for someone to not feel slighted.

It's either New Orleans, which absorbed the mother of all gut punches and still, at times, appears to be walking in quicksand. Or Oklahoma City, which graciously and generously opened its heart and bank account and poured its love into the Hornets in an effort either to attract them permanently or prove itself NBA-ready for Commissioner David Stern.

That's the tough part of the deal, knowing that whichever way the wind blows, someone still will have a nostril full of stink.

"I just want the people of New Orleans to understand that I'm still on track," Shinn said. "I want to be a part of rebuilding New Orleans."

Chalk up his prior defiance to anger, Shinn said, over the state's attempt to have him sign an unconditional guarantee to return on top of the lease agreement.

If, truly, that's the case, perhaps that was overkill. Especially if the lease is as ironclad as it appears to be, and the Hornets are locked into their marriage with New Orleans until at least 2012.

But, perhaps too, maybe the state's negotiators felt compelled to seek more assurance when word began to waft that the franchise wanted to stay put, without knowing whether or not it could be sufficiently supported in New Orleans next season.

The realistic likelihood is that it can't -- not with the population depleted and infrastructure devastated and leadership still, even now, unable to tell people whether they can return and rebuild. But it's too easy for a one- or two-season suspension to turn into something longer, too easy for the out-of-sight, out-of-mind syndrome to set in.

Amid all that legal entanglement and emotional posturing and uncertainty, the franchise wants, and needs, a good showing in March.

For itself, certainly, because no team wants its home crowd to be comprised mainly of vendors and dancers. For the league, which never has been in the business of subsidizing franchises and doesn't seem the least bit interested in starting now, of course.

But, just as much, a good showing is needed by New Orleans, for New Orleans.

"I don't know how critical it is," Shinn said. "(But) I think it's very important. Every little positive stacks up.

"The (Hornets') plan and the goal is to come back. Nothing has changed. I want New Orleans to look good."

Doesn't really matter how much you do or don't believe him, how much or little you take offense to what was said last week. Because ultimately, it's about supporting the franchise, about showing the

nation that it's not all confusion, gloom, doom, dust and rubble in New Orleans.

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Sporting News

1.31.2006

<http://www.sportingnews.com/yourturn/viewtopic.php?t=58082>

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No way Hornets return to New Orleans

By Michael Deuser

January 31, 2006

Hornets owner George Shinn sounded on Monday like a man who has spent a lot of time poring over contracts and talking to lawyers. He told reporters: "They were asking for an unconditional guarantee. I can't forecast any acts of God or any other thing, so how can I guarantee something that I can't? I'm not God, I can't do that." "They" was the state of Louisiana, which was pressing Shinn for a guarantee that he would return the Hornets to the city of New Orleans in 2007-08, two seasons after their hurricane-induced departure. Fact is, in my opinion, there's virtually no chance of the Hornets returning to the Crescent City; Shinn has stumbled onto a basketball goldmine better known as Oklahoma City.

Thanks to the basketball-crazy fans in Oklahoma, the 22-22 Hornets are 11th in the NBA in attendance this season despite having the league's second-lowest payroll (only the Bobcats spend less). Chris Paul and Co. are drawing 17,667 fans per night (including a game in Baton Rouge where they failed to clear the 8,000 mark), which is more than 3,000 more fans -- per night -- than the Hornets drew last season in pre-Katrina New Orleans. Considering that the average cost of an NBA ticket is around \$50, that's an additional nightly revenue of around \$150,000 -- or additional seasonal revenue of over \$6 million -- before even one of those fans buys a hot dog or a jersey.

George Shinn isn't a god, and he doesn't aspire to be. George Shinn is a businessman, plain and simple. In Oklahoma City, the Hornets promise to be a profit-creating machine. In New Orleans, even before Katrina, they were guaranteed to generate a loss. Shinn has more than enough money to pay a team of talented lawyers very well. Something tells me they'll be able to find a loophole that will allow the team to bail on its New Orleans stadium lease before its contractual escape clause in 2012. And something tells me this loophole will involve typical contractual language making exceptions for "acts of God."

The Hornets return to New Orleans? I'll believe it when I see it.

Preseason

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December

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March

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ESPN

2.1.2006

<http://sports.espn.go.com/nba/news/story?id=2314238>

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Oklahoma City to host 35 games; New Orleans six

By Mike Fish

ESPN.com

NEW ORLEANS -- Louisiana officials could have legally forced the Hornets return to this city next season but instead put off the fight while accepting owner George Shinn's proposal to play the bulk

of the team's 2006-07 home games in Oklahoma City.

The Hornets have been a box-office smash since relocating to Oklahoma City in the wake of the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina. Under the deal signed with Oklahoma City, the Hornets were afforded the option to return next season if the New Orleans Arena wasn't ready for play. The Hornets are scheduled to play three games at the New Orleans facility next month, but Shinn pressed Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco on the fact the city wouldn't be prepared to adequately support a 41-game home schedule.

How quickly and to what level the city eventually repopulates remains one of the great unknowns. According to estimates released by the mayor's office this past week, New Orleans' population was 134,400 in December -- down from the 2000 Census Bureau estimate of 484,674.

"Clearly, the Hornets and the NBA felt the community could not support 41 games," said Tim Coulan, chairman of the state-affiliated Louisiana Superdome and Entertainment District. "That led them to ask for a reprieve in 2006. We looked at the opportunity for us to force them legally to come back in 2006 and the consequences of that. And what they might choose to do legally would put us in an adverse situation.

"If we won, then we got a team that didn't really want to be here. Why put us in an adversarial situation with a team that has great concern over the viability of the region? So this is the best that we could hope for under the conditions."

Shinn reiterated his concerns directly Tuesday to Blanco, who along with NBA commissioner David Stern agreed to the plan that has the Hornets playing 35 home games in Oklahoma City next season and six in New Orleans. The agreement includes the strong possibility that New Orleans will host the 2008 NBA All-Star Game -- a potential \$30 million boost to the local economy -- as well as the league's annual marketing meetings next October.

"We believe the additives of the All-Star Game and the owners' meeting is a real confidence boost to the city and its recovery," Coulan said.

All the parties to the agreement anticipate the club returning to New Orleans for the 2007-08 season -- most important, Stern, though adding, "For now, our collective interests are best served by having the team play the bulk of 2006-07 in Oklahoma City."

The NFL already has addressed the fact the New Orleans Saints will be returning to the city next season, after splitting time this season between San Antonio and Baton Rouge.

Right now, no one is a bigger fan of Oklahoma City than Shinn. The move there has been a financial windfall, with some estimating the club could turn a profit of as much as \$35 million this season. Hornets officials acknowledge the franchise lost money during the 2004-05 season, when the club's attendance figures were among the lowest in the league.

The latest agreement came after Shinn told the New Orleans Times-Picayune last Saturday that he'd reached the conclusion that New Orleans wasn't prepared to host an NBA club next season.

"They're not ready, so we should play in Oklahoma City next year and then start working to put everything together to come back," Shinn told the newspaper.

Shinn added: "I feel like the guy that's got two women that's fighting over him," in describing the two cities' pursuit of his franchise. "It would be nice if it was two women and not two states. It's a situation that I want to do what's best."

Likewise, Hornets players are torn between their affection for the struggling city they left behind and their new Oklahoma City fans.

"The fans here have been wonderful," P.J. Brown said after practice Tuesday. "There is no real winner. Somebody is going to lose. I don't know who that is going to be. It's tough. As a player you're very sensitive to the fans' feelings and you want to make them happy."

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The Oklahoman
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Hornets one step closer to staying in OKC.

By Berry Tramel
The Oklahoman

That's the proper interpretation of the NBA's King Solomon announcement Tuesday.

Oklahoma City gets 85.3 percent of the Hornets' home games next season. New Orleans gets six home games next season, a virtually for-sure All-Star Game in 2008 and all the flowery future talk it always has gotten from the NBA and the Hornets, except when George Shinn strays and tells the truth.

Which was the case the other night when Shinn admitted these numbers: The Hornets' revenue for a typical game at the Ford Center: roughly \$800,000.

The Hornets' revenue for a typical game last season at the New Orleans Arena: \$360,000. And that was pre-Katrina.

That's \$18 million a year. That's why Shinn privately will fight to stay in Oklahoma City and why his fellow owners won't gang up to vote against him. There's a little bit of the golden rule among moneyed people; don't stick it to the other guy, because some day he could stick it to you.

Shinn, in debt when he landed in OKC, would lose his shirt with a return to New Orleans. His colleagues recognize that.

New Orleans has a solid lease with the Hornets, which could make the divorce quite nasty, but what other choice does Shinn have?

Lawyers with a lot less ammunition than a staggered city have argued out of contracts. And besides, does a city really want a franchise that doesn't want to be there? No good comes from forcing Shinn to return to a city where he was failing even in good times.

The NBA continues to employ classic exit strategy.

The league is smoothing the road for permanent relocation.

Awarding the All-Star Game, with perhaps more to follow, is a meaningful olive branch. New Orleans always has been one whale of a big-event town; no reason the All-Star Game couldn't not only succeed there, but excel.

And the language used Tuesday was the same kind of encouraging, but non-committal, wording we heard last September, when the Hornets arrived.

Commissioner David Stern: "We are hopeful that the team will be in a position to return to New Orleans full time beginning in the 2007-08 season."

Shinn: Returning to New Orleans is "our goal and our plan"

Carefully chosen words, meant to keep New Orleans' spirits raised, without concrete assurances. New Orleans did not get the guarantee it sought. Sentiment is lovely, but this is big business. Big business is why Oklahoma City wasn't a major-league player in past decades and why Oklahoma City is a major-league player today. There's a lot more money in Oklahoma City than most of us ever dreamed. Shinn smells the money, and his representatives plan to start meeting this week with potential limited-partnership investors to relieve his debt. Sources said Oklahoma City business leaders could be interested in both minority interest and controlling interest, should Shinn decide to sell.

Make no mistake. Oklahoma City wants this team. Mayor Mick Cornett and city leaders have gone low-key since September on such base desires. But the benevolence only goes so far; the government, the private sector, the working Joes, everyone wants the Hornets to stay.

"It's tough," Hornets center PJ Brown said of this tale of two cities. "Someone's going to lose"

The events Tuesday were one more indication that the loser is not going to be Oklahoma City.

Article 53

Sports Illustrated

2.1.2006

http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2006/writers/richard_deitsch/02/01/the.rant/index.html

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The Rant

With Hornets thriving, NBA does right by Okla. City

Posted: Wednesday February 1, 2006 12:48PM; Updated: Wednesday February 1, 2006 3:12PM

There are roughly 300 days to go before Sports Illustrated names its 2006 Sportsman of the Year. I'm not waiting. I'm nominating an entire city: Oklahoma City.

One of the best stories in sports has emerged from one of worst disasters we've ever seen. In the aftermath of the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, the NBA's New Orleans franchise was temporarily placed more than 700 miles away to Oklahoma City, a city not unfamiliar to tragedy with the 1995 bombing of a federal office building. Kansas City, Las Vegas and San Diego were among the other cities interested in the franchise but the NBA opted to send the Hornets to Oklahoma City, which paid for the Hornets' housing and office-space costs and offered the team a guaranteed cash payout if the team's revenues fell short of projections.

These days, the only projection Hornets fans are thinking about is who they'll play in the playoffs. Last year, the team finished with an 18-64 record. If the playoffs started today, the Hornets would be the eighth seed in the Western Conference. The team is 22-22 overall and 13-7 in Oklahoma, including a win over the Kings in January at the University of Oklahoma's Lloyd Noble Center. The Ford Center's upper bowl has been dubbed Loud City. They should call themselves Proud City. The Hornets have played 19 games at the Ford Center and have averaged 18,546 fans --- including 10 sellouts. The in-game atmosphere rivals Midnight Madness. Fans arrive early for games and scream throughout. So much for Oklahoma being a pigskin state.

The NBA is the first major sports league to place a team in Oklahoma City and the league is clearly impressed. They announced yesterday that the Hornets will play 35 games in Oklahoma City and six in New Orleans in 2006-07. The plan is for the team to return fulltime to New Orleans for the 2007-08 season. That's the right thing to do. But Oklahoma City has set itself up as the top choice for relocation if a franchise moves, or if the league expands beyond its current 30 teams.

For years, Oklahoma City has craved a reputation as a first-class, major-league city. Welcome to the club, cowboy.

Article 54

Chicago Tribune

2.1.2006

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/cs-060201bullsgamer,1,4563392.story?coll=chi-sportsnew-hed&ctrack=1&cset=true>

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Paul KO's Bulls in OK

Quick rookie guard puts on show as Hornets tip Bulls

By Sam Smith

Tribune pro basketball reporter

Published February 1, 2006, 11:12 PM CST

OKLAHOMA CITY -- The Bulls saw one of the next stars of the NBA Wednesday night as rookie Chris Paul collapsed their defense repeatedly and led the Hornets to a 100-95 victory.

"There are certain rookies—it doesn't happen that much—who come into the league ready to play, and he's definitely one of them," Bulls coach Scott Skiles said of the No. 4 overall pick from Wake Forest. "He's among the league leaders in steals. He got deflections, had his hands on balls, played both ends. He's an all-[NBA] caliber guard, no question about it."

It was an all-NBA stretch run from Paul, who carried the Hornets after the Bulls took a 90-89 lead with just less than three minutes remaining.

Paul had 25 points, 13 assists, four rebounds, three steals and just one turnover despite playing bumper cars with the Bulls' interior defense all game.

With his team stumbling late, he spun and scored on a breathtaking drive for a 93-90 lead with 1:49 left. Then he hit a jumper after a Ben Gordon miss and, with the Hornets ahead five with 35 seconds left, sneaked up behind a driving Gordon, stole the ball, was fouled and made two free throws on his way to 11 fourth-quarter points.

"It was sort of the way things just fell into place," Paul said.

"It was real frustrating," said Kirk Hinrich, who led the Bulls with 20 points. "He's real quick, slippery strong.

"He made plays for the team all night and we struggled to do a good job on him."

It was bad enough that the Bulls had to extend themselves Tuesday in a futile comeback against Dallas, but then they arrived here and found the Hornets were calling on a higher power.

In a practice adopted from when the team was in Charlotte, there was a pregame invocation in which the speaker asked "to watch over the Birdman," a reference to the suspended Chris Andersen, and finished by saying that **if that higher power was a basketball fan, he would be a Hornets fan. C'mon, is that fair?**

[DL Edited Note: emphasis supplied ... that's the best damn prayer I've ever heard at a sporting event! Sorry about my digression ... the story continues ...]

No, this is not your ordinary NBA venue. The fans, as is the custom here with the team now committed through at least most of next season, stand until the first basket is made by the home

team. And they have quite a bit to stand for as the surprising, young Hornets (23-22) thanks to a guard-oriented, perimeter-shooting team like the Bulls (20-25).

"There are three things with them this season," Skiles said. "One, Chris Paul. I think he's one of the best point guards in the league right now. David West is having a career year, and I think the unfortunate circumstances that led to coming here has helped them.

"They get a nice home-crowd boost I don't believe they got in New Orleans, at least I never witnessed it. There's some excitement that surrounds the team and Paul has made a huge difference.

"He's a franchise player."

The flashy rookie took over after the Bulls took a quick lead. He helped keep the Hornets within 23-22 in a first quarter in which they were outplayed.

The Bulls occasionally employed a zone defense that helped change the momentum of Tuesday's game in Dallas, but Paul cracked it and got both Gordon and Hinrich in foul trouble.

With the Bulls falling behind in the second quarter, Skiles ran onto the court to draw a technical foul, though Paul then drove twice for baskets and the Hornets took a 53-42 halftime lead thanks to a 14-0 run.

"I took a little bit of a gamble in getting a technical," Skiles said. "I thought a couple of whistles were questionable. I thought we'd get a response and we did. Unfortunately, we got one from the Hornets instead of from us.

"We battled back, had our chances and we didn't make the key plays."

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Times-Picayune
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Oklahoma City's mayor is defining class act

Thursday, February 02, 2006
John DeShazier

OKLAHOMA CITY -- You could paint Oklahoma City mayor Mick Cornett as the bad guy, but it would take a willingness to ignore the facts.

You could not wish Cornett and his city well in its pursuit of an NBA franchise, but that would be nothing more than mean-spirited. Because from the beginning, the citizens of Oklahoma City and their mayor only have expressed a desire to do what was best for New Orleans, even while babysitting its NBA team, even while forking over a reported \$40 million this season for the privilege.

"What I've told our citizens is 'we need to support this team with everything we've got,' " Cornett said. "And if we do that, I believe the NBA will find us a franchise."

We've seen things done the other way, step by step, according to the most commonly used blueprint -- those instructions that direct cities and their governments to stampede whomever stands in their way, to pant and coo and promise the world, to publicly trash the competition in an effort to make more attractive their profiles.

And Cornett, Oklahoma City's first-term mayor, and his constituents never have stooped to that level.

"We're pulling for New Orleans," he said. "You can't be as closely involved with city government as I am -- to run for mayor you have to have a strong passion for municipal government -- and not be pulling for New Orleans."

That's not to even remotely suggest Cornett and Oklahoma City don't covet a pro sports team. They want an NBA franchise, in particular, and are doing about everything they can think of to make Commissioner David Stern take notice and place Oklahoma City on the short list of places the league would approve for a franchise relocation or expansion.

They just didn't want to pursue one the way they could have pursued the Hornets.

Not by attempting to pirate away a franchise from a city that barely can raise a glove to defend itself, not tastelessly spouting off about someone else's deficiencies while that place attempts to recover from the worst natural disaster in American history.

Not by kicking New Orleans while it's down -- because Oklahoma City knows something about being down.

The Oklahoma City bombing, the biggest act of domestic terrorism in American history, occurred on April 19, 1995.

Oklahoma City understands what it's like to rebuild, to need its important businesses to show support and stand strong to help resurrect the community.

"We've been through dire straits ourselves," Cornett said. "To a certain extent, I think we're an example and perhaps can serve as a role model to a lot of Gulf Coast cities, that you can turn it around. We've come a long way. When I think back to where we were 10 years ago, it's an amazing turnaround for this city. And I think that's part of it.

"I made a clear decision early on (that) we would not compete with New Orleans for this franchise. This is their franchise. But if they couldn't play games in New Orleans, I would compete as fiercely as I could with any city in the country for the right to host them. And the city stepped up. There's no question about it, that we have proved that we're worthy of a major-league franchise."

Hard to argue that point.

Sellout crowds. Corporate sponsorship. So much teal inside the Ford Center you'd think fans had been splashed with buckets of teal paint beforehand. Ear-splitting cheers.

Obviously, no one can peek into the future, to gauge what support might be like a few seasons from now, when the honeymoon ends and the Hornets, or any other team, bottom out in the standings. But at present, every sign points to the level of support needed to sustain a franchise.

The Hornets? Sure. But only if it's done the right way, Cornett said.

"The decisions concerning (the Hornets) are, to a large extent, beyond our control," he said. "It needs to be between the NBA, and the city of New Orleans, and the state of Louisiana, to determine when the city and the state and the community down there can host an NBA franchise.

"It won't be my call. No one will ever call me to ask me what I think about that. So I don't focus on that. I focus on us proving we're a major-league market.

"I think that this point we're sold on the NBA. And I'd like to think that there won't be any gap, that we're going to have an NBA team here from now on. But that's out of our control to a large extent.

There's a lot of moving parts in that equation. Hopefully, months from now or maybe a year from now, some of that will clear up."

Article 55

Los Angeles Times

2.4.2006

Note: this was copied from a web board; the stated source link no longer works:

<http://www.latimes.com/sports/basketball/nba/lakers/la-sp-okcity4feb04,1,3581833.story?coll=la-headlines-sports-nba-lakers>

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This Turned Out OK

Hornets have been a success in Oklahoma City, and no one is sure about a return to New Orleans after Katrina

By Mark Heisler
Times Staff Writer
February 4, 2006

OKLAHOMA CITY — Where?

A year ago, when the NBA was hiring Republican consultants for advice on the red states, this place wasn't even on its map. Nor did it occur to New Orleans Hornet owner George Shinn after Hurricane Katrina, when he began getting calls from the mayor of every city with a 15,000-seat arena and 41 available dates.

Shinn's personal choice was Las Vegas, but that wasn't how it turned out.

It's a long way from the neon-lighted Strip to the Hornets' new home. Here, the gift shops at Will Rogers World Airport sell T-shirts with a drawing of an upside-down cow over the state profile, a wry allusion to the rural prank of cow-tipping.

"I got calls from Vegas, St. Louis, Kansas City, Anaheim, San Diego, Tampa, just all over," Shinn says. "But David Stern and I were talking and David suggested Oklahoma City.

"And I said, 'Oklahoma where?' "

Five months later, the Hornets are not only here, but, despite the diplomatic statements designed to spare feelings in New Orleans, they're expected to stay.

They're No. 11 in attendance, compared to No. 30 last season. In an even bigger surprise, they've gone from last season's 18-64 to No. 8 in the Western Conference with rookie-of-the-year front-runner Chris Paul. They're 14-8 in the Ford Center and Coach Byron Scott credits half of those wins to their boisterous fans.

With Katrina's death toll more than 1,000 and the displaced in the hundreds of thousands, the Hornets' problems are insignificant. Nevertheless, the team has taken on a symbolic importance in both of the cities it calls home.

Here, the Hornets mean major league. In New Orleans, where they meant less and less in each of their three seasons, their return would symbolize renewal and their loss would be dismaying.

Stern just announced the team will play six games in New Orleans next season, nominated the city for the 2008 All-Star game, and said he was "hopeful" the Hornets "will be in a position to return to

New Orleans full time beginning in the 2007-08 season." However, Stern stopped short of saying the team would return.

Shinn's statements are as carefully worded. Nevertheless, he's praised in New Orleans for his sensitivity — Times-Picayune columnist John DeShazier called him "the anti-Benson" — if only in contrast to Saint owner Tom Benson.

Benson announced he would bring his NFL team back only after first agreeing to start "discussions" about moving, according to San Antonio Mayor Phil Hardberger. The story broke in October, less than two months after Katrina, with one dire story after another about its impact still leading the news.

Shinn knew, or learned, this was sensitive from the moment Stern told him there was such a place as Oklahoma City and he should move there.

"I said, 'Well, I'm going to fly out there, take a look at it,' " Shinn says.

"He said, 'No, I don't want you to do that.'

"And I said, 'How the heck do you expect me to make a decision?'

"He said, 'Well, it just wouldn't look good.'

"David's a PR guy. He said, 'It wouldn't look good if you're walking through that arena with the Mayor of Oklahoma City and it ends up on the front page of New Orleans.' "

Shinn will donate the proceeds from the three upcoming games in New Orleans, starting March 8 against the Lakers, to Habitat for Humanity. But business is business.

"I owe it to the people there [New Orleans]," Shinn says, insisting he's open to returning. "When we first went there, they supported me. These people have been through a lot and I just hate to. ...

"Fortunately, they're getting their football team back and we were like the new kids on the block. But we're going to try to make it work."

One way or another.

Looking for a Home

If Shinn is perceived as handling this difficult situation gracefully, he was perceived as running a dream situation in Charlotte into the ground.

In basketball-mad North Carolina, his Hornets led the NBA in attendance for their first eight seasons. And they rose in the standings after drawing the No. 1 pick that became Larry Johnson in 1991 and the No. 2 that brought Alonzo Mourning in 1992.

But it all blew up in their faces starting when Shinn gave Johnson a \$70-million extension — an aghast Stern noted that was twice the \$35-million franchise price — only to learn Johnson's back injury was worse than anyone thought and he'd never be the same player.

Mourning forced a trade. Shinn was sued for civil sexual assault and acknowledged an affair with a cheerleader before being found not liable in court. Negotiations with Charlotte officials for a downtown arena became so acrimonious even Stern couldn't salvage them.

Shinn left in 2002. Stern turned right around and gave Charlotte another expansion team, this one for \$300 million.

Shinn's search for a new home demonstrated one thing: All the obvious choices were gone. It came down to Newport News, Va., the No. 42 TV market, and New Orleans, a tourist destination with a small arena, little corporate presence and the No. 43 TV market.

The Hornets went 47-35 and 41-41 in their first two seasons, were switched into the West and fell to 18-64 as their franchise player, Baron Davis, forced a trade.

Then Katrina put them back on the road again.

To everyone's surprise, the road led here, but Stern had learned all about Oklahoma City — at length — from Mayor Mick Cornett, who made a detailed presentation in 2004. Stern concluded it might be able to support a team, after all ... in the NHL.

"He called me the mayor who wouldn't go away," Cornett says. "We went through every league, every sport, every TV deal, every business model of every franchise there was out there available. And he was trying to help me determine what would be the best fit in Oklahoma City because he knew it wasn't the NBA.

"And I left his office with that advice, that I should pursue an NHL team. Next time I saw him was in the Ford Center at one of our games."

It was the No. 47 TV market, but it had energy giants Kerr-McGee, Devon and Chesapeake flush with profits as oil prices soared. With five "pioneer sponsors" putting up \$1.5 million and the city and state going for the rest, they showed the NBA the money.

"The hurricane hit Monday," Cornett says. "The water started rising on Tuesday. Wednesday I called Stern. Nine days later they [NBA and Hornet officials] were in the Ford Center. On that ninth day, fundamentally we put the deal together."

And a sweetheart deal, it was. Shinn was guaranteed the prior season's revenue plus 5%, with \$2.5 million in relocation fees, free office space and temporary housing for 100 employees.

In the first 10 days after the announcement, the Hornets sold 10,000 season tickets. Even Stern called that "unbelievable."

Oklahoma City had an NBA team, such as it was.

The Man Who Knew No Fear

Scott was always different, given to saying exactly what was on his mind as a player, although with everyone flocking to Magic Johnson it was largely missed.

Scott didn't change as a coach, nor did he wilt easily. Getting his first job meant jumping into the New Jersey Nets' black hole, but he survived a 26-56 debut to make the NBA Finals in his second and third seasons.

The lowly Nets he joined were a success story compared to the 2004-05 Hornets, who for years had been unraveling like a ball of yarn. Hired in large part because Davis liked him, Scott saw his team start 2-29 and learned Davis didn't like him enough to endure that.

Unbowed after Davis' departure, Scott insisted the right man could turn it around, as Steve Nash had in Phoenix. It turned out to be true, although Scott didn't know who the right man was or how they would get him.

"I didn't at that time, until we finished working out all the guards we had in [before the draft] and I knew that right guy was Chris Paul," Scott says.

"And I said, 'You know what, we're probably going to get Deron Williams, who I liked as well. ... I said, 'No way he [Paul] is going to drop to four [where the Hornets were picking], he's going to go two or three. And lo and behold, Utah [at No. 3] wouldn't let us know what they were going to do until the last second, until they made the decision to take Williams.

"And we were in the war room jumping up and down because we knew then that this was going to be the start of something special. We were going to get the point guard of the future."

Not even Scott thought the future would arrive so fast. At 20, the effervescent Paul is their undisputed leader. The Hornets have exceeded expectations, but they haven't exceeded Paul's.

"You know, I've never actually been on a losing team," Paul says, "and I'm sure guys like this [teammates] were the same way in college and things like that."

The Hornets are small as well as young, with a front line of P.J. Brown, David West and Desmond Mason. Brown, the last holdover from the team that came to New Orleans in 2002, is the only Hornet who was ever a full-time starter before this season.

They play like college kids and the crowd cheers like a student body, standing until they make their first shot.

This deal is working for all involved. After Shinn's guarantee is met, the city, state and sponsors get 80% of the profits to repay their costs. Because revenues will more than cover Shinn's guarantee, this is expected to be a rare instance in which the taxpayers enjoy the largely intangible benefit of a local team and the tangible benefit of getting their money back.

"It's the most inclusive thing we've ever had in the city," Cornett says. "Before we were split, Oklahoma-Oklahoma State, what we call the Bedlam Rivalry. We've never had anything that was for everybody.

"You look at this crowd, it's younger, it's older, it's people of color, it's people of all economic levels and they're all here for one thing and that's never happened."

Of course, not everyone who used to be involved still is. Scott recently said he "would love to stay" next season, sounding as if he wanted to stay permanently. A day later he was obliged to add, "I think we have an obligation to be back to New Orleans when economically they can support a team."

Even Shinn the salesman has a hard time remaining detached.

Asked about their attendance drop in New Orleans, Shinn acknowledges, "That's right."

And the problem of depopulation?

"I agree," he says.

This will take years to play out. It's only a Cinderella story until you get to the Louisiana state line.

Tale of two cities

Annual home attendance and average for the NBA's Hornets, during their three seasons in New Orleans and this season in Oklahoma City (2005-06 figures are for 22 games):

Year	City	Att.	Avg.
2002-03	New Orleans	641,683	15,650
2003-04	New Orleans	587,613	14,332
2004-05	New Orleans	583,070	14,221

2005-06 Oklahoma City 390,183 17,735

[Edited Note: the writer has the OKC attendance wrong through 22 games; actual attendance for those games was 409,689 averaging 18,622.]

Article 56
Sacramento Bee
2.3.2006

<http://www.sacbee.com/content/sports/story/14147036p-14975329c.html>

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Ailene Voisin: NBA just biding its time with New Orleans

By Ailene Voisin -- Bee Columnist

Published 2:15 am PST Friday, February 3, 2006

Story appeared in Sports section, Page C1

What do you do with the Hornets? Where do they live? Where do they work? And how does a franchise abandon New Orleans without appearing heartless?

This All-Star idea isn't the answer, but given everything that has transpired during the past several months, it's the best feel-good solution available. It buys time. It makes tremendous long-term sense.

Assuming negotiations between NBA and city/state officials progress as smoothly as anticipated, designating New Orleans as the host city for the 2008 weekend celebrity bash (along with scheduling six games there next season) allows the parties to reconvene after there has been some clarity regarding the recovery process and affords an opportunity for the Big Easy to re-establish itself as one of the nation's premier Big Event cities.

The NBA should visit. Often.

But it doesn't have to stay.

"Sports can be used as a tool to show that we're working hard at getting back to normal and bringing economic development here," said Jay Cicero, president of the Greater New Orleans Sports Foundation. "People pay attention. We think we've got a shot at being successful with both franchises (the Saints and Hornets). But there are legitimate questions. It's a question the Saints are asking ... that we're all asking. Can we do it?"

The prognosis for any NBA team inhabiting New Orleans, of course, requires more than a quick perusal of your usual magnetic resonance imaging scan, necessarily includes scrutiny of the following: the quality of the arena and its amenities, the availability of corporate sponsorships, the extent of the regional television contract and television market size, the population base, degree of fan support, extent of competition for the sports and entertaining dollar.

And unfortunately, the significant issue here - is this market big enough to sustain two professional sports teams? - has hovered since Hornets owner George Shinn dumped the city of Charlotte and badgered skeptical fellow owners into approving his 2002 relocation bid to an area that currently ranks among the league's smallest. Additionally, the Hornets failed to attract a committed following during their three seasons in New Orleans, finishing last in average attendance in 2004-2005.

So why not stay in Oklahoma City? Why not just state the obvious and ease out of New Orleans?

Because this is an impossibly delicate matter regardless of whether Shinn and Commissioner David Stern actually believe their carefully crafted rhetoric. Logic says they don't. Says that this was a misprint from the beginning. Demographics. Television market. Income levels. Really, the Hornets never had a chance.

Besides, the Saints were there first. As Cicero added from his cell phone, "The Saints are totally embedded here."

After Hurricane Katrina, of course, the Saints were sleeping in San Antonio for a while. But assuming the NFL's return to the city that was ripped apart by the worst natural disaster in American history is a permanent one, Stern and the NBA owners are left to digest the leftovers. They have to decide whether Shinn's Hornets - an acquired taste in the best of times, especially after his nasty divorce from the citizens of Charlotte - can justify staying in their immensely successful refuge of Oklahoma City, should relocate to a larger market or quietly allow the situation to evolve naturally, economically as well as psychologically.

"From everything we have seen and heard," Stern said Wednesday after making the announcement, "we have little doubt that New Orleans will soon regain its place among the world's premier cities for hosting major sporting events. ... We are hopeful that the team will be in a position to return to New Orleans full-time beginning in the 2007-2008 season."

Caution: Stern spoke about hope, not permanence. Yet who can blame him? For a change, who can blame the often shameless Shinn?

Between the politics and the parsing of words, the reality is this: There is no stat sheet to analyze, no exact numbers on the balance sheet, no way to figure out where to go from here. So the best move is to stay put, to stay in Oklahoma City and make an appearance once in a while, schedule the occasional All-Star Game that is expected to pump \$30 million into the local economy, and devote the region's communal sports passion toward the Saints and Super Bowls.

This embattled city doesn't need the Hornets.

It never did.

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Mercury News
2.7.2006

<http://www.mercurynews.com/mlid/mercurynews/sports/13810024.htm>

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Posted on Tue, Feb. 07, 2006

Scott survives a tough call in New Jersey to find hope in Oklahoma

BY LISA OLSON

New York Daily News

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. - Byron Scott looks as if he's just stepped off a luxury cruise. The lines around his eyes have faded into happy half-moons, and he no longer has the discomfiting habit of gnawing on the inside of his cheeks as if they were stuffed with Juicy Fruit.

Go figure. More than any other season, this one ought to be rife with discontent and uncertainty. A horrendous national disaster forced Scott and the New Orleans Hornets to relocate to Oklahoma City, and while that town has embraced the team with acts of kindness and unexpected enthusiasm, Scott would be forgiven if he were grumpy or bitter.

Surely the death and destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina prompted Scott to re-examine his life, to remember how he's gloriously blessed. But beyond those spiritual meditations, Scott couldn't ignore the practical. New Jersey is so far away, even the stench no longer haunts him.

At its worst, the NBA is Machiavellian and deceitful, the egos overshadowing whatever joy hangs on the court. Before the jokers at Madison Square Garden conspired to ruin careers and destroy the game, the Nets were caught in their own unsightly power play. While it didn't have the ugly

repercussions the Knicks keep force-feeding us almost daily, it was no fun encountering the congo line of back-stabbers in the Meadowlands' back alleys.

If he were so inclined, Scott could show off the scars. He led the Nets to two NBA Finals and stood tall in the middle of one of sports' most remarkable turnarounds. In between all the exultation and high-fives, the players began to turn on and tune out Scott, and he was fired midway through the 2003-04 season. Scott says now the Nets' situation was so untenable, he would not have returned even if the Nets had asked. The team's ownership was in flux and the star point guard was inspiring rebellion. There are worse predicaments, as New York basketball fans have discovered, but Scott had little desire to stick this one out.

"It was just too many things going on player-wise that I didn't like, that I wasn't going to be able to deal with the next year," Scott told *The Oklahoman* this week. "No coach wants to go through that type of stuff when you have mutiny."

In a hallway a few yards from some of those very same mutineers, as saxophonist Branford Marsalis warmed his pipes and buckets were deposited around the arena for donations to "New Orleans Area Habitat for Humanity," Scott was asked to elaborate. Was he really "relieved" to walk away from a team that still had such strong playoff potential?

"I just felt it was time to move on. I'm in a great situation right now, I've got a young team, a lot of young guys who want to play. I was frustrated with some of the things I felt were going on," said Scott, before the Nets beat the Hornets, 99-91. "We'll leave it at that."

As he bulldozed toward another triple-double, Jason Kidd never bothered to glance Scott's way. Kidd finished one rebound short, his 14 points and 11 assists hard reminders of what Scott left behind. "Unless we were the ninja mutant ninja turtles, there was no mutiny," Kidd said of his three-plus years with Scott.

It's a good thing for the Nets that Kidd doesn't shoot as messily as he spins analogies. In rookie Chris Paul, Scott is blessed with a point guard who is also special, a Kidd clone minus the knife. In general, I wondered, how much control does Scott think players should have?

"It's like they say about prisons. You got the prisoners running the asylum, nothing good is going to happen," Scott said.

The Hornets' circumstances were hardly desirable, even before Katrina wiped out the team's home. Charles Barkley warned Scott not to take the job, career advice Scott wisely ignored. It's been a moving, gratifying experience, a refresher course in all that is good about America. Whatever reservations Scott and the Hornets had about the move to Oklahoma City have been supplanted with awe at their hosts' generous spirit.

"From the first day I got there it's been unbelievable and the players could tell you the same thing," said Scott, his team 24-23, with a grip on a seventh-seed playoff spot. "We play great there at home because of the support we're getting."

The decision to stay in Oklahoma next season is political, emotional, controversial. While much of America slides back into cushy oblivion, the Hornets are running, jumping reminders of a national tragedy. Scott has said he'd prefer the Hornets not yet return to New Orleans but reserves the right to change his mind. P.J. Brown, a Louisiana product who is one of the few veterans on this young squad, delicately toes the line.

"A lot of us want to go back, but on the other hand the people in Oklahoma have been great," Brown said. "The whole Gulf Coast has pretty much been destroyed. It's going to take a united effort. We're overseas in Iraq trying to rebuild and yet we've got a situation in our own back yard that's devastating."

For a few hours most nights, Brown and the other Hornets can ease away from the horrors. That's the beauty of basketball, of any sport. It travels well. It's why Scott breathes easily again, without peering over his back.

Article 58
USA Today
2.11.2006

http://www.usatoday.com/sports/basketball/nba/hornets/2006-02-11-ownership_x.htm

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Oklahoma investors group seeks stake in NBA franchise

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — Investors have come forward to seek a financial stake in an NBA team for the Oklahoma City market. Businessman Clayton I. Bennett, who formed the group, said the investors are interested in partnering with Hornets owner George Shinn should the team remain in Oklahoma City. If the team moves back to New Orleans, the group would like to lure another NBA franchise to the city.

"The bottom line is, we want a team for this market," said Bennett, president of Dorchester Capital in Oklahoma City.

Shinn has been seeking investors for the Hornets in an attempt to reduce a large debt incurred a year ago when he bought out partner Ray Woodridge. The team is playing most of its home games in Oklahoma City this season and next because of hurricane damage in New Orleans.

In a statement released late Friday night, Hornets president Paul Mott said Shinn "has absolutely no desire to sell the team, but we very much look forward to opening a dialogue with Mr. Bennett and his group to discuss ways in which they can become more involved in the ownership of the Hornets."

Shinn was in New York and could not be reached for comment.

Bennett's group includes Aubrey McClendon and Tom Ward of Chesapeake Energy Corp., and G. Jeffrey Records Jr., MidFirst Bank. Those three and Bennett are the members of Oklahoma Professional Sports, LLC, the organization that partnered with the city and state in providing a revenue guarantee for the Hornets this season.

Bennett said he has at least four other civic and business leaders who are interested in joining what would be a broad-based group. Bennett said he also envisions a larger collection of investors.

The Hornets have been averaging 18,622 fans per game at the Ford Center, eighth-best in the league.

Shinn and NBA commissioner David Stern both have said they hope to return to New Orleans in 2007-08, but have stopped short of guarantees.

"We are absolutely committed to the Hornets this year and next," Bennett said. "But we also are 100% committed to finding a team for this city in the long term."

If the Hornets do not stay in Oklahoma, there could be other NBA clubs on the market.

Seattle SuperSonics owner Howard Schultz has said he will sell the club unless extensive renovations are made to Key Arena or the team gets a new building to play in. Both Bennett and Oklahoma City mayor Mick Cornett said they have not spoken with anyone from the Sonics.

Article 59
Times-Picayune

2.12.2006

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TWO TEAMS, TOO MUCH

The NFL's economic structure will allow the Saints to proceed next season in the same market that wouldn't be able to support the Hornets, experts say

Sunday, February 12, 2006

By Benjamin Hochman

Staff writer

If the Saints can return next season, why can't the Hornets?

The answer, though complex, can be simplified -- the NFL and NBA are two different animals.

The NFL's revenue sharing, the size of fan bases and disparity in number of games are some of the reasons why the Saints will be back in New Orleans and the Hornets will be in Oklahoma City next season.

"If the NBA went back in the current state New Orleans is in, it would be a marketing and logistical nightmare," said Marc Ganis, president of SportsCorp, a sports media consulting firm. "Could it be done? Highly unlikely in any successful manner."

"There were agreements on both sides of the table with our discussion with Louisiana officials about how difficult it would be for the Hornets to prosper in New Orleans," said Joel Litvin, the NBA's vice president of legal and business affairs. "There was also the notion that it would be easier for the city to support one professional team than two. There's a significant crossover between the

fans for Saints and fans for Hornets, and the assumption given was -- this location and that people have much more important things to spend their money on, and it would be easier to support one team than two. That's just common sense."

Both New Orleans teams were forced out of town in the fall because of Hurricane Katrina -- the Saints to San Antonio, the Hornets to Oklahoma City -- but the Saints announced in December that they would return to play in the refurbished Superdome next season.

For the same reason the Hornets would struggle in New Orleans, according to NBA officials and analysts, the Saints can squeeze by.

With the NFL's revenue sharing, the Saints will bring in significant earnings regardless of how many fans show up on Sundays.

TV is king

From the NFL's television deals, each team reportedly earned an \$87.5 million share during 2005. Throw in sponsorship deals and shared season-ticket sales, and each team reportedly starts a season with nearly \$112 million. The NFL's salary cap is \$85.5 million, and nears \$100 million with benefits. So because of revenue sharing, an NFL team can pay its salaries just by being in the NFL.

In the NBA, the television revenue sharing brings in millions for each team equally, but a team can't count on that money to stay afloat.

Why? The NBA reportedly brings in \$767 million per year from its televised games, so each team gets \$25.5 million. The NBA salary cap is \$49.5 million this season.

That means an NBA team must rely more on ticket sales, suite sales, arena signage and corporate sponsorships to stay afloat -- and the new New Orleans, experts say, can't keep the Hornets financially stable next season.

"Football's popularity certainly exceeds the NBA's -- we don't hide from that," Litvin said. "It's just a different selling proposition, it's a different business. When people talk about the NFL's revenue sharing or structure, they're talking about national television revenues, a far more significant percentage of the leagues' total revenues -- and therefore an individual team's revenue -- than our television revenues. All their games are televised nationally -- no local telecast rights.

"So since that money is distributed equally to all teams, that in itself is a significant amount of revenue sharing. They don't distribute more money to teams in New York or Los Angeles. Everyone gets the same check -- and it's a very large check. Our structure doesn't provide for that. We have national contracts that are significant, but smaller than the NFL's. Teams are much more challenged to generate revenues in their local markets than NFL teams are."

"(In) the NFL, three-quarters of each team's dollars, on average, come from the league," Ganis said.

"The league basically writes a check to the team. In the NBA, it's under 50 percent."

Sales-driven league

The Hornets can't pay all their salaries with shared NBA revenue -- even though they have the second-lowest payroll in the league (\$42.2 million). So the team must rely on making money on game nights.

"If you don't sell tickets," Ganis said, "you're in deep trouble in the NBA."

"Home gate receipts are far more important to an NBA team than to an NFL team," said Gary Roberts, a sports law expert and deputy dean of Tulane's law school. "Gate receipts are a much smaller percent of total revenue in the NFL. (With ticket revenue sharing) in the NFL, the home team keeps only about 60 percent of the gate receipts anyway. So an NFL team that's having a disastrous year at the gate will take a significant revenue hit, but it won't be nearly as big a hit as if an NBA team has a disastrous year, because it's a much larger percent of their revenue."

Sound familiar? In 2004-05, the Hornets were 18-64 and averaged 14,221 fans with three sellouts, last in the NBA. According to an extensive Forbes study, only the Charlotte Bobcats had less revenue than the Hornets' \$78 million. The Hornets' operating income -- earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization -- was 23rd in the NBA, with a loss of \$3.9 million; 11 teams had operating income in the red.

And the Hornets team value, according to Forbes Magazine, is \$225 million -- lowest in the NBA (the average is \$326 million).

All this was before the storm.

Overcoming tough times

The Saints are quite familiar with disastrous years. In 39 seasons the team made the playoffs five times; the Hornets made the playoffs in two of their three seasons in town. But the Saints' fan base, built on generations of loyalty, has made the Saints one of the most successful teams at the bank.

In the 2004 season, according to Forbes, the Saints had an operating income of \$43 million based on \$175 million in revenues, making it the eighth-most profitable team in the league. And Forbes puts the franchise value at \$718 million -- 22nd in the NFL -- more than three times the price of its NBA counterpart.

Lucrative revenue sharing and a loyal fan base fill the Saints' already deep pockets.

Then comes the structure of the NFL's schedule, which makes New Orleans even more accommodating next fall. On the flip side, the NBA's schedule structure hurts the Hornets' chances to return next fall.

"The number of games is really where you start for me," said Hornets president Paul Mott, when asked why the Saints can return next season but not the Hornets. "I know for us, the challenge we face is -- how do we put on 41 games in a six-month period of time?"

The Saints, meanwhile, will play eight home games.

"A smaller population base can support an NFL team," Roberts said. "The total number of fannies in the seats over the course of the year can be less in football, since you only have to put a bunch of them in there a few times. So people will come from Baton Rouge and Lafayette and Biloxi, Miss., and all over to a Saints game because it's an event -- a once-every-couple-of-weeks thing. NBA teams depend much more heavily on the immediate local population. And people from Lafayette aren't going to come and watch a two-hour basketball game in the evening, where they will come for a three-hour NFL game."

Market shock

In the summer, the Hornets rejuvenated the franchise's economic state with the addition of Mott, the NBA's senior director of team marketing and business development. Last June, Hornets officials said the team was enjoying its highest sales figures since the franchise relocated to New Orleans in 2002.

By the early winter, a third of Hornets season-ticket holders weren't living in Louisiana, the team said. All but three of the Hornets' corporate sponsors went on hiatus. And the New Orleans metro area's pre-Katrina population of 1.3 million is now estimated to be approaching 1 million.

With the excessive number of home games, ticket sales are a vital reason the Hornets feel they can't thrive in New Orleans next season, while businesses and fans slowly return to normalcy.

Meanwhile, in Oklahoma City, the team is a cultural phenomenon. The Hornets have sold out 12 of 21 games, and reportedly make \$800,000 in revenue on the average game night, compared to \$360,000 in New Orleans. In Oklahoma City, the team is expected to surpass \$40 million in revenue, an amount guaranteed by city officials.

"Fortunately, we're generating enough revenues (in Oklahoma City)," Hornets owner George Shinn said in December. "And if we have to stay another year, it will help us so we can be strong so we can come back and be strong (in New Orleans). We're building and getting ourselves solid and strong, and we want New Orleans to help and do the same thing."

The Hornets officially announced Jan. 31 that they will play 35 home games next season in Oklahoma City and six in New Orleans.

Prior to that, the team will play three games at New Orleans Arena next month. In 2007-08, the

team is expected to return permanently to New Orleans.

"That's our goal," Shinn said.

Help from above

The NBA and NFL have both offered aid to both teams, but neither did so with subsidizing.

The NFL owners, for instance, helped out by giving money to the Superdome, which was ravaged by the storm. League owners unanimously approved a minimum payout of \$15 million for repairs and improvements, in addition to a conditional \$5 million, depended on variables in the construction budget.

The \$20 million commitment to help for repairs may come with a string attached. The league has proposed that state officials reduce the \$81 million exit penalty in the Saints' contract with the state by the \$15 million or \$20 million as part of the deal, according to the attorney for the Louisiana Stadium and Exposition District.

The Hornets, meanwhile, have an ironclad agreement to remain in New Orleans until 2012; the state is allowing flexibility for next season, due to the unprecedented circumstances.

The NFL has also said it wants to reduce the Saints' travel miles this coming season. The team traveled 30,000 air miles last season, playing four home games in Baton Rouge, three in San Antonio and one in East Rutherford, N.J.

Another way the NFL hopes to earn the Saints money without giving the team a direct subsidy is via corporate sponsors.

The league helped unite Saints owner Tom Benson with national marketing consultant Frank Vuono, who will help the team with its marketing.

The NFL also will lean on its national sponsors to be proactive in buying sponsorships with the Saints, as well as advertisements at the Superdome.

NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue is expected to visit New Orleans on Tuesday to meet with Saints executives and members of the business community to discuss, among other items, luxury suites.

It will be Tagliabue's fifth visit to the state since Katrina.

The NBA, Hornets officials said, also has been creatively helpful, without writing a check to Shinn.

After the hurricane, the league offered resources for marketing and strategizing.

Said Mott, "I guess I could have said, 'I'd like money,' But quite frankly, the resources were maybe more valuable to me than money, because we had to rebuild in 45 days."

Another gesture on the league's part dealt with the Hornets' relocation fee -- which the team pays because of its original move from Charlotte. It was due one month after the hurricane.

The Hornets had the money, Mott said, but needed to use every available dollar, so the league postponed the deadline to help the Hornets.

Most significantly, the league announced that New Orleans has exclusive bidding rights to the 2008

All-Star Game.

"I think it will help the Hornets and the NBA in this area, and it makes them look like good citizens, which is good PR," Roberts said. "It was a smart move."

"We chose to put a team here, and the analysis of the owners was, although it's a small city, it had the potential to be a strong NBA market," Litvin said last week. "None of the reasons why we moved there have changed. It's a vibrant city that attracts tourists."

"The fans have proved to be faithful to the Saints, despite the on-field misfortunes."

The NBA is banking that fans will prove faithful to the Hornets, despite misfortunes keeping the team out of New Orleans.

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Thursday, February 23, 2006

Shinn speech hints that he'd like to move the Hornets

By Benjamin Hochman
Staff writer

At a private party last weekend in Houston, Hornets owner George Shinn told Oklahoma businessmen that he hopes the Hornets can host an All-Star Game in Oklahoma City, according to two guests.

New Orleanians Hal Braden and Cory Morton were guests of the Hornets during the National Basketball Association's All-Star weekend in Houston, and they attended the Friday cocktail party at the Houston Hyatt.

"He got everyone's attention and basically starts talking about how happy he's been in Oklahoma City [where the Hornets relocated after Hurricane Katrina]," said Braden, a Hornets season ticket holder in New Orleans. "He's grateful for the reception and for the enthusiasm. Then he starts basically alluding to the fact that he would like to stay there long-term. He said, 'I have my accountants looking into it, and we're trying to figure out the best place to be business-wise — but you can only guess where I want to be.'"

"Then Shinn said, 'This All-Star weekend is a fun time for the NBA, it's really a fantastic event. Houston is benefiting greatly from having it. In 10 years, I hope to see an All-Star game in Oklahoma City, and I'd like for the Hornets to be the host.'"

"That was just as blatant as it could be," said Morton, also a New Orleans season ticket holder, who believes Shinn didn't know he was at the party.

Three Oklahoma City businessmen at the party remembered Shinn speaking glowingly about the city, but none recall a specific reference to a Hornets-hosted All-Star game.

Hornets president Paul Mott, who was at the party, said: "I do recall him talking about the All-Star Game and saying to myself, '2016 ... I won't be here because I'll be almost 60.' But I don't recall him talking about the Hornets hosting it. I remember him talking about the All-Star game, how great it is, and how great it would be for Oklahoma City to be able to host an All-Star Game."

On Thursday, Mott reiterated the Hornets' public stance that the team will return to New Orleans: "Our intentions have not changed."

After Hurricane Katrina, the Hornets relocated to Oklahoma City, where the fans and business have embraced the city's first major league team. Hornets players and coaches have publicly gushed about the support. The team, 18-64 a season ago, is also much improved. The Hornets are currently 29-24, and if the season ended today, they would be the seventh-seeded team in the Western Conference playoffs.

The Hornets are scheduled to play three games at New Orleans Arena in March and will return to the Crescent City next season for six home games, playing the other 35 in Oklahoma City.

The Hornets and the NBA, though, have pledged to return to New Orleans for the 2007-08. The league has granted New Orleans exclusive bidding rights for the All-Star Game that season.

The Hornets have a lease with New Orleans Arena, which expires in 2012. Because of extenuating economic circumstances after Hurricane Katrina, the state allowed the Hornets to play in Oklahoma next season, even though the lease agreement required the team to play in New Orleans if the arena is usable. The state gave the Hornets leeway next season, with the understanding that the team would return to New Orleans in 2007-08. Once the lease expires, the Hornets can pay a \$10 million exit fee if they decide not to renew.

On Saturday in Houston, NBA commissioner David Stern said, "We plan on going through with the commitment to return to New Orleans, and, in fact, there's a lease that requires it. It's important for the league to honor leases, and it's illegal not to. Usually, they can be specifically enforced by motions in court. So we think it's a good idea to honor leases."

Said Mott: "Our hope by postponing it to another year is that the city will be far enough along that it will be ready to support its NBA team. If we could have made it work in New Orleans this year, we'd be there."

NBA spokesman Tim Frank reiterated the league's stance about returning to New Orleans, and added, "It would no be prudent to discuss speculation about what an owner may or may not have said."

Last spring in an auction, Morton won a trip on the Hornets plane to a road game, good for this season. Because Katrina moved the team away from New Orleans, the Hornets invited Morton and his guest to the ultimate road game – the NBA All-Star Game.

Morton and Braden arrived in Oklahoma City on Friday and flew on the team jet to Houston, along with Oklahoma City businesspersons from American Fidelity Assurance Group, Anheuser-Busch, Cox Communications, Ford and McDonald's.

At the party on Friday, the New Orleans duo mingled with the Oklahoma City residents and with the Hornets employees delegated to make sure the guests were accommodated. Shinn arrived late to the party and made his speech, which sparked applause, and even cheers from one guest.

"We were not supposed to be privy to this speech," Morton said. "I was in shock."

After the speech, Braden said the once-outgoing Hornets employees “avoided us like the plague. ... Everyone knew that Shinn had screwed up.”

Braden and Morton remained in Houston, attending the All-Star festivities along with the Oklahomans. At a Sunday dinner at The Strip Steakhouse, before that night’s All-Star Game, Morton considered discussing the speech with Shinn, but the owner did not arrive. Morton did discuss the speech with Hornets employees seated at his table.

Said Morton of Shinn’s speech: “If that would have been said in front of the New Orleans public, they would have been like, ‘What?’ ”

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The Sporting News

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From topsy-turvy to okey-dokey

Posted: February 23, 2006

Andrew Gilman
For Sporting News

In a corner of the Hornets locker room, assistant coach Jim Cleamons is diagramming the night's game plan. X's here. O's there. The only one not paying much attention is head coach Byron Scott. As Cleamons outlines strategy for the upcoming game against the Knicks, Scott is focusing on the oversized Western Conference standings that are Sharpied on a dry-erase board.

Don't blame Scott for enjoying the view. For once, the standings are relevant to his team. Last season, when the Hornets won 18 games -- a total they surpassed in mid-January this year -- looking at the standings was not much fun.

But Scott and the Hornets live in another world now. Picked to finish two places below last by just about everyone spewing conventional wisdom, the Hornets headed into the All-Star break with a firm grasp on a playoff spot in the Western Conference. An All-Star-worthy performance by rookie point guard Chris Paul and a breakout season from power forward David West combined with a frenzy of adoring fans in football-mad Oklahoma have made the team the league's biggest surprise.

In fact, it has been a season full of surprises for the Hornets, starting before they arrived to training camp. First, they were forced to relocate when the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina pushed them out of New Orleans and into the open arms of Oklahoma City. Shortly before camp opened, they lost their second general manager of the offseason when Allan Bristow resigned. Then, before the team played its first game, new general manager Jeff Bower traded the Hornets' only former All-Star, sending center Jamaal Magloire to the Bucks for small forward Desmond Mason and a first-round pick.

"What we really wanted to do was get away from last year," West says, and the Hornets certainly have. The result of all the offseason turmoil has been a truly fresh start.

CP3's 'O' has been key

So how did the Hornets turn so much upheaval into a run to the sixth spot in the Western Conference at the break?

"One reason?" says second-year guard J.R. Smith. "It's C.P. by far."

CP3 is the name Paul goes by in Oklahoma -- he wears No. 3 -- and his name is introduced last and with the loudest fanfare at the Ford Center. For good reason. Despite limping into the break with a bruised left shoulder and ribs -- after already having suffered torn thumb ligaments and a bruised tailbone -- Paul is going to run away with the Rookie of the Year award. He is second in the league in steals per game (2.2) and averages a rookie-best 15.9 points and 7.7 assists, not to mention a triple double's worth of thrills.

"In five years, he'll be the best point guard in the game," Knicks guard Stephon Marbury says. "Hands down."

Paul, the fourth pick in the draft, arrived from Wake Forest with a can't-miss smile and a do-it-all game. He is quick enough to get past any guard in the league, and though his outside shot needs work, his leadership and poise have impressed scouts and coaches from the start.

"Whatever it is, he has it," Grizzlies assistant coach Eric Musselman says.

As for last season's 18-64 debacle? Well, Paul wasn't around then. "I never thought of any of that stuff," he says. "Coming in here, I never once thought we would be bad. The fact is we're all professionals. Just because the team was bad last year is irrelevant to this year."

So much of last year has become irrelevant. The 2-29 start, the in-house trouble, the injuries. Last season, the Hornets made news because of Baron Davis, the talented but upset point guard who forced his way out of New Orleans -- but not before he tore apart the locker room.

"Now, we have people who enjoy being here, who enjoy playing here, and we don't have any knuckleheads," says center P.J. Brown, who grew up near New Orleans and is the undisputed leader of the team. "That's all you can ask for. OK, I'm displaced a little bit, but I'm having fun. This has been an enjoyable year."

When Magloire left, the Hornets moved Brown to center and gave West the power forward spot. West, a third-year pro, was unproven -- he played only 18.4 minutes per game in 30 games last season -- but finally healthy, and he has made the most of his chance. His combination of an accurate midrange shot and clever inside moves has made West a leading candidate for Most Improved Player.

West had worked his way into the starting lineup a month into last season before he injured his right knee and went on the injured list for 44 games. This season, he has scored at least 10 points in all but five games and leads the Hornets in scoring (16.8 points per game) and rebounding (7.8). He is shooting 50.9 percent from the field and has shown an impressive flair for the dramatic. West has made three game-winning shots this season with 2 seconds or less left, the most in the league.

A cozy atmosphere

Paul and West have made the biggest difference for the Hornets, but the team's home-court advantage in Oklahoma City also has the league buzzing. In New Orleans, the Hornets finished last in attendance last season, which was just their third in the Big Easy. In Oklahoma City, they sold 10,000 season tickets in no time. The fans not only have turned out, they have shown up with a zeal that makes the atmosphere at Ford Center feel like a jam-packed college gym.

"This team fighting for the playoffs in this place? It's going to be bonkers," a Western Conference scout says. "That's what everyone is saying across the NBA. They think Oklahoma City is nuts. The

fans are great."

Though the Hornets won nine of 10 games before the break, the final two months of the season will offer quite a challenge because of a tough schedule and Paul's injuries. Of their 30 remaining games, the Hornets will play 19 away from Ford Center, including three home games in New Orleans. But so far, such distractions have not hurt the team.

When popular forward/center Chris Andersen was kicked out of the NBA in January for violating the league's anti-drug policy, Bower acted quickly and decisively by trading two second-round picks for veteran forward/center Aaron Williams. Last week, Bower added depth at the point by trading barely used forward Maciej Lampe to the Rockets for Moochie Norris.

"You have to be surprised," says Knicks coach Larry Brown, whose team lost by 11 points at Ford Center two weeks ago. "Just one of the best stories in the league. Phenomenal."

And back inside the dressing room, an oversized expanse made originally -- but not surprisingly -- for a football team (indoors, of course), the Hornets are talking playoffs as Scott stares down the standings.

"My coaches tell me to quit looking at what happened last year," Scott says. "But I haven't stopped. You have to have something to measure against. You have to have something you look back on and say, 'This is where we've gotten better.' I'm always looking at the stats. I want to know."

Want to know what has happened with the Hornets?

Simple -- just look at the standings.

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Salt Lake Tribune

2.25.2006

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Hornets more than OK in Oklahoma

Hornets at Jazz ~ Tonight, 7 p.m.,

FSNWashed up? Not: Post-hurricane squad triumphs over predictions the team would be NBA's cellar dwellers

By Steve Luhm

The Salt Lake Tribune

Oklahoma City has taken the NBA by storm.

When Hurricane Katrina savagely lashed the Gulf Coast and flooded New Orleans on Aug. 29, the city's professional basketball team was displaced.

The Hornets ended up fleeing to Oklahoma City, where they have enjoyed shocking success - on and off the court.

New Orleans/Oklahoma City won five straight games before the All-Star break and has firmly established itself as a major player in the Western Conference playoff race.

Led by Rookie of the Year favorite Chris Paul, the Hornets have ignored preseason predictions of disaster - they went 18-64 last year - and emerged as one of the NBA's most pleasantly surprising stories. They are 29-25 and seventh overall in the West entering tonight's game against the Jazz in the Delta Center.

Oklahoma City deserves credit for a big part of the success.

The Hornets rank 11th in the league in attendance after selling out 14 of their first 24 home games. In Oklahoma City, thanks to an average crowd of 17,971 this season, the Hornets have discovered a homecourt advantage that had been missing in New Orleans. [ed note: too bad he included the non-okc games in that figure!]

"I think the unfortunate circumstances that led to coming here has helped them," said Chicago coach Scott Skiles, after his team was beaten in Oklahoma City. "They get a nice home-crowd boost I don't believe they got in New Orleans - at least I never witnessed. There's some excitement that surrounds them."

Oklahoma City "has done a great job demonstrating they can support an NBA team," said NBA commissioner David Stern.

The Hornets are the city's first major-league franchise.

Oklahoma City sought an NHL expansion team in 1996, but lost out when the league moved into Atlanta, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Columbus and Nashville.

According to the 2000 census, Oklahoma City has a population of 1.08 million, making it the smallest market in the NBA, just behind Memphis (1.1 million) and Salt Lake City (1.3 million).

Still, the Hornets have prospered in Oklahoma City and been embraced by their fans, although Stern says the league definitely plans to return the franchise to New Orleans for the 2007-08 season.

Fine, Oklahoma City Mayor Mick Cornett recently told the New Orleans Times-Picayune.

While the city would love for the Hornets to stay, he said, the benefits of being a gracious and receptive temporary host are immeasurable.

"I knew what the impact of a major-league franchise can be on a city if you haven't had one before," Cornett said. "It suddenly puts you on a level of equality - granted it's a superficial level - with all the other teams in the league."

Cornett continued: "To a large part of the people, you are who your sports teams play. And if your sports teams play Amarillo, Wichita and Little Rock - there's nothing wrong with those cities - but that's who you are associated with.

" . . . If you are trying to compete for jobs, trying to get the attention of recruiters, get the attention of highly educated people on the East and West Coast, those type of associations matter. So just the fact you are part of the NBA family - even if it's just for a year or two - is very special to us."

Clay Bennett, a prominent businessman, believes the Hornets have hastened the day when a pro franchise - basketball, hockey or baseball - permanently settles in Oklahoma City.

"We believe we are a major-league market and believe now we have proven it," Bennett told the

Times-Picayune. "We want to stay a major-league market."

The Hornets will play three late-season games in New Orleans, starting March 8 against the Lakers.

Next year, they will play 35 games in Oklahoma City and six in New Orleans before returning to Louisiana in 2007-08.

According to Stern, the NBA has no plans for expansion, but Oklahoma City's support of the Hornets has entrenched it at the top of a short list of relocation sites for existing franchises.

Other possibilities include Las Vegas, Kansas City, San Diego and Anaheim, Calif.

On the court, the Hornets have become an attractive franchise.

Byron Scott is a top candidate for coach of the year honors, and Paul is the odds-on favorite to be the rookie of the year.

"I thought it would take until March or April to start seeing the type of improvement we're seeing now," said Scott. "I didn't know we would come together and grasp things we talk about on both ends of the floor."

Power forward David West, a leading most improved player candidate, credits Scott: "He has pushed us all year."

Said veteran center P.J. Brown: "From Day One, everybody was picking us to finish last. But he didn't believe that, and he told us that we would be better if we believed in ourselves, and we have."

The Hornets' brightest star is Paul.

The No. 4 pick in last summer's draft, he leads all rookies in scoring (15.9), assists (7.7) and steals (2.17).

After Paul finished with 25 points and 13 assists against Chicago, Skiles said, "I think he's one of the best point guards in the league right now. . . . He is a franchise player. There are certain rookies - it doesn't happen that much - who come into the league ready to play and he's definitely one of them. He's an all-pro caliber guard, no question about that."

Scott agrees.

"Aside from Steve Nash," he said, "I don't see any point guards in the Western Conference playing better basketball."

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Big surprise: Shinn wants to stay

By Berry Tramel
The Oklahoman

This just in. Dog bites man. Kids like candy. George Shinn wants to keep the Hornets in Oklahoma City.

Last weekend, the Hornets flew some OKC sponsors to Houston for NBA all-star festivities. During a private reception, in a small group setting, Shinn mentioned something along the lines of how it would be nice if the Hornets were still in Oklahoma City 10 years from now.

Apparently unknown to Shinn, a couple of fans from New Orleans were on the trip, having last spring won an auction for a road trip.

Those fans told the New Orleans Times-Picayune that Shinn indicated he wanted to stay in Oklahoma City long-term and even talked of hosting an All-Star Game at the Ford Center.

Shinn wants to stay in OKC? No kidding. That's a revelation only to someone who hasn't been paying attention.

The Oklahoma contingent didn't even express excitement at Shinn's statements, although the New Orleans fans told the Times-Picayune one Oklahoma Citian cheered Shinn's words.

David Thompson, publisher of The Oklahoman, was at the reception and described Shinn's statements as "just making small talk, making people feel good ... There was no innuendo or hidden signals. He didn't say anymore than what he's already said."

Another Oklahoma businessman, who asked not to be identified, said Shinn merely was complimenting Oklahoma City and suggested that while the Hornets owner has been capable of putting his foot in his mouth, this was not one of those times.

Here's the simple truth. Shinn has been dropping hints, both subtle and bold, that he wants to figure out a way to keep the Hornets here. His reasons no doubt are rooted in economics and competition.

But it's no easy mission, for these reasons:

Legal issues with what appears to be a bedrock New Orleans Arena lease.

Political issues with the NBA, which is not crazy about the New Orleans market but also is not crazy about franchises hopping cities like a carnival. The league most wants stability, and there's nothing stable about the Hornets going from Charlotte to New Orleans to Oklahoma City in the span of half a decade.

Sensitivity issues. New Orleans got a raw deal from nature and from the feds and from their own leaders. New Orleans is an American tragedy, and Shinn has an affinity for his home of the previous three years. Shinn doesn't want to pile on.

But he's a businessman. He most definitely wants to stay in Oklahoma City. The two New Orleans fans found out that in Houston.

Hal Braden said that after Shinn welcomed everyone, "he starts basically alluding to the fact that he would like to stay there long-term. He said, 'I have my accountants looking into it, and we're trying to figure out the best place to be businesswise, but you can only guess where I want to be.'"

That could be interpreted in various ways, as Shinn just pandering to his audience.

But this can't: "In 10 years I hope to see an All-Star Game in Oklahoma City, and I'd like for the

Hornets to be the host," Shinn said, according to Braden.

Shinn can't hold a press conference and tell everyone what he's thinking. NBA commish David Stern would blow his stack.

But Shinn also can't keep everything suppressed all the time; that's not his makeup.

The Hornets' fate doesn't rest solely with Shinn. Stern will have a say, and I don't claim to know who holds that edge. The NBA owners will have a say, too, although I think they in the end will support Shinn, knowing that there but for the grace of God go them. The courts might even have a say.

Shinn's say, we know for sure. He wants to stay.

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Times-Picayune

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"A good showing (is) going to shine a great light on New Orleans" "It's going to have a lot of national significance" "I really believe it's great for New Orleans"

Owner George Shinn says he hasn't wavered in his desire to bring the Hornets back to New Orleans, and he calls Wednesday's game here against the L.A. Lakers 'historical.'

Saturday, March 04, 2006

For the first time since last season, Hornets owner George Shinn will be seated courtside at New Orleans Arena on Wednesday night when the Hornets play the Los Angeles Lakers. It will be the first major professional sporting event in the city since Hurricane Katrina struck Aug. 29.

Since his team relocated to Oklahoma City this season, Shinn has been accused of double talk to appease fans in New Orleans and Oklahoma City. While he continues to say publicly the Hornets will be coming back to New Orleans, during the All-Star Game festivities in Houston recently, Shinn allegedly said to some Oklahoma businessmen he wanted to stay in Oklahoma City.

In an interview Thursday Shinn discussed some of the controversial issues surrounding him, and he gave his outlook regarding the team's future in New Orleans and his expectations for the three games to be played at the Arena.

What is your side of the story regarding the private party held in Houston when two New Orleanians said they heard you say that you want to stay in Oklahoma City long-term and hope to see an All-Star Game there in 10 years?

I have to walk a very fine line here. I'm trying to sell tickets. I'm trying to make everybody happy, and I know I can't do that. I appreciate having the opportunity to speak about this thing, but I think to continue it is ridiculous. I'm not going to get into a "he said, she said" debate. I think it's fruitless and unnecessary. I've noticed since the hurricane that no matter what the topic, or the question, or the answer, it's people. They hear what they want to hear. I go through it all the time with the situation we're in; it's a franchise playing in two cities. Every time I say something, it's been dissected or interpreted differently in each of the two cities -- Oklahoma City and New Orleans. In Oklahoma,

they interpret what I say one way, and New Orleans will interpret it another way. But I think it's encouraging, though, that our fans in both markets are so passionate about us that they hang on to every word said about the team. So I think the thing to do is just to move on, but my intentions are the same. I have to put on one pair of shoes when I'm here and another pair when I'm there. I don't mean that in a negative way, but I want people to respect my job what I've got to do. My intentions are the same, I'm planning to come back. Sometimes I try to say it, and it's not like I don't want to say it, but it's the fact that everybody keeps asking me and it seem like they didn't hear it the last time.

Do you take the same stance as NBA commissioner David Stern regarding your lease obligation in New Orleans?

My answer since Day One has been consistent. We're planning to return to New Orleans. What else can I say?

What is the significance for the franchise to return to New Orleans to play the Los Angeles Lakers on Wednesday night in the first major professional sporting event in the city since Hurricane Katrina struck on Aug. 29?

I think it's historical, really. I think it's going to have a lot of national significance. I really believe it's great for New Orleans because we're only 1,000 or so tickets shy from having a sellout. To me that's great because I was worried about that, and now I'm not. It's going to have a lot of national significance because I've been told we're going to have more national media come to this game than any other game that we've had. So it's going to be large to show the country that New Orleans has returned. Personally for me and for our players, our coaches and staff, this is an opportunity to reconnect with our fans of New Orleans.

Has the response by fans in New Orleans been more than you expected?

Obviously, I think it's overwhelmed us. What I mentioned in the past was that if we have a good showing, it's going to shine a great light on New Orleans. If we have a bad showing, it's going to be terrible. I even thought that if we had only (a crowd of) 5,000, then what we needed to do was cut off the upper level and have everybody downstairs (in the lower bowl). We were coming up with all kind of plans. Fortunately, that didn't happen. I've been extremely impressed with the numbers. We've got good people there working, taking calls, doing their job, and the fans have just been calling. The bottom line is that I'm just thrilled.

Will you address the fans before the game, and what will you say?

That's a good question. At this point, I haven't really decided. Michael Thompson (director of corporate communications) told me that it should be a game-time decision. The reason is that I've got my heart set to reach out and tell all our fans how happy I am to see them and how proud I am of their strength and determination in rebuilding New Orleans. But on the other side of the coin, it's very emotional for me, and I don't want to set the wrong tone being emotional or whatever, because this event is meant to be an entertainment diversion from all the grind the people have had in rebuilding and trying to put their lives back together. I don't want to bring too much seriousness to an evening of entertainment.

Do you think New Orleans fans have to prove they can support an NBA franchise by having sellouts for all three games at the Arena?

I don't see the three games like a referendum on New Orleans' ability to support an NBA team. However, I think these three games is the first step to prove that New Orleans is coming back.

We're over 17,000 sold, and that's incredible. If we had sold 5,000 tickets, that would shine a real dim light, because the other owners around the league are going to be watching.

From a personal standpoint, how difficult has this season been for you?

It's been very difficult. Everyone is looking for a clue or a sign as to what my intentions are. I made my intentions clear from the beginning: We plan to come back to New Orleans. On one hand, it's been very difficult and very frustrating. I want to try and express myself, and sometimes people just take it totally out of context what I say. But on the positive side, it's a clear sign that people do care. It's been difficult, but you know if you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen.

Did you monitor any of the news clips of Mardi Gras in New Orleans, which was the first big event the city has hosted since Hurricane Katrina?

I watched the last of Mardi Gras on TV, and it just brought a smile to my face. Not because everybody was having fun, but to me it was sort of a signal to the entire country that we're coming back, and I believe New Orleans is coming back. I'm just excited and thrilled and very satisfied at this point.

When do you expect negotiations to start between the league and city regarding the 2008 All-Star Game?

My understanding as far as the All-Star Game is that the NBA wanted to wait until after the Houston All-Star Game. Those negotiations are probably already under way. I would hope that they are already under way. My feelings about the All-Star Game is that New Orleans, in my opinion, is the best event city in the world. The NBA All-Star Game is one of the best events in the whole world. It's a match made in heaven. I think it's going to be great for New Orleans because it's so good at putting on big events the NBA will come back again and again.

What do you see your role in the All-Star Game negotiations?

I'll do everything I can to help make it a success. But an All-Star Game is really not a thing for a franchise. It's run totally by the league, and they work in conjunction with the team to get things done. Obviously, the league knows I will do anything I can to help them. They have the same people that have been putting on this event for years. It's a three-day event loaded with celebrities from all sports and entertainment. It's really wonderful for a city.

When you look at your return to New Orleans for the 2007-08 season, what will you be evaluating closely in regards to the city's recovery efforts?

To answer your question, the NBA has requirements. In the NBA book, it says a city must have a population with varying industries and income levels. It requires that they have businesses with enough resources to support all professional sports teams in town and a large enough revenue and television market. Is it going to take time for that? Yes. I think New Orleans is going to do it. It's going to come back stronger. But there is a lot of negative stuff written about New Orleans that still bothers me, and I get frustrated when I see some of these reports in the news. Our coach made a comment about how he liked Oklahoma, talking about how great it was to play in front of good energetic crowds . . . the folks in New Orleans didn't like that. I believe what's going to happen (Wednesday night against the Lakers) is that the crowd is going to be electrified. It's going to be turned on, and they're going to be cheering for the Hornets. They're going to be excited, and that's going to turn all these negatives that our players and coaches have seen in the paper, turn back to positive things. I think these three games is the first step in getting back. Let's hope and pray everything works out the way we want it to.

What is the latest update regarding your pursuit to find potential private investors?

I can assure you one thing -- you're talking to the guy that will have the majority share. That's not going to change. I would be willing to sell up to 49 percent, but no more. The only way that would change is if I'm put away in a big pine box and my kids sell it. But I plan to keep 51 percent, no matter what. Currently, we're in productive talks with many potential investors. The key to me is finding the right investors, people who share our vision and values. The nature of those types of discussions are always sensitive, so I won't get into specifics on whom those potential investors are. But they come from all around the country, which includes New Orleans. Everyone we have spoken with shares our enthusiasm about our young and exciting team. It's nice to hear potential investors say, "You've got a good team." They didn't say that last year, but it's amazing what one year can do."

Is there a timetable on when you would like to have your search completed for investors?

I don't have a timetable, but it does take time. It could take a month or a year or two. I'm not pressed at all. Everything is just fine. I'm a very optimistic guy, and I think this is going to work out to my benefit.

Things got so bad during the team's final season in Charlotte in 2001-02 that you no longer would come to games played at Charlotte Coliseum. Are you making an effort to guarantee nothing like that happens again, especially in New Orleans?

I love New Orleans, and I wouldn't want to find myself in an adverse situation when I didn't feel safe or comfortable. So I want to feel good about it. I want my players, coaches and anybody that works for me to feel comfortable, excited and positive. I'm just hoping and praying everything works out that way. My goal is to do what I can to help. I've been doing the Hoops for Homes; we raised approximately \$1 million already toward rebuilding those homes.

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In the words of George Shinn

Sunday, March 05, 2006

In the words of George Shinn

Sept. 2: "I can assure you we don't have any plans to use this as an excuse to leave or escape. That's not in the tea leaves. I promise you. I'm an optimist. I can see things turning around. But this craziness there right now is out of control. Right now, things have got to get straight. We're in the process of evaluating everything we can. We're going to work closely with the league and do what's best for it and our team. But we've got employees who've lost everything they have."

Sept. 9: "Our objective is not to abandon ship here or to get out of dodge. Our plan is to hope and pray New Orleans rebuilds. And I think it will with everyone's support and the federal money that's coming in there. I think it will be stronger. We want to play in New Orleans. That's our home. But we can't. We can't come back even if the facility was clean because there's nobody else there."

Sept. 15 (In Baton Rouge): "When we come back and what we do is a real good question. We're

looking at Oklahoma City and here in Baton Rouge. Playing in the Arena has good and bad possibilities. If we could do it in a way that we'd have a full crowd, it would be ecstatic. If we have 1,500 people, it would be horrible. That might send a signal there was no hope there."

Sept. 24: "It's not just the Arena (being) in playing condition, but will there be any fans there. I don't know how many will come back, how quickly they'll come back. I'm convinced New Orleans will rebuild. With the dollars that the federal government is putting in, I can see it rebuilding and even being stronger. But how long is it going to take? This option (for a possible second year in Oklahoma City) was just a cushion just to make sure if it got to that point."

Oct. 1: "I believe it's going to come back. I feel it's going to come back bigger and stronger. We're here (Oklahoma City) for this year. New Orleans has a lot to do to get back and when they come back, we're coming back. I want the people there to have hope. In a lot of ways that's all some of them have, and I'm not going to take that away from them."

Oct. 3 (At media day in Oklahoma City): "We are New Orleans' team and that's it. If any politician here in Oklahoma City or anybody else says this is something other than temporary, they are a liar. One reason why I'm pushing this thing so hard in Oklahoma City and trying to make it work here is to let the people have hope here they can get a franchise. Not my franchise, but a franchise. I'm selling like hell. If we were in New Orleans, I wouldn't have near the expenses that I'm going to have being up here. I've got a lot of expenses, so I've got to put on the best sales shoes I can to pay my bills. If I sell this arena out, I will be very close to taking care of the expenses, which are heavier now because of the storm. I'm not going to turn loose on this, I'm in a vice and I've got to push hard. Let's say that we play here this whole season and we sell out every game, a lot of people here are probably going to think, why would we go back? But we're going to go back."

Oct. 22: "You're talking to the man. The only guy stronger than me is Commissioner David Stern. If David tells me something different, I'm going to listen. But David and I right now are singing from the same sheet of music. We are the New Orleans Hornets."

Oct. 25 (At exhibition game in Baton Rouge): "I just can't sit back and say, 'I'll come back when New Orleans comes back.' I can say that, but what I've got to do is help them. I've got to do my damn part. I think everybody else, every other businessman, has to do the same thing. Don't just sit on the sidelines. We're stepping up. You've got to have a plan and a goal. Our goal is to play those games in New Orleans. It's going to take a lot to get me not to do that. If the NBA comes in and says the Arena's not ready, I'm going to go straight to David (Stern, NBA commissioner) and say 'I went through it; I approved it, by God. We're going to play there.' What happens if we play those game and nobody comes? The first one played will probably be on national television. Everybody will be watching. If nobody shows up, they'll say, 'That place will never come back.' What we've got to do is get some local people to help us and make sure we can get it as full as we can. And that will send a message to everybody . . . to the NBA, to me, to everybody. We've got to make sure it will work. If it's not going to work, I'd rather it not work here than not work there. We've just got to take it one day at a time. We were just looking for a place to land and make it. As far as the NBA is concerned, they've given us the right to play in Oklahoma City for one year. The agreement says 'temporary.' It doesn't say 'permanent.' "

Nov. 1: "I'm very impressed with the leadership (in Oklahoma City). I'm impressed with the people. Nice people. Nice city. Very clean. And I've been impressed the way they stepped up. Who would have guessed? Why'd we pick Oklahoma City? The first reason was they had an NBA arena. It was the closest (to New Orleans). . . . If I'd have gone to Las Vegas, we'd have made so much money no one would have wanted to come back. But we weren't looking for that. We were looking for just a place to land and make it. My primary goal was to make sure my employees could have a place to stay, housing, whatever. I've been lucky in my life. I've gone through a lot of hell and landed on

my feet. I just think that I'm very lucky in Oklahoma City. I'd like to think I was smart, but I think it leans more toward being lucky. We looked at Oklahoma. One reason, I think, they were willing to be so generous is because of what they went through with the bombing (of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building) and all that. They offered housing to our employees, and we had so many of them who (after the storm) didn't have a thing. It looked like a safe haven."

Dec. 16: "Fortunately, we're generating enough revenues (in Oklahoma City). And if we have to stay another year, it will help us so we can be strong so we can come back and be strong here. We're building and getting ourselves solid and strong, and we want New Orleans to help and do the same thing. It's important that we do the right thing, because if we play a game in New Orleans and 1,500 people show up, that's not going to look good for anyone, not the NBA or New Orleans. What we've got to do is put our heads together with the state, city and NBA to make the right decision about what's best not only for us but New Orleans. I've got all the confidence in the world that New Orleans is coming back. I think the question all of us have to answer is -- when?"

Dec. 19 (Announcing he'd seek local investors in Oklahoma City): "I think it's important, if you're going to have owners, have 'em from the community where you are."

Jan. 28: "Right now, I think everybody's got to accept the fact that New Orleans is not ready for this coming season. They're not ready, so we should play in Oklahoma City next year, and then start working and putting everything together to come back. The NBA said we'll be announcing it at the end of the month, and I'm predicting a few days after that. The end of the month is not until Tuesday, I think, so just hold your breath until then. What if next October there's 10 feet of water in the city? You expect me to come back? Give me a break. Just be reasonable about things. That's all I'm asking. I feel like the guy that's got two women that's fighting over him. It would be nice if it was two women instead of two states. We already have a contract, and if they want to go court, they have a right because I signed the (lease) deal. To put something in that ties me down that much more is unfair. I want to work with them, and I want to do everything I can to make this thing good. But it's got to be good for everybody, not just this person or that community but everybody. I want it to work. I want people to work with me. I don't want people to say you've got to do this and you've got to do that. I don't have to do that. . . . As far as I'm concerned, we do not have a deal with the state of Louisiana and will not until I hear from the NBA or from my attorneys. My attorneys and the attorneys from the state are talking and discussing it, but I have to make the final decision and they know what guidelines and parameters they have from me. We're not there yet."

Jan. 30: "They were asking for an unconditional guarantee, and no matter what happens I have to come back. I would not agree to that, although my plans and intentions is that I was coming back the following year (2007-08). I can't forecast any acts of God or any other thing, so how can I guarantee something that I can't? I'm not God, I can't do that. I just felt like it was no more than I can ask them to give me an unconditional guarantee that they're going to bring people back to New Orleans next year and the level of income is going to grow tremendously. I had just been informed of what they asked me to do (unconditional guarantee), and obviously I shouldn't have talked to the media because I was upset. I'm still planning to come back. Is it going to be the following year, I don't know. I hope so. But I can't predict what's going to happen, just like when that storm came, who in the world would have predicted it. We just have to be on guard to do what's right."

Jan. 31: "I think it's going to take awhile for (New Orleans) to come back. It makes sense for us to play here and give the city an opportunity to rebuild. That's our goal. We plan to return (to New Orleans). I've said that from the very beginning. We are going to work with state officials there -- I had a conversation with the governor on Sunday -- and we talked about us meeting on a regular basis."

Feb. 3 (In the Los Angeles Times): "I owe it to the people there (New Orleans). When we first went

there, they supported me. These people have been through a lot and I just hate to. . . . Fortunately, they're getting their football team back and we were like the new kids on the block. But we're going to try to make it work."

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Jackson leery about Hornets' future in N.O.
Will play first game at Arena this season Wednesday vs. Lakers

Sunday, March 05, 2006

By John Reid

Staff writer

Los Angeles Lakers coach Phil Jackson apparently has some concerns about playing the Hornets on Wednesday night at New Orleans Arena. He also thinks the Crescent City is going to have a difficult time supporting NBA basketball on a regular basis again, despite the Hornets' expected return in 2007-08 to play a full, 41-game home schedule at the Arena.

"I have an unbiased and non-prejudicial view of New Orleans," Jackson said. "I've always had a wonderful time in the city, however, it is tough for them to support NBA basketball. There are not a lot of corporate businesses, and it has become a corporate business situation that has made the NBA successful. I never thought after the Jazz left (in 1975) they'll be able to support an NBA franchise again."

Jackson is considered one of the league's most respected and successful coaches, having won six championships with the Michael Jordan-led Chicago Bulls and three with the Lakers from 2000-02.

"I think New Orleans is a spectacular entertainment town, but it takes a real consistency to hold an NBA franchise," Jackson said. "You really need to have a solid group of people who want to go to 41 home games."

Since the Hornets relocated to New Orleans before the 2002-03 season, Jackson had not made any negative comments until this season about the city's ability to support the Hornets.

After the Hornets announced in January they were moving three games to New Orleans that had been rescheduled to be played in Baton Rouge, Jackson made a joking, but negative comment regarding New Orleans Arena.

"Hopefully they've drained the mud out of the building, and the termites aren't going to eat the building away by the time we get down there," Jackson said to Los Angeles-area reporters.

New Orleans Arena suffered damage to its basketball facilities, notably its locker rooms and storage areas as a result of Hurricane Katrina. The walls and floors had to be removed in the locker rooms and storage areas, and a new basketball court also has been ordered. It is expected to be installed today.

As a result of the damage, the Hornets temporarily relocated to Oklahoma City to play a 35-game schedule this season. Under an agreement reached with the state, the Hornets are set to return to Oklahoma City next season but will play six games at New Orleans Arena.

Repairs at the Arena began in mid-January, and Arena spokesman Bill Curl said the work will be completed before Wednesday's game against the Lakers.

"I think he (Jackson) can be confident that there will be no water (or mud) in the building when he gets here," said Glenn Menard, general manager of New Orleans Arena. "We think the fans will see the Arena back like they remembered it."

While Jackson expressed concerns, his star player, Kobe Bryant, is looking forward to playing in New Orleans.

"It's a chance for people to take their minds off the tragedy that took place down there," Bryant said. "I want to give them a good show and put on a great performance for the fans that come out and watch us."

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Hornets' tickets get tax exemption from Oklahoma

OKLAHOMA CITY -- Tickets for the Hornets will be exempt from state sales tax under a bill Gov. Brad Henry signed into law Monday as state officials work to make Oklahoma City more attractive as a permanent home for the NBA team.

The Hornets have committed to play most of their home games here this season and next because of damage Hurricane Katrina did to its home city of New Orleans.

"This law is important because it allows us to continue to offer our fans in Oklahoma City the most affordable tickets in the NBA," team owner George Shinn said at a news conference. Tickets to Hornets' games start at \$10.

Henry said he hopes the Hornets will stay.

"Ever since Oklahoma City stepped forward in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the Hornets have been a tremendous hit in Oklahoma," he said in a prepared statement. "Not only have the Hornets brought tremendous hoops action in our state, but the teams considerable success here has also translated into a big boon for the economy."

The Hornets have pledged to return to New Orleans after next year. Shinn has repeatedly praised Oklahoma City for its support, but has danced around the question of whether the team may stay here permanently.

He kept up that stance Monday.

The team has sold out many of its games at the Ford Center.

"It's been absolutely incredible," Shinn said. "We've set standards for the entire NBA and Oklahoma City has proven it is a major league city."

He said some of the games played in Oklahoma City have had the excitement of playoff contests.

He said he felt "enormous pressure" in talking about the team's future and not trying to offend anyone in New Orleans or Oklahoma City. The NBA's Board of Directors will make the final decision on where the Hornets will play after next year.

The legislation signed by Henry also exempts NHL tickets from the sales tax in case the state gets a major league hockey franchise in the future.

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The Mercury News

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Posted on Wed, Mar. 08, 2006

Can the Hornets truly come home again?

By David Aldridge

Knight Ridder Newspapers

NEW ORLEANS - Red and blue are not good colors here.

Blue is the color of the tarps that cover the roofless houses. Hundreds of them. Thousands of them.

Red is the color of the spray paint that is on, seemingly, every house and every building in the Lower Ninth Ward. On the splintered wood of what remains of homes, at the base of schools, on the side of the Church of Christ, the letters "TFW" are painted. Block after block after block, as if a crazed graffiti artist has gotten the run of the city.

It is not graffiti, of course, but a warning: toxic floodwater inside.

Making that property uninhabitable.

Making that community uninhabitable.

Making another spray-painted sign on a nearby home - "Please Don't Knock Down House - that much more poignant.

There are no traffic lights in the Lower Ninth. There are no animals. The few remaining people huddle in groups, as if sheltering themselves from the cold. The strip malls are closed, the fast-food stores are closed, the liquor stores are closed. There are tent cities - except they're not really tents, at least not the ones you'd find at an outdoors store. These are makeshift dwellings, tarps over 2x4s.

North and south along Louisa Street, Abundance Street, down to Harrison Street, across Paris Street, there is nothing but desolation. You can see through the houses. Every 500 yards or so, there are still huge piles of debris.

Which is not debris, of course, but someone's life, strewn here and there by the floodwaters, blown there and here by the hurricane-force winds of Katrina.

There is electricity, but no place to plug it into.

There is no hope.

And anyone who thinks that a sports team could possibly put a dent in all this destruction and despair is a fool.

Until you reach the small home on Delachaise Street, closer to downtown, in a neighborhood that seems to have been brushed by Katrina, but not annihilated.

It is a new home.

It may be the first home built in the city since Katrina breached the levees in August.

It is the home of the Winston family, built during the last five months through the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity and the New Orleans Hornets. It is but a drop in a desert of despair, but it is more than that.

It is hope.

It is the sum of hundreds of hours of work, through donated materials and manpower from volunteers, both from within (local subcontractors did the plasterboard work and electricity) and without (students from Ithaca College drove two days to come down and apply the final painting and landscaping touches, and Penn students on spring break were there as well).

The Hornets returned to New Orleans on Wednesday night for the first time since leaving the city and relocating to Oklahoma City for both this season and next. And they bring with them a question: Can this city possibly be a home for them again?

I have been of one mind on that issue: It seemed to me not only impossible but silly to ask this city to support a team when it has to rebuild roads, schools and homes, and has to bring families back together. (It isn't the destroyed property that's the worst of this; it's the displaced people.) It will take years, decades, to make New Orleans whole again, and in that context, a team staying or leaving - whether the Hornets or the Saints - seemed to me to be about priority number one billion.

But on the ground here, people are desperate for any reed of normalcy, any sign that they aren't forgotten. The Winstons - Byron and Sandra, and their four children - found it in this home, after evacuating to Baton Rouge and living with relatives, sometimes sleeping 12 in a room, and then staying in temporary housing back in New Orleans, just a few blocks down the road.

So they know what it means to come back home.

"The Hornets are needed in this city," Byron Winston, a painter and construction worker, said on Tuesday. " `Cause a lot of times, folks don't have anything to do. So they will have a larger fan base with the few people they have, because I think as a whole, most people will support it now, just as an outlet. I'll certainly be back behind the Hornets 100 percent. So I think it's a great thing that they're back. ... This is where they should come back to."

It is understandable that Byron Winston is enthusiastic about the team that helped give him a home. But there are the cold, hard facts of pro sports, and they dictate that cities looking to support teams have infrastructure, large swaths of residents with disposable income, and a corporate base that can buy the courtside and 50-yard-line seats this year, next year, every year.

That is not here.

But without hope - the hope that a team can give a city - it never will be.

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Updated: March 8, 2006, 3:17 PM ET

Nothing easy about it

By Mike Fish

ESPN.com

NEW ORLEANS -- As floodwater raged past the overwhelmed levees, as stranded families clung to rooftops awaiting rescue workers to pluck them from the filthy muck that swamped this historic city, as armed soldiers struggled to quell the chaos that ensued at the storm-ravaged Superdome, the opportunities were seen from hundreds of miles away, even as the full fury of Katrina's wrath had not yet been realized.

At a time when the very survival of the city and its marooned residents was at stake, the future of its two major sports franchises wouldn't figure to register on the radar. But just days after the killer storm laid waste to New Orleans, an ESPN.com review of public documents reveals, civic leaders and power brokers in Oklahoma City and San Antonio frantically lined up to babysit the Hornets and Saints, respectively, with an eye on a long-term commitment if the Big Easy was unable to regain its big-city footing.

So as news cameras captured images of the hellhole left by Hurricane Katrina, as helicopters dropped massive sandbags to plug the breached levees and Humvees loaded with National Guardsmen rolled through the flooded streets, as New Orleans' frustrated and beleaguered mayor yelled to federal officials during a radio interview to "Get off your asses, and let's do something," the opportunity wasn't lost on those who realized the Saints and Hornets would be looking for places to play.

By the time an early-morning e-mail from NBA commissioner David Stern arrived in Oklahoma City mayor Mick Cornett's inbox on Sept. 3 -- "mayor mick--if you are checing [sic] e-mails, please give me a call ..." -- only five days had passed since Katrina wreaked her destruction across the Gulf Coast and the wheels had already been set in motion to relocate the teams, if only temporarily. There was little time, if any, wasted by the city officials in Oklahoma City and San Antonio, who moved quickly to fill their own empty sports venues while auditioning for major league brass.

Now, six months after the worst natural disaster in American history, as the Hornets return to New Orleans for a belated cameo appearance Wednesday night against the Los Angeles Lakers and the Saints prepare to head back to the Superdome next season, the long-term viability of the franchises is as up in the air as the New Orleans of tomorrow, despite calming words and financial commitments from league officials.

Ray Nagin, New Orleans' mayor, and other local politicians cast the survival of the teams as critical in the task to remake a major American city. Perhaps in a more realistic tone, sports industry leaders question whether New Orleans, a borderline professional sports town in the days before Katrina, can regain the population base and corporate muscle needed to support NBA and NFL franchises.

Even before the storm, season-ticket sales for the Saints had dipped to about 35,000. The Hornets were the NBA's worst draw last season. And New Orleans, after having played host to nine Super Bowls, had fallen out of the rotation for the NFL's mega event.

Officials from New Orleans to the statehouse in Baton Rouge just hope league officials are true to their word in realizing recovery won't be a one- or two-year deal. In the case of the Hornets, the NBA and Louisiana officials agreed to push back the club's return and play the bulk of the schedule in Oklahoma City through the 2006-07 season.

"Listen, there is no secret that both the NBA and NFL are providing us with ample opportunity to have a better projection of what the future is going to look like," said Tim Coulin, chairman of the state-run Louisiana Superdome and Exposition District, which manages the Superdome and New Orleans Arena. "It's obviously no different than any other business that has concerns over the repopulation. All we have asked for is the opportunity. And they understand because they have seen the magnitude of the disaster."

Of course, there are civic leaders far and wide who would grab the teams in a heartbeat. The Los Angeles market eventually will become home to another NFL club. Kansas City, which next year will debut a 20,000-seat downtown arena, is eager to become host of an NBA team. And Oklahoma City and San Antonio clearly have an alluring eye out for the Hornets and Saints.

Just take a behind-the-scenes look at the provincial boosterism and political wrangling that went into becoming the home away from home for the New Orleans teams, if for only three NFL games in San Antonio or, in the case of Oklahoma City, two NBA seasons.

"Welcome to Oklahoma!"

For the better part of a decade, Oklahoma City officials pestered Stern in pursuit of an NBA franchise. They'd put out feelers for an NHL club, too. Stern liked the mayor and the city's business leaders he'd come to know, but nothing materialized. So the debt-free downtown Ford Center sat dark, save for minor league hockey games and a variety of special events.

Then Katrina blew through New Orleans, and folks back in Oklahoma finally had a shot, if only a tryout.

In a Sept. 2 e-mail to Stern, Cornett -- the Oklahoma City mayor -- carefully assured the commissioner that he wasn't responsible for tipping off the national media to his city's interest, then declared "we stand ready" if Hornets games needed to be relocated. The mayor further thanked Stern for a conversation the two engaged in a day earlier -- just three days after Katrina.

"They were clearly a perfect waiting city that had a great understanding of tragedy," Stern recently described Oklahoma City to ESPN.com. "So, they are very respectful, and very able to move fast, as well."

In subsequent exchanges over the next 10 days, as well as presumably in a Sept. 9 meeting, Cornett pitched the financial wherewithal of Oklahoma City, advising Stern in an electronic message that three of the world's largest energy companies are based in the city. "Have you seen the price of oil and natural gas?" Cornett asked the NBA boss.

Hornets owner George Shinn told ESPN he was clueless about Oklahoma City until being tipped off by Stern himself. "David suggested Oklahoma City, and my first reaction honestly was, 'Oklahoma where?' " Shinn recalled.

Ultimately, Oklahoma City promised to house team employees and furnish office space for 100 employees, as well as guarantee to cover the difference up to \$10 million if the team's gross revenues failed to reach \$40 million, which was 5 percent more than it attained last season in New Orleans. That kicker likely won't come into play because club officials project the Hornets to turn

a profit in their new digs, unlike during their 2004-05 season in the New Orleans Arena.

"Welcome to Oklahoma!" began a letter from Gov. Brad Henry to Shinn in which Henry promised to support legislation exempting Hornets tickets from Oklahoma sales tax.

Once the deal was swiftly executed and the national media gathered in town, Mayor Cornett, an old TV sports anchor, sat behind his desk at city hall and reviewed a series of talking points crafted by a local public relations firm, The Gooden Group. It was about the right spin, advancing the major league message while not coming off as a cold, heartless franchise raider. And letting it be known Oklahoma was doing its part to welcome Katrina evacuees.

It spelled out detailed points for the mayor to hit on, like:

- "OKC experienced its own tragedies," a reference to the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in 1995. "... We know what New Orleans is going through at this time."
 - "Talk about how the rapid development of the [Hornets] agreement speaks volume for the city's agility to respond to significant opportunities."
 - "Will Oklahoma City land a permanent NBA team? While time will eventually tell, the business community certainly has used this unique opportunity to unequivocally demonstrate it has the capabilities to move OKC to top of the NBA preferred list of expansion cities when the time comes."
- "... We are a city that also experienced disaster 10 years ago and was in disappointing straits. So, we're highly sensitive to what the people of the Gulf Coast are going through. "

Cornett routinely stuck to the script in articles that would appear in a number of major newspapers from Los Angeles to Philadelphia, as well as a segment of ESPN's "Outside the Lines." Never was the mayor more on point than when he told The Denver Post: "The NBA decides where the Hornets play. If they can't return, they have a place to play. But we are a city that also experienced disaster 10 years ago and was in disappointing straits. So, we're highly sensitive to what the people of the Gulf Coast are going through."

More than 500 miles west of New Orleans, San Antonio civic leaders were doing their own flirtatious dance with Saints owner Tom Benson -- one far less appreciated by those paying attention back home. Benson created his own PR disaster by openly chatting up San Antonio and its franchise-hungry mayor, Phil Hardberger, and already had been labeled an "old crybaby" by some in the New Orleans business community for repeated threats to take his NFL franchise to greener pastures.

After his nomadic team played on the LSU campus in early November, Benson got into it with a group of fans leaving Tiger Stadium, and later claimed in an e-mail to NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue that he and his family members "could have all been severely injured or killed." Eyewitnesses said the unpopular owner was never in danger.

Tagliabue later indirectly criticized Benson's flirtations with San Antonio, while stepping up as an ally for New Orleans with his call to market the team regionally and suggesting the Saints rework their Superdome lease. At an Oct. 30 news conference before the Saints took the Tiger Stadium field, the NFL commissioner put Benson on notice, saying, "Teams are not franchised as free agents to run around the country and play wherever they want to play. Under our league policies, owners are not supposed to be talking about relocating their team during a season."

Benson previously drew the ire of Nagin, the beleaguered New Orleans mayor, after it was reported

that the Saints owner had been working with San Antonio officials to relocate permanently to the Texas city, where he has a home and car dealerships. Nagin told ESPN.com recently, "Opportunities present themselves all the time. And those mayors are helping out, but they're also, out of the corner of their eyes, looking at this as a potential permanent situation for their city. Every city that does not have an NFL or NBA franchise would love to have one. So, I understand the realities."

In the case of the Saints, the NFL team fattened the San Antonio coffers -- even if the stay proved temporary -- while folks in New Orleans were hunkered down, waiting for federal assistance. Speaking at a local auto dealers luncheon in the fall, Mayor Hardberger estimated the three NFL games in the Alamodome had an almost \$25 million economic impact on his city. He also claimed his city received \$6 million in free media exposure.

As for the mayor, he received some "very, very nice Saints cuff links" from his city's director of convention facilities, Michael Sawaya -- according to an Oct. 6 e-mail he sent the director.

After the Alamodome sold out for the Oct. 16 game between the Saints and Atlanta Falcons, Hardberger was provided with his own talking points, which were prepared for his monthly box luncheon. Included in the draft, which was obtained by ESPN.com, were the following nuggets:

- "I think we've proven wrong anyone who doubted whether San Antonio is an NFL city."
- "Commissioner Paul Tagliabue doesn't want (the Saints) here in San Antonio again because he doesn't want them to be successful here and decide to stay for good."

The mayor concedes now that his plans to bring the NFL to San Antonio could be put on hold if the baseball Marlins land in South Texas. Still, he left no doubt about his preference: "If I had the choice of a professional football team or a professional baseball team, I would take football."

"We're giving [the Saints] \$180 million over 10 years to stay here?"

In the wake of Katrina, New Orleans' downtown and its tourist lure, the French Quarter, slowly have come alive. But of the 480,000 residents who called New Orleans home before the storm, barely a third have returned. Scattered banks of traffic signals remain dark, producing dangerous four-way stops and snarled traffic. The Hyatt Regency that towers not far from the Superdome is still closed. The same is true of many nearby businesses and a boarded-up shopping mall.

The area around the Superdome and New Orleans Arena is desolate and nearly abandoned. Weeds have begun to creep through cracks in the sidewalk. Inside the basketball arena, the locker rooms that were flooded are being rebuilt -- part of an estimated \$10 million repair bill.

Across the street, the Superdome -- at one point home to 25,000 evacuees -- is undergoing \$139 million in repairs to get it ready for the Sept. 24 return home of the Saints. Water-damaged Sheetrock is being torn from suites. The soiled playing surface needs replacement. Mold is being removed from the seats and from every nook and cranny. The steel decking on the roof needs replacing, at a cost of about \$30 million.

Many rooms at downtown hotels are still occupied by storm victims, insurance adjusters and others connected with Katrina's recovery. Hospitality industry workers are cordial enough, but service is slow even by local standards. Fewer than half the city's food establishments have reopened. Workers are a scarce commodity, with the work force shriveled to a third of its pre-Katrina size, in part because of the dearth of affordable housing.

These nights, a stroll down Bourbon Street proves uneventful and out of synch. Music blares into the street, but a glance inside finds many of the clubs and daiquiri bars nearly empty.

Strip joints such as Larry Flynt's Hustler Club are closing early. A doorman says the pace will quicken when, and if, the Saints and convention business return.

A vendor hawking flowers on a quiet street corner says of business: "It stinks."

Down the block at Bourbon Teez, among the souvenir shops catering to tourists, hang a smattering of thin, three-for-\$20 T-shirts with not-so-subtle reminders of the post-Katrina angst. Messages like:

- FEMA ... The New Four Letter "F" Word
- Make Levees ... Not War
- Semi-Sweet and a Little Nuts ... Ray Nagin and the Chocolate City

Over on Poydras Street, some 10 blocks from the Superdome, Jerry Amato recently sat inside the door of Mother's Restaurant, a downtown Crescent City landmark, as the noontime lunch crowd steadily filtered in. Amato returned a month after the storm to find the 82nd Airborne patrolling the streets outside his place. A flattened, burned-out car sat curbside just outside the front door. It wasn't until a last-minute spruce-up of the area just before Mardi Gras that the wreckage finally had been cleared.

Crammed in the parking lot alongside Mother's are nine white trailers, one man's solution to the worker shortage. In them, Amato houses cooks and waitstaff until permanent homes can be found.

Business isn't what it used to be, he says, but by post-Katrina standards, his place is hopping.

As for what the city's two sports franchises mean to his and other nearby businesses, Amato suggests the Hornets wouldn't be missed if they never returned. The Saints are another story. They've become a part of the local fabric and draw huge crowds on football weekends. A fair number of fans come from out of town. But like others about town, Amato opines that the future of the Saints shouldn't rank high on what is now an enormous agenda.

Even before the hurricane, we had issues with schools in this state," said the squat, stocky figure with a scruffy gray beard. "We had people who were coming out of school totally uneducated. And we're giving [the Saints] \$180 million over 10 years to stay here? There were a lot of people who just couldn't understand why we had to give a person in business such a big amount of money.

"Now, we're looking at sections of the city that may never come back. So who cares about sports teams? You got three- and four-mile areas in the Lower Ninth Ward that are totally destroyed. And people in this country don't understand how massive this is. These people don't have the resources to come back. I was on the road for three weeks [after the storm], and it's tough financially, and I make a nice living."

On a recent sunny afternoon, Amato left his business for an hour to drive down to the hardest-hit areas, just four or five miles from the Superdome and New Orleans Arena. Down St. Claude Avenue and off to the left sat block after block of houses leveled or battered by surging water, and cars still resting on top of each other in some front yards.

The place resembles a war zone, with mounds of debris, decimated homes as far as the eye can see. Nobody lives here anymore. It's eerily still.

"Listen, it's so screwed up. There are no birds," Amato said as he lowered the window of his SUV

to the sound of silence. "Nothing. No food for them."

Despite the bleak scene, Mayor Nagin, who faces a tough election late next month, is bent on putting a rosy spin on the city's future. The New Orleans population should touch 300,000 by year's end, he suggests, with 90 percent of the 1.3 million pre-Katrina residents returning to the greater metro area. Displaced folks are, in his perhaps overly optimistic words, "clamoring to get back."

Construction-related activity should be a boon to the city, he adds, predicting almost \$100 billion to be spent over the next five to seven years.

"This economy should be strong enough to support those franchises," Nagin said. "They are absolutely critical. The Saints franchise has been here for 30-plus years. It is part of the culture, if you will. It looks as though we're going to have a real significant shot at retaining them. I think it is good for the psyche of the community, also."

These days, rightly or wrongly, the ability of a city to attract pro sports franchises validates its arrival. The Saints put New Orleans among the bottom rung of those cities, but it was that second franchise, the Hornets, that civic leaders believe brought real bragging rights. A second franchise puts New Orleans one up on places like Sacramento, Portland and Memphis.

The Big Easy would be Birmingham if both franchises were to leave tomorrow.

"In America today, the existence of professional sports brands a city as a first-class city," said former New Orleans mayor Marc Morial, now president of the National Urban League. "The cities that have sports franchises have reputations as being elite communities. One of the best examples might be Nashville, which only in the last 10 years picked up pro football and the hockey team. What has happened to Nashville is that their profile has risen. They have been able to relocate a number of corporate headquarters. I'm not going to say the two go hand in hand, but certainly it is directional.

"I thought that when the Hornets moved to New Orleans in 2002, as I was leaving office, it was an endorsement of the direction of the city. People don't move sports franchises to cities that are in decline. They move sports franchises to cities that are on the rise.

"Now, that community should be given a chance to prove that they can continue to support the teams. You have an unusual situation in New Orleans because you had the greatest natural disaster in American history. And it is going to take time. It may take two or three years before ticket sales and corporate sponsorships get back at their pre-Katrina levels."

Or they might never return fully.

"There will be a team one way or the other in Oklahoma City"

Repopulation of the city is critical for the health of its sports teams. So, too, the vibrant return of corporations with the cash to lease suites and sign sponsorships deals. But if the tourism and convention industry fails to flourish again, and early signs are dubious, experts predict it will be the death blow to the franchises, if not the city.

There is a simple reason: The major revenue stream that supports the Hornets, and to some extent the Saints -- as well as the operations of the facilities, thus allowing lucrative lease arrangements for the teams -- is funded by a 5 percent hotel/motel tax in New Orleans and neighboring Jefferson Parish. Sixty percent of the budget for the Louisiana Stadium and Exposition District, the state body that oversees the facilities and a signatory on the leases, is derived from the hotel tax.

Already, tax estimates for the fiscal year ending June 30 are projected at \$22.7 million, dramatically off the \$42.1 million generated by tourists last year. The LSED slashed its operating budget and laid off 151 employees in advance, but where it potentially gets dicey is if the hospitality tax money doesn't pick up after the teams return.

In the case of the Saints, for instance, a new lease signed in 2001 entitles them to inducement payments from the state totaling \$186.5 million through the 2010 season -- including \$20 million next season. The payment from this past season is a modest \$3.3 million because only two preseason games were played in the Superdome. The Hornets have inducements based on attendance, although they're far less lucrative than what the Saints have.

"Over time, the ability of the state to be able to continue its obligations under that lease are going to require that the hospitality industry come back strong," said Morial, the former mayor. "Which I think is possible, because the infrastructure of the hospitality industry was not substantially damaged by Katrina. The tough side is that the housing market, which supported the workers that they need, was substantially damaged."

Compounding the problem are the horrific images of suffering that were beamed worldwide in the weeks after Katrina, hardly a selling point for a city where the No. 1 industry is tourism. The city's major convention center remains closed till June. And the turnout for the first Mardi Gras since Hurricane Katrina was smaller than normal -- an estimated 350,000 this year, compared with the usual 1 million, according to the New Orleans Tourism Marketing Corp.

"Let's be honest, it is a tourist-based economy," said Sal Galatioto, who brokers franchise sales through his New York-based Galatioto Sports Partners. "And the port is incredibly important there, but it is not a real diversified economy. There's not a lot of corporate headquarters. It is what it is."

"It is a tough situation. No one expected this to happen, so it takes a little time for people to reformulate their thoughts and move forward on a thoughtful basis. Look, it is not as if it was a huge market before. And now, it depends on your view of what you think will happen. Some people think the city is going to come back in better shape than it was. We'll see."

In the meantime, the parties are posturing and biding time. While the Hornets have approval to stay in Oklahoma City through the 2006-07 season, they are playing three games this month in New Orleans and another six next season. Stern, the NBA boss, described the half-dozen games against Western Conference teams as a "pretty good test case."

"Right now, we're operating on the assumption that the team is returning in 2007-2008," Stern said. "I think that that will pretty much reveal itself by this time next year -- the All-Star Game in Las Vegas."

The Hornets have proven fabulously successful in their new, larger digs, averaging 18,651 through 26 home games -- including 14 sellouts. Last year in New Orleans, the Hornets posted a franchise-worst record and saw attendance plummet to 14,221 -- last in the league.

Club officials have resumed efforts to sell equity shares in the franchise, a process that began in New Orleans after minority owner Ray Woolridge sold back his interest to Shinn last year. Hornets president Paul Mott said that only about 60 percent of the New Orleanians who initially expressed interest continue to be engaged in talks. At the same time, potential investors are being sought in Oklahoma and Mott expressed hope that the club would be able to bring people before the NBA for approval this summer.

Stern said he was unfamiliar with the potential partnership sale, but offered his strongest

endorsement yet of Oklahoma City's future as an NBA city. "I don't know what time frame to put on it," the commissioner said. "But yes, I would say there will be a team one way or the other in Oklahoma City."

"It was a dead loser"

Based on the contract signed four years ago when the Hornets relocated from Charlotte, it appears they'd have an epic legal tussle if they were to try bolting New Orleans. The contract runs through 2010 and contains no option allowing the Hornets to terminate the agreement.

Of course, if the New Orleans population fails to come back in the expected numbers, legal experts suggest that the sports teams could argue to void the contracts because the circumstances upon which they are based have changed so fundamentally. At this point, however, no one is talking legal action.

The Saints are a considerably more fluid case. The deal signed in 2001 allowed them a one-time out after the 2005 season, and before March 31 this year, if they anted up an \$81 million exit fee. After Katrina, the Saints agreed to push the date back a year, and there's some speculation it could be delayed yet another year or two, largely because the NFL would not want to be perceived as failing to give the city a fair shot to recover.

Ultimately, it will be the leagues' commissioners -- Tagliabue and Stern -- who make the decision whether to bail on New Orleans. The feeling in some quarters is that Benson might have been on a permanent path to San Antonio had Tagliabue not stepped in and committed the league to New Orleans, at least for the time being. Benson did not respond to multiple interview requests by ESPN.com.

"The league constitution requires that Benson follow the league bylaws, so he has few options," said Gary Roberts, deputy dean of the Tulane University law school, located in New Orleans. "I cannot see Tom Benson beating Paul Tagliabue in a lawsuit. Frankly, if Benson thought he could win a lawsuit against the league, he would have brought it this year. He couldn't. It was a dead loser.

"So, he basically came crawling back with his tail between his legs because Tagliabue told him to. And I think the league is going to continue to maintain that position through next year. What they do two or three years down the road, I don't know."

Long term, the Saints still are considered the much stronger New Orleans franchise -- for a lot of reasons. Not only do they have three decades of history on their side but they're looking to draw for only eight regular-season games -- plus two in the preseason -- as opposed to 44 NBA dates, a fair number falling on weeknights. Saints officials reported last week that season-ticket renewals are nearly four times what they were a year ago, with 20,000 to 25,000 deposits. The encouraging news is linked to many ticket holders having money remaining in their accounts because of the cancellation of the New Orleans games last season, as well as reduced prices on some seats.

The real clincher is that Benson can bank on -- before next season kicks off -- more than \$100 million in revenue sharing from the NFL, the bulk coming from national broadcast partner agreements. The NBA revenue sharing package projects to be about a third of that.

That hasn't swayed Benson from talking up other potential markets in better times or extracting huge financial concessions from Louisiana politicians. So where might he threaten to leave for next? His choice of San Antonio might not pass muster with NFL hierarchy because of the city's population base and its own dearth of corporate headquarters, plus the fact that it would be a third team in Texas.

Of course, the NFL continually leverages the Los Angeles market, and it's just a matter of time before someone is given the OK to relocate. Some have projected the Saints heading way west if all fails in New Orleans. Or might NFL owners keep the L.A. slot warm for an expansion franchise, knowing a new team would bring a projected \$1 billion expansion fee?

More likely, the NFL will stay the course in New Orleans for two or three years, doing the right thing for all the PR reasons. If a stadium deal is done in L.A. by then, and if it should become obvious New Orleans can't sustain an NFL franchise, the Saints loom as a perfect candidate to move there.

Now, it's just a speculative game, projecting how much of the population will find its way back to the Big Easy, what kind of jobs they'll return to and whether the tourism industry can drive the local economy again. It'll all unfold through time, whether it's three, four or five years down the road.

"This city needs to start thinking about how it is going to remake itself without major league professional sports franchises, because I find it hard to believe that four, five, six years from now that those teams are going to be here," warned Roberts, the Tulane sports law expert. "You look around the country, and there are fine midsize cities that don't have a lot of major sports that are quite nice places to live. I think we can get through it, survive and do very well. But the city's official position is 'No, we need them.' I don't blame them. The sports franchises are assets, and if we can keep them, it is to our benefit. But I'm not sure we are going to keep them, so we might as well get beyond that and start thinking about how we're going to rebuild the city without them."

If so, as sports cities go, New Orleans will go down as home of the Triple-A Zephyrs. Or Birmingham with a whole lot of jazz.

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Why leaving home is OK

By Ric Bucher

ESPN The Magazine

NEW ORLEANS -- Before I arrived in New Orleans this week, I firmly believed the NBA had no business even trying to return here, just as the city had no business asking. How do the Hornets leave Oklahoma City, which has gone bonkers in a way Nawluns never did? How does a city with so many bigger problems even pretend keeping a three-year-old franchise is a legitimate priority? This isn't wallpapering over swiss-cheesed sheetrock. This is having the wallpaper peel off, discovering disease-ridden dead bodies and blithely trying to paste the wallpaper up again.

Now, having felt the Big Easy's improved pulse, heard local radio talk-show hosts boast about the Hornets' faithful fans and seen a displaced beat writer practically make a personal plea for the team's return on ESPNEWS, a gentler me has emerged. I appreciate why commissioner David Stern is saying the Hornets must come back. I understand those who genuinely believe an NBA franchise lifted the city to a new plateau, one it can't possibly reach without one.

I get it. I do. That's why I'm suggesting this be looked at not as a dilemma but an opportunity to correct a mistake. Which was bringing the Hornets to New Orleans in the first place.

Let's be honest. Did it, at any time, really feel right? Plying an owner who turned off one of the most devoted fan bases in Charlotte? Putting civic money in his pocket when the citizenry was already

being shortchanged on basic amenities? So the fans who never got over the Jazz moving to Utah finally had their basketball jones sated again. So the Hornets had more support than originally thought -- but that, in part, is because original expectations were so low.

If New Orleans were really in such great shape, it wouldn't have already had to concede its ability to take the team back next season. The city needs help and the NBA should provide it via an All-Star Game and donations and appearances and whatever can be done to boost the economy. They don't need the Hornets back in the city to do any of that.

If commissioner David Stern should have pause at keeping the Hornets where they are, it's only because it means owner George Shinn sidesteps another self-made disaster. If I remember correctly, the franchise plummeted a year ago thanks to a combination of bad personnel decisions and drastic cost-cutting measures. Chris Paul falls in any other team's lap and this is not nearly the feel-good season it has proved to be.

New Orleans has the legal power to force the Hornets to return. They have a lease with no buyout that runs until 2010 and Stern is too smart to get caught up in a PR-deadly legal battle. "NBA GOES TO COURT TO DESERT HURRICANE-RAVAGED CITY" would not be good business for the league no matter how many cowboys hang Buzz dolls from their gun racks.

But having driven past block after block of uninhabitable houses and abandoned cars and piles of refuse, having read about the city's dilapidated education system and its corruption-riddled law enforcement, I would hope New Orleans' leaders would be smart enough not to insist on keeping a team that isn't all that wild about coming back. Only P.J. Brown still has a house in the area and only four players were on the team last season and that's about to be three once J.R. Smith is traded. If it were up to the Hornets, they'd stay right where they are.

While everyone hopes New Orleans recaptures its old panache, as an outsider the laundry list of issues that Hurricane Katrina uncovered makes it hard to see energy devoted to keeping a pro basketball team as wisely spent. It's an elegant city in a wink-and-a-nod way and I love its multi-cultural bouillabaise. It certainly doesn't need Kobe or LeBron stopping by to be that again.

The old notion is, of course, that when a player gets hurt, he gets his starting job back once he's healthy again. That only happens when the substitute doesn't come close to performing the way his predecessor did or the starter gets back in a reasonable amount of time. Jay Williams may play again, but he isn't replacing Kirk Hinrich or Ben Gordon for the Bulls if he does. Promising him that wouldn't change his current battle. Same goes for New Orleans and the promise of being an NBA city again.

Hey, from all accounts, Wally Pipp went on to have a pretty good life. Or at least I never heard of him having a bad one. New Orleans, being a lot more hip from the get, surely can do that. Or maybe even better.

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Stern: NBA owes it to New Orleans to return

11:32 PM CST on Wednesday, March 8, 2006

NEW ORLEANS – The day started with President Bush touring the area and chastising Congress for shortchanging the city.

It ended with a basketball game.

There are issues of politics and appropriations, of construction and depopulation, the NBA is not qualified to discuss. So commissioner David Stern and the Hornets did what they could Wednesday, which was build a home, stage a game and pledge fidelity to a city the NBA swears it has not forgot.

"What we're doing here is largely symbolic," Stern said, holding a hammer as he and some of the league's players and legends worked on a home in the Lower Ninth Ward. "But it tells everyone that we've got to help. We've got to do better."

The Hornets' 113-107 loss to the Los Angeles Lakers was the first professional sporting event in New Orleans since Katrina hit. You can debate the significance of the moment. Providing relief from the drudgery and uncertainty of everyday life is nothing compared to the \$1.5 billion in financial relief President Bush said Congress needs to approve.

What struck the Hornets players, who were chased to Oklahoma City by the storm more than six months ago, was the cruel juxtaposition of progress and paralysis.

Rookie Chris Paul said a chill went up his spine as he gawked at the uprooted trees and realized how much work needs to be done. Veteran P.J. Brown was surprised that downtown was so vibrant.

He then went to the gas station in New Orleans East he frequented before Katrina and found it was no longer there.

Stern spent a large part of his day in meetings with everyone from the Louisiana Reconstruction Authority to the governor. He was given encouraging reports about the city's port and hotel industry. Stern was briefed on the city's schools, banks and biomedical research and told about the \$100 billion in public and private investments coming the city's way.

Then, he walked through parts of the city where trash was piled waist-high, where molding carpet, discarded furniture and corroded refrigerators lined the street.

"There is an enormous amount of economic activity here," Stern said. "But the thing you can't get away from is that certain aspects of the reconstruction seem to be stalled. You have to see the devastation to understand its scope and impact."

Stern says the league has a social responsibility to return to New Orleans for the 2007-08 season. But you can argue it's irresponsible to return when there are so many more important issues to be addressed.

"Sports is a big part of our culture in America," Brown said. "But we have to prioritize and make sure we take care of the most important things first like housing, jobs, hospitals and schools.

"If everything works out there and is going right, I'm all for bringing the team back."

Others remain skeptical. Lakers coach Phil Jackson voiced doubts about whether the city had the corporate base needed to support a franchise.

Hornets coach Byron Scott echoed that opinion and conceded he and the players were spoiled

because the crowds have been so large and raucous in Oklahoma City.

That explains why the sellout crowd of 17,744 at New Orleans Arena – a rarity since the franchise moved to the city three-and-a-half years ago – booed when Scott was introduced.

[Edited Note: emphasis mine]

"I would say to Byron let me make that decision and he should focus more on basketball," Stern said. "And if you see him, tell him that. We're going to be back."

Owner George Shinn wasn't as strong. Shinn has been unabashed in his enthusiasm for Oklahoma City and hesitant to publicly commit that the Hornets will return to New Orleans. When pressed on the issue Wednesday, he said he planned to return but cautioned, "I can't forecast. What if another Katrina hits this summer?"

The Hornets are scheduled to play six games in New Orleans next season. The league intends to hold the 2008 All-Star Game in the city, negotiations Stern hopes to finalize by April.

Stern stressed that state and city leaders are as committed to bringing the Hornets back. There is hope. But it's impossible to provide any assurances when there are so many unknowns and an overwhelming need for so much more to be done.

"We'll just have to wait and see," Brown said. "Who knows what will happen?"

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Philadelphia Inquirer

3.12.2006

<http://www.philly.com/mld/inquirer/sports/14075880.htm>

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On the NBA | Home is where Hornets will be

Posted on Sun, Mar. 12, 2006

By David Aldridge

Inquirer Columnist

The NBA returned to New Orleans last week, with the Hornets playing the Lakers. But the most important meetings took place in private, when NBA commissioner David Stern got an update on the city's progress since Hurricane Katrina. He met with Louisiana Gov. Kathleen Blanco, representatives from Mayor Ray Nagin's office, the Louisiana Reconstruction Committee, the head of the local convention and visitors' bureau, the head of the port authority, and local business leaders.

All of whom, it should come as no surprise, were bullish on the city's future.

It only reinforced Stern's determination to return the Hornets to New Orleans for good in 2007, after a second and seemingly final season in Oklahoma City next year. The Hornets will play 35 games there and six in New Orleans before returning to the refurbished New Orleans Arena in '07. And Stern is still looking to bring the 2008 All-Star Game to the Big Easy.

"They felt that next year, if we could do six games, that would be good, because they've got lots of people to bring back, lots of reconstruction would occur," Stern said. "They thought that an All-Star Game would be a huge lift for the tourism industry, which is really their bread and potatoes, despite the difficulties that the hotels have of staffing."

Stern was told that the city expects its hotels to be 100 percent operational by the end of 2007, with a higher occupancy rate than before Katrina. Companies like Harrah's, the casino conglomerate, have made commitments to rebuild in and around the city.

The bottom line is that Stern believes New Orleans, while perhaps smaller in population, will be a totally different town in terms of business support - the lifeblood of any pro sports team. It will be different from the city that had only one Fortune 500 company when the Hornets arrived from Charlotte in 2003.

"It's clear that there's going to be an enormous amount of economic activity here," Stern said. "They said, 'Listen, we don't want the team to come back if it's not going to be a success for reasons extraneous to it. But we're going to make it a success together.' We said that's fair."

This is not good news for Oklahoma City, which has been sterling in its support of the Hornets. Stern has made it clear that Oklahoma City is now his number-one choice for any team looking to relocate. But that's a slippery business. The Commish will be happy to leave the Blazers in Portland and the Sonics in Seattle as long as each gets the new arena (in Seattle's case) or public funding (in Portland's) that it craves.

Oklahoma City, it seemed, had earned the right to keep the Hornets. That city stepped up to the plate when called, with a public-private partnership that has deep pockets and a strong affinity for its new team. Its location makes geographic sense.

But it's hard to say that when you go to New Orleans and see the people who have stayed - hardworking people who want their team back, if only to serve as a diversion from all the misery and pain they're facing every day.

"If I was making just a pure business decision," said owner George Shinn, "obviously it would have to lean toward Oklahoma City, because of the sponsor support we're getting there, and the ticket sales. But this decision won't be made just because of that. We'll have to use our head and our heart to make this decision."

Said Nagin: "The Hornets [are] another norm that we have. People have missed it... in the wake of Mardi Gras, with businesses opening up, the Hornets just fit so nicely in the puzzle."

The people in the organization, of course, just want some sense of where they're going to be. Many still have houses here - some were damaged, some were spared - and have to deal with insurance and rebuilding like everyone else while they rent apartments and houses in Oklahoma City. Privately, most would like to stay there, if only because of the home-court advantage they've had this season.

"We're all in limbo," coach Byron Scott said. "We would like to know, one place or another, and we can make the adjustments in our lives."

No one, of course, can guarantee that other, more powerful storms won't hit the region. But there are no guarantees that there won't be more earthquakes in San Francisco, or ice storms and blizzards in Chicago. New Orleans is where it is. And even after seeing the devastation in the Lower Ninth Ward firsthand, Stern is going to move heaven and earth to put the Hornets back in town.

Barring another disaster, Oklahoma City will have to wait.

"Frankly, to me, Anderson Cooper's been doing a good job," Stern said. "But there's nothing, obviously, like being here."

Article 73

Houston Chronicle

3.12.2006

<http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/sports/feigen/3717631.html>

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March 12, 2006, 1:01AM

NBA NOTEBOOK

Hornets' problem remains

League tries to put optimistic face on New Orleans' unyielding plight

By Jonathan Feigen

Copyright 2006 Houston Chronicle

So Byron Scott should not have sounded like a spoilsport.

The Hornets were back in New Orleans for the first pro sports event since Hurricane Katrina. NBA commissioner David Stern and Hornets and Lakers players were hammering nails.

The whole thing was treated as an important symbolic statement.

Scott should have bit his tongue and played along. But he revealed the quandary the Hornets face.

He was asked if he had sold his New Orleans home.

"I don't know what I'm doing with the house, to be honest with you," Scott said. "I'm still kind of waiting around. Mr. Stern and the league kind of put us all in a bind. We understand the situation. We're going to play another year in Oklahoma City.

"After that, we don't know what's going to happen. So I have to sit down with my wife and decide if we're going to sell the house or not. We might be back in September.

"Obviously, we're getting a little spoiled in Oklahoma City, when you're getting 19,000 every single night. We don't know how long that's going to last. The whole future of our franchise is a question. But the guys have gotten spoiled. They enjoy playing in front of those fans. Again, if we have the same type of fans here in New Orleans, no problem."

Stern did not like that.

"I would say to Byron, 'Let me make that decision,' " Stern said. "He should focus on basketball. ... We're going to be back."

Stern said the same thing every time asked. The Hornets, after one more season in Oklahoma City, will return to New Orleans. At his All-Star Game news conference, he had tried to be less definitive but was pushed toward a promise. In New Orleans, he had decided it would be best to take the pledge.

But the truth he avoided — and that was perhaps unnecessary for the happy occasion — is that he cannot be sure New Orleans will be able to support a franchise.

It was good that Stern did not go as far the other way as Hornets owner George Shinnl.

"I can't forecast," he said. "What if another Katrina hits this summer?"

But for all the good intentions, for all the symbolism and celebration, the reality remains somewhere between Stern's promises and Shinn's pessimism, best put by Hornets forward and Louisiana native P.J. Brown.

"Basketball, this professional team, is very minute in the whole scheme of things around here," Brown said. "We've got housing, jobs, hospitals, schools, things like that. If this team can fit in this puzzle, then, yeah, I'm all about coming back."

In other words, the NBA would be a nice finishing touch, but nothing is close to being finished. Feed the hungry before offering them dessert.

Article 74

Sports Illustrated

3.13.2006

http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2006/writers/kelly_dwyer/03/13/weekly.wrap/

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Awkward situation

Hornets' return to New Orleans raises questions

Posted: Monday March 13, 2006 2:45PM; Updated: Monday March 13, 2006 5:27PM

I'd just like to remind everyone that gambling is illegal, printable brackets are for sissies and "Monmouth" just sounds made up. Trolling the Internet to read about the NBA? That's where it's at. Dig:

- The Houston Chronicle's Jonathan Feigen touches on something that most of his fellow NBA scribes have heretofore ignored -- the altogether unseemly future transition back to New Orleans that the Hornets have to make in 2007. Though the team played in New Orleans for only two full seasons, toiling through '04-05 in front of the smallest crowds in the NBA, they appear to be set on returning to the beleaguered city in time for the '07-08 season. Nobody wants to come off as insensitive in wondering aloud about the city's ability to host an NBA franchise, but the viability of the Hornets in New Orleans was in question years before Hurricane Katrina struck. Bank on some hurt feelings in this touchy tempest, regardless of what David Stern decides to do.

[Edited Note: the author is misinformed since the Hornets played in New Orleans for 3 full seasons before temporarily relocating to Oklahoma City, not 2.]

Article 75

New York Times

3.21.2006

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/21/sports/basketball/21hornets.html?_r=2&oref=slogin&oref=slogin

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Hornets Wonder How They'll Fit In

By Liz Robbins

Published: March 21, 2006

NEW ORLEANS, March 20 — The Hornets' chartered bus turned tentatively into the narrow debris-lined streets of the Lower Ninth Ward as the rookie point guard Chris Paul put his video

camera to the window to record the twisted scenes of destruction.

An empty open banjo case lay on a pile of collapsed houses a few feet from a copy of the New Testament. A Mercury Sable was caught diagonally upended, bearing the bumper sticker, "Faith," while a battered wheelchair sat nearby.

"Take nothing for granted," Paul said somberly as he got off the bus two hours later, the video in his backpack to remind him. "Just to see that's all some people had — and now it's all gone."

The most stirring sight for Speedy Claxton, the Hornets' veteran point guard, was the one word he saw spray-painted on the front of a desolate bungalow. "It said 'Help,'" Claxton said, shaking his head.

One day before the Hornets were to play their third and final game in New Orleans — having relocated for this season and next to Oklahoma City — four players, Coach Byron Scott and his wife, Anita, and a handful of Hornets employees took a tour of the New Orleans areas that were hit hardest by the floods from Hurricane Katrina.

They saw the dichotomy of their lives and the destroyed ones of their city's fans — scenes that made them question, uncomfortably, how basketball would ever have a place here. Suddenly, their eight-game losing streak did not seem as disconcerting.

"We're fortunate enough to be in a situation where we make good money, and there are some parts of the city where people are living in trailers, tents, parking lots of Wal-Mart," forward David West said. "You don't feel at ease with that situation."

"What we do in terms of our profession isn't that big of a deal when you got major life issues people are dealing with — it's quite a reality check."

Forward Aaron Williams took pictures with his phone to send to his wife as the bus returned to the team's luxury hotel in the French Quarter.

That area of the city is vibrant and almost unchanged, except for "Help Wanted" signs hanging in windows. Workers are scarce. The levies are not rebuilt. Federal, state and city officials are still haggling over how to distribute aid.

The city has far more pressing items on its agenda than making sure the infrastructure, let alone fans, will be ready to embrace the Hornets when they are scheduled to return for the 2007-8 season. And yet, some city officials believe that for now, the Hornets are playing a significant role.

"It means a lot if we have professional sports here," City Council President Oliver Thomas said in an interview Monday. "It shows that we can be a world-class community. It puts us on the map. For us, that first Hornets game, like Mardi Gras, that was all part of our therapy."

When the Hornets played the Los Angeles Lakers on March 8, they inaugurated a new court at New Orleans Arena. There was a new scoreboard, and fresh paint in the hallways.

But adjacent to the arena, cars streamed into a parking lot set up as a temporary post office for people who no longer have addresses.

The veteran forward P. J. Brown, a native of Slidell, La., said: "There are people who need jobs and housing, there are a lot of important issues that need to be addressed. I think it's a good idea for the team to stay another year in Oklahoma City to see what progresses."

N.B.A. Commissioner David Stern repeated last week that the Hornets would return from Oklahoma City to New Orleans and that the league was planning to have the 2008 All-Star Game in the city — which Thomas said was one of the initiatives in his 10-point plan to rebuild New Orleans. (The Saints are returning for five games next season.)

In Oklahoma City, the team has averaged 18,685 fans in 33 games. The season before Katrina, the Hornets had the worst attendance in the league. The Hornets have averaged 17,827 fans in the two games in New Orleans and, as of Monday night, 1,500 tickets remained for Tuesday's game against the Los Angeles Clippers.

But will they be able to sustain that for a 41-game home season?

George Shinn, the team owner, said he wondered the same thing. "We all have to take the necessary steps with a positive outlook that this is going to work," he said. "If it doesn't, we'll have to deal with it at that time. What happens this summer if another hurricane comes? There are a lot of question marks."

The Hornets are trying to contact their season-ticket holders, many whose whereabouts are unknown.

In the meantime, the Hornets and the N.B.A. have contributed \$1 million to Hoops for Homes, the project run by Habitat for Humanity. Renowned retired players like Bill Walton and Willis Reed, the Hornets' vice president, helped active players build the first new home in the city last week.

All around them, the Hornets see conflicting pictures of hope and despair. After the hurricane, their bus driver, Charles Mitchell, had to be rescued by boat from his roof. He had not eaten in two days. After he was flown out of the city, he returned to work with FEMA and disaster relief groups but still cannot rebuild his house. He drove through neighborhoods that were as empty as ghost towns. In the suburb of Chalmette, a child's bicycle lay mangled on a broken windshield of a van. In the house next door, a family could be seen trying to reclaim anything it could.

"Your heart goes out to a lot of folks," West said, "You don't know where they get the courage to stay."

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ESPN

3.21.2006

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Updated: March 21, 2006, 11:03 PM ET

Shinn calls games in New Orleans a success

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS -- Hornets owner George Shinn pronounced his team's three games back in New Orleans a major success and said it left him optimistic about the Hornets' chances to succeed when they are slated to return to the city full time for the 2007-08 season.

"I had doubts at first. Quite frankly, I was scared. I didn't know we'd have the success we've had and I've been very pleased," Shinn said before Tuesday night's game against the Los Angeles Clippers. "It's good for New Orleans, it's good for us."

The first two games against the Los Angeles Lakers and Denver Nuggets were sellouts, and Shinn said the final game was very close to selling out, with tickets still being purchased up to tip-off.

The Hornets will remain temporarily based in Oklahoma City next season, with six home games against Western Conference teams to be played in New Orleans.

Shinn said he's hoping to get the same type of crowds next season and that the team will work on getting deposits for a 41-game home schedule the following season.

"That's going to be the story," Shinn cautioned.

Shinn called the condition of the arena, which had minor flooding during Hurricane Katrina, "magnificent."

"Everything's perfect in that regard," Shinn said. "Can the city support us? I think it can. I know a lot of people have been displaced, but without saying the wrong thing, a lot of the people that have been displaced were not ticket holders and a lot of these people couldn't afford tickets. The people that could ... are either still here or they're living in Metairie or somewhere close and that's the reason we're having sellout crowds."

While trying to remain firm on his commitment to return to the city, which his lease requires him to do, he stopped short of making any guarantees. Attendance has been strong in Oklahoma city, often exceeding 18,000.

"The team would be an absolute financial success to stay in Oklahoma. I can't deny that," Shinn said. "If everybody here, the state and everybody, can step up and give us some confidence, than everything's going to work here. ... I want it to work."

Shinn said the only reason he left some wiggle room was because it was impossible to foretell not only how well the city would continue to recover from Katrina, but whether another major storm would hit the area next hurricane season.

"The plan, again, is to come back here," Shinn said. "I'm not God. ... If another Katrina hits here and hits dead on here, what's going to happen? I don't know the answer to that question, but it's probably not going to be good. We've all got have our eyes open and we've all got to make the right decision."

NBA commissioner David Stern has said the league intends for the Hornets to return and the NBA All-Star Game is tentatively scheduled for New Orleans in 2008.

"I just want the best to happen to this city," Shinn said. "Everybody politically or business-wise, whatever, wants us to come back, so that's good. But the bottom line is, it's got to make sense. What would be bad is ... if we come back and three years later have to leave. That doesn't help anybody."

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CBS Sports
3.22.2006

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Hornets' return to Big Easy instills sense of normalcy to city

March 22, 2006

By Tony Mejia

CBS SportsLine.com Staff Writer

NEW ORLEANS -- With apologies to Oklahoma City, the Hornets are still New Orleans' team. Knowing what tragedy is all about, OKC can relate, and should gladly step aside when the city ravaged by Hurricane Katrina is ready to take its team back.

On Tuesday evening, the Hornets took the court in front of 16,799 fans, the first time in the three games being played in the Crescent City that the New Orleans Arena wasn't sold out. Still, it was pretty close, falling just short of capacity. Fans saw a crucial 120-108 victory over the surging Los Angeles Clippers, the first win in the building since March 12, 2004.

That, of course, was before disaster struck.

The Hornets played back-to-back games at New Orleans Arena for the first time in more than a year on Tuesday. As a result, players were able to see the destruction that remains a part of the city seven months later. Everyone knows the levees broke. No one, other than those who have returned, knows the damage still left behind.

"You drive around the neighborhoods, and man, you can't believe what you see. Damaged homes, businesses closed, areas that look like war zones, filled with rubble," said David West, a third-year forward who was a resident while spending his first two seasons with the Hornets.

"It was great to give the people a good show. Something to get their minds off what's going on is important. There are still people living in trailers or [they're] homeless. This was something where they could remember what once was, what can be."

In its present state, New Orleans is conflicted and battered, trying to put its best foot forward despite the fact the entire world can see its pain. No amount of makeup can fix that, but that's what the city is doing -- slapping on some lipstick and attempting to carry on.

"You best believe the city of New Orleans is going to bounce back," said recently acquired forward Linton Johnson III, who went to school at Tulane and knows the city better than anyone on the team. "The most important thing we have to do is keep winning, because no one wants a losing franchise, whether you're here, in Oklahoma City or Egypt.

"We just have to put out a product people want to support. That's our focus, making the playoffs and continuing to improve."

Fans are forced to watch the Hornets from afar these days, so the team's three March visits were a welcome treat to loyal supporters. If you didn't know it, you would never guess the strife that cloaks the area. The New Orleans Arena was in excellent shape only months after flooding caused extensive damage to several parts of the building.

A month ago, team officials came down and realized there was extensive work to be done, but everyone involved with the restoration process pulled through in a remarkable effort that exemplifies the rebuilding job of the entire city.

"We had to reach out for employees that had been here in the past," said Bill Curl, spokesman for the New Orleans Arena. "To be honest, it was a scramble. But it's something to see people coming into a basketball game and hug each other. In essence, it was a reunion.

"I think everyone put their heart and soul into it. It shows you what the people down here are like. Everyone is happy that people are having fun and being distracted. To see large crowds under these circumstances is remarkable. It sends a great message to the country that New Orleans is coming back."

The arena was closed from Aug. 29 until it reopened earlier this month. Roof and other structural damage occurred, while power was lost for more than 30 days. The basketball court the Hornets once played on was destroyed. The total cost of repairs fell just short of \$10 million, and it was well worth it when you realize what it means in terms of the city's rebuilding process.

"They just needed a little fix," said Gerry Vaillancourt, radio analyst for the Hornets and a popular sports talk host in New Orleans. "I can appreciate what this city has gone through. I'm still floating on air after the incident.

"I had to evacuate and be away for 22 days. You feel the spirit when you're here though. All these people are trying to get their lives back together, and they come out and see a little hoops, something they once had on a regular basis. There's the old cliché that people say, 'it's just sports,' but obviously you can see it's more than that. This is a part of them. It restores a little bit of normalcy."

That's exactly what the three games played in New Orleans were able to provide. A sense of comfort. People doing the twist in the stands. Clapping. High-fives. Watching the Honeybees dance team strut their stuff. It was like any normal NBA game, with the emphasis being normal. Owner George Shinn must look after his financial interests -- that's understandable -- but he needs to take into account how much his team means to the city.

"We need at some point to put the storm behind us. We need them to be back," said Shaun Boyd, a loyal supporter of the team. "Three games now is fine, but ultimately, they need to be back. Win, lose or draw, I've been here. We're here at every game and we really miss this team.

"A lot of people relocated, but a lot of people have come back, and this is our team. The city has never won a championship, and we're hoping that this is the team that's going to put us back on track."

From a financial aspect, the team generates those opportunities. Harold Peaden, owner of Southern Sweet Potato Pie Company, was on hand selling his wares, pecan pies and sweet potato pies, from a stand at the arena. His family had six homes wiped out by the storm.

Peaden and numerous people CBS SportsLine talked to were ecstatic at having the team in town, yet realistic about the predicament. It's clear the Hornets can't return next season, and are probably two years, at the earliest, away from being able to return full-time.

"There's a reasonable balance that needs to be maintained and it's important that the franchise remains healthy," Curl said. "To be understanding of their situation, they have to maintain a solid stream of revenue. Would we like them here the whole season? Sure, but reality has to set in. Right now, we're not there yet."

The Hornets will play six games in New Orleans next season, and then the possibility will be explored to return to its usual 41-game home schedule in 2007-08. If that comes to fruition, the All-Star Game would likely follow suit that year, officially restoring the city's stance as an NBA city.

As for right now, the Hornets' cameo was simply a reminder of what all of New Orleans is striving for: getting back to where the city was, pre-Katrina.

"New Orleans is a long ways away from being able to support this team," said Davis Robertson, a New Orleans mailman and avid Hornets supporter. "I went around and picked up some of the mailboxes that were destroyed and there still is an awful lot of damage.

"However, I really think in a few years' time, a lot of people would do what they could. They would really try to come out and support them because we do need them, and we do know that if we lose them, there would be almost no chance of getting another team here."

New Orleans residents have already lost so much that Shinn and the NBA need to ensure their basketball team isn't another casualty.

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Berry Tramel
The Oklahoman

Handshake Marks Deal for Hornets

Shinn may sell a portion to city investors.

Hornets owner George Shinn has a "handshake" agreement to sell up to 49 percent of his franchise to a group of Oklahoma City investors led by Clay Bennett.

Such a partnership does not guarantee the Hornets' long-term future in Oklahoma City. But investors could be key in whether the Hornets return to New Orleans after the 2006-07 season.

The sale would be pending NBA approval, but Shinn said he anticipated no hangups, since Bennett is a former member of the San Antonio Spurs Board of Directors and has been hailed by NBA Commissioner David Stern for his work both there and with helping the Hornets succeed in Oklahoma City.

All parties said no contingency plans have been settled upon should the Hornets return to New Orleans, but "the intention of our group is to own a team in Oklahoma City," Bennett said. "The interest is to help keep a team here and help make it successful in the long term."

Shinn said he expects to sell percentage units for \$2 million each, so 49 percent would cost \$98 million.

Shinn has sought partners to pay off the debt he incurred since buying out partner Ray Wooldridge's 35 percent interest a year ago. Shinn said he needs to sell at least 35 percent of the Hornets but does not plan to sell more than 49 percent so that he would retain controlling interest.

Shinn had begun seeking investors in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina flooded the city in August; he renewed his efforts in Oklahoma City.

"I'd love to have somebody like that as a partner," Shinn said of Bennett. "He's a can-do guy, a brilliant businessman and a good human being -- a perfect candidate, in my estimation, as a valuable investor."

Bennett, president of Dorchester Capital in Oklahoma City, has about 10 investors in his "broad-based" group, including G. Jeffrey Records Jr. of Mid-First Bank and Aubrey McClendon and Tom Ward, co-founders of Chesapeake Energy Corp. Those four make up Oklahoma Professional Sports, LLC., the organization that partnered with the city and state in providing revenue guarantees

for the Hornets this season.

"There's a lot of work to be done," Bennett said of the agreement. "But there's a handshake agreement relative to the principle elements of the deal ... sooner rather than later is my preference to complete the transaction."

Both Stern and Shinn say the franchise will return to New Orleans for the 2007-08 season, if that city has recovered enough.

The Hornets have thrived in Oklahoma City, playing to 20 sellout crowds at the Ford Center. Shinn has said his per-game revenues here are about \$800,000 per game, compared to \$360,000 in New Orleans.

"I appreciate the positive and productive tenor of our discussions and have enjoyed working with George," Bennett said.

"The city's response to the NBA has been nothing short of extraordinary and it would be the commitment of this new ownership group to sustain this success and create a model franchise in the league."

Next season, the Hornets are scheduled to play 35 home games in Oklahoma City and six at the New Orleans Arena, where they have played three games this month.

Stern has said Oklahoma City now is at the top of the NBA's list for relocation or expansion franchises. The league has no expansion plans at this time, but the Seattle Supersonics, Portland TrailBlazers and Orlando Magic all have arena issues that have led to speculation about moving.

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The Oklahoman

3.31.20006

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Go ahead and renew, the Hornets are staying

By Berry Tramel

The Oklahoman

Arms folded, face stern, Mike Mullen sat a few rows up from the Ford Center floor the other night and dramatically declined to renew his Hornets season tickets.

Mullen was not displeased with the entertainment value of pro basketball, or the Hornets' nose dive since the All-Star break, or even the hefty financial toll required of an NBA patron.

Mullen was protecting his heart. He, like many an Oklahoma City fan, wasn't willing to give the Hornets another year of his passion when he believes they are headed back to New Orleans in 2007.

"I don't want to get attached to the Hornets, because I don't think they're going to be here," Mullen said.

That's a common belief in OKC, thanks to all the rhetoric from David Stern and George Shinn about plans to return to New Orleans.

But it's misguided. The Hornets are not going back to New Orleans.

Do whatever you want, Hornets fans. Boycott next season or buy their tickets. It's your money.

Just know this. The Hornets are not going anywhere. They are in Oklahoma City to stay.

The New Orleans talk is all posture. All politics. You can't get Shinn to admit it, but the Hornets are mapping an exit strategy and planning to make OKC their permanent home.

No other conclusion is possible when you do what you should always do when considering big, big business, which the NBA is.

Follow the money.

This Hornets story has not been a crusade of candor. Sometimes, it seems the only people telling the truth are me and Byron Scott.

But there is no doubt that Stern, the NBA commissioner, and Shinn, the Hornets owner, merely are cushioning New Orleans' fall. Gently bidding farewell. Saying all the right things, doing all the right things, while at all times knowing no way will the Hornets return to the city that was their home for three years.

Are Stern and Shinn lying to the good folks of Louisiana? Technically, no. The Hornets will give New Orleans the opportunity to reclaim the franchise.

"I believe they're going to give us a fair shot," Shinn's New Orleans attorney, Bill Hines, told the New Orleans Times-Picayune.

That will happen. Shinn will give New Orleans every chance to meet his needs. And New Orleans will fail. The city, still devastated from Katrina, is in no position to compete for the Hornets.

An NBA franchise is not a hobby, at least not for Shinn. It's a business that requires big revenues. Shinn won't, and frankly can't, return the Hornets as a goodwill gesture. Bankruptcy does no one any good.

New Orleans will face relocation scrutiny the way a new market would, maybe more scrutiny than New Orleans faced when he moved the Hornets from Charlotte. And New Orleans has no past success to fall back on; New Orleans was not cutting it as an NBA city even before the hurricane.

Here is what Shinn has in Oklahoma City and will require from New Orleans: •

? 1. Investors. Shinn has a deal on the table from an Oklahoma City group willing to buy just as much of the team as Shinn is willing to sell. Hines says a Louisiana group is interested in investing, though no names have been produced.

Will the Louisianans truly produce? This we know. Clay Bennett's group stands ready with a cashier's check that Shinn knows will not bounce.

? 2. Sponsors. Shinn had five major corporate sponsors, each in for \$1.5 million, within a couple of weeks of relocating to Oklahoma City. Shinn had only one such sponsor in New Orleans and can't be sure he'll get even that upon return.

Little Oklahoma City zoomed into the upper half of NBA corporate support. Those five major

sponsors, of which The Oklahoman is one, tell Shinn as much as the packed house at the Ford Center that this is the place for his team.

? 3. Season tickets. Oklahomans bought more than 10,500 season tickets in the six weeks from relocation to opening night, and Shinn knows that when he announces the Hornets are here to stay, that number will escalate.

Shinn has no idea what he'll get in New Orleans, but he knows it's far south of 10,500. The Hornets were next-to-last and last in league attendance the previous two years, before the troubles hit. If Shinn is smart, he will require a ticket commitment from New Orleans, and no way the city can provide that.

All of which brings us to the lease at the New Orleans Arena, which requires the Hornets' return. That same lease also agrees to provide a new practice facility and headquarters for the Hornets.

Think about that argument some New Orleans politician will have to make. A city that a couple of weeks ago had two hospitals and four schools up and running, a city with square mile after square mile of devastation and desertion, a city that seven months after Katrina hasn't even started some cleanup, much less the rebuilding, wants to spend \$20 million on a practice facility for a basketball team that relatively few were excited about to begin with?

As an NBA official told me three weeks ago before the Hornet-Laker game in New Orleans, "If they're not ready to have us back, they're not going to want us to come back."

This is meant as no disrespect for New Orleans, which was dealt a cruel blow. It would be a grand story if the Hornets returned to help buoy the spirits of the rebuilders.

Except if the Hornets return, they will be sucked into the abyss. They will wither and falter and threaten the financial viability of Shinn, who does not have the bottomless pockets of some NBA owners.

David Stern himself said he had no desire to give New Orleans a trial run. If the Hornets are to return, he said, it's because the franchise can prosper there. "The prospect of having a team come back and then moving again is not a good prospect," Stern said.

So back to that great seat at the Ford Center, which Mike Mullin is ready to give up.

Bail on the Hornets if you want. Bail on them because you've tried the pro game and it's not to your liking. Bail on them because they've tanked in this pennant race. Bail on them because they trotted out Linton Johnson in the starting lineup Wednesday night.

But don't bail on them because you think they're leaving. They are going nowhere.

In September, I told you, Oklahoma City, this NBA experiment was up to you. Support this team, and the Hornets would not leave.

You did, and they are not.

Article 80
The Oklahoman
3.31.2006

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National opinions vary on team future

By Andrew Gilman
The Oklahoman

Skip Bayless grew up in Oklahoma City. He knows what football means in this state.

But tonight, in the midst of spring football practices at Oklahoma and Oklahoma State, pro basketball goes nationwide thanks to Bayless' buddies at ESPN.

"I've always said that Oklahoma is also a good basketball state, beside being crazy about football," said Bayless a Northwest Classen High School graduate who now is a co-host on ESPN2's morning talk show Cold Pizza.

The question of whether Oklahoma will remain a pro basketball state, and whether the Hornets will stay in Oklahoma City, is almost certain to be discussed tonight during ESPN's 7 p.m. broadcast of the Hornets-Memphis game from the Ford Center. It marks the first and only national broadcast this season of a Hornets' game in Oklahoma City.

NBA commissioner David Stern and Hornets owner George Shinn have repeatedly talked of plans for the Hornets to return to New Orleans after playing 35 games here next season. But Stern said that the ultimate decision-makers will be NBA owners.

Still, opinion-makers at ESPN are using their platform as the self-proclaimed Worldwide Leader in Sports to shape viewpoints on the subject. What do they think will and should happen with Hornets?

From a helping of Cold Pizza to ESPN the Magazine, their opinions on Oklahoma City are glowing, but their feelings about where the Hornets should end up are quite different.

"I would be shocked if it (the franchise) doesn't stay in Oklahoma City," said Ric Bucher, who covers the NBA for ESPN the Magazine. "It would be a mistake if it doesn't stay in Oklahoma City. New Orleans, with all the problems that they have, getting back their basketball team should not be one of the first 100 priorities."

Bucher points out the Hornets weren't a popular draw even when they were winning in New Orleans, even failing to sellout its home playoff games in 2003 and 2004 and ranking last in the league in attendance last season.

But like a quarterback who is injured, should New Orleans lose its spot in the starting lineup just because the city is out with an injury?

No, says Stephen A. Smith, host of ESPN's Quite Frankly which has become a forum for the brash, sharp-dressed Smith to speak his East Coast accent loudly and with a preacher's conviction.

"Because of the catastrophe, they (the NBA) don't want to be associated with abandoning of that territory," Smith said of the damage of Hurricane Katrina. "I think they will give New Orleans an opportunity."

That opportunity may fall under the guise of the 2008 All-Star game which is scheduled to be in New Orleans. Or that opportunity could be the six games at New Orleans Arena scheduled for next season.

Positive crowds at those events could be the barometer the NBA and commissioner David Stern use to determine the long-term viability of New Orleans.

But for now, no one, not owner George Shinn, not Stern, has said anything about the definite future of the Hornets, despite the Hornets ranking in the league's upper half in attendance (18,060 fans per game, No. 11 in the NBA) while playing home games in Baton Rouge, La., New Orleans, Norman as well as the Ford Center. Those numbers alone have swayed a few opinions.

"If it were me, you'd have to really make a compelling argument for me to take them out of Oklahoma after what you're seeing now," said David Aldridge, a former ESPN NBA analyst, who now does the same for TNT.

"I guess you could take this out two or three years and see if they're still drawing and maybe you could make a better conclusion. Certainly, based on this season. For them to support that team from day one, when they didn't know it was going to be a better team, I think they got a great shot."

Still, negotiating the fine line between being a gracious interim host and coveting an NBA team is something Oklahoma City officials like mayor Mick Cornett are still concerned about. The priority, according to Cornett and others is not to steal away an NBA team, it's to steer the issue toward the recovery of New Orleans.

ESPN.com's Marc Stein, said it should remain that way, and the other side of that truism is while the Big Easy gets well, the Hornets will remain in Oklahoma City.

"I can't say it better than (Hornet forward) PJ Brown said it when I was in New Orleans for that Hornets-Lakers game," Stein said. "Housing, jobs, hospitals, school, roads . . . there are zillions of issues to resolve in New Orleans before they can even start thinking about NBA basketball. Common sense says there's little chance the city will be far enough along in its recovery to be ready for Hornets training camp in October 2007. So the expectation around the league is that the Hornets will stay in OKC. But we'll just have to see."

But if New Orleans does recover sufficiently, Stein agreed with Smith - no way should the city be penalized because of a storm.

"If New Orleans can re-establish some semblance of normalcy and financial viability - and more importantly, if New Orleans wants the Hornets back - there's no question they should have that opportunity," Stein said.

"Doesn't matter how well the Hornets are supported in Oklahoma City. Doesn't matter how they were supported in New Orleans before Hurricane Katrina. No city deserves to have a team taken away because of a natural disaster."

But should Oklahoma City lose out, too? That's a question that will be sure to come up during the broadcast tonight. That, the Hurricane, the improved play of a team that won only 18 games a season ago and the team's uncertain future.

"I definitely think that Oklahoma City has earned the right to keep the Hornets long term," said Bayless. "If you talk to anyone who's been to a game there, including Kobe (Bryant), they'll tell you it's the loudest arena in the league."

Article 81**Fox Sports**

4.13.2006

<http://msn.foxsports.com/nba/story/5503030>[Top](#)[Back](#)[Next](#)**NBA commish Stern rips on Seattle officials**

NEW YORK (AP) - David Stern gave another warning that the SuperSonics could eventually leave Seattle, saying Thursday that the city is, "not interested in having the NBA there."

The NBA commissioner also touched on the situations regarding the Trail Blazers and Hornets during a conference call, but his strongest words were saved for the Sonics' future in Seattle.

NBA commissioner David Stern had harsh words regarding the Sonics' future in Seattle. (Ethan Miller / Getty Images)

Stern has said the Sonics' lease with the city is the worst in the NBA, and he went to Seattle in February to ask Washington state lawmakers for tax money to renovate Key Arena.

Sonics owner Howard Schultz, the chairman of Starbucks Corp., has threatened to move or sell the team if state lawmakers don't approve a sales-tax package to pay for a new or renovated arena. But state lawmakers last month said there would be no deal this year.

"I would say that the city is making it pretty clear of what they want us to do, and we'll accommodate them," Stern said.

Asked what that meant, Stern responded: "What I mean is they're not interested in having the NBA there. We understand that, we understand that there are competing issues, and the mayor is free to make whatever decisions he needs to make and I support that.

"But that's a pretty strong signal and I think that the existing ownership has said they don't want to own a team that's not in Seattle, so I know what they're in the process of doing. So we'll just see how this play ends."

Marianne Bichsel, spokeswoman for Mayor Greg Nickels, said the city wants the Sonics to remain in Seattle.

"The mayor has made it perfectly clear in several interviews given, the Sonics have been in Seattle for 40-plus years, and we would like them around another 40-plus years and we'd like them at Key Arena," she said. "We're in discussions with the Sonics a lot about the situation, but we have a lease through 2010 and we fully expect that the lease will be honored."

But once the lease expires in 2010, it doesn't sound as if the league would stand in the way if ownership wants to move the franchise.

"It's not a very good lease, to say the least it's the worst in the league," Stern said. "The city says they're not prepared to do anything to improve it. I don't think this is a difficult choice."

Also, Stern said he would "never say never" to getting involved again in the situation in Portland. The NBA recently pulled out of the process of trying to help find one buyer for both the Trail Blazers

and the Rose Garden because it was frustrated by Portland Asset Management, the lenders who now own the arena.

And he repeated that the Hornets will return to New Orleans, even if investors from Oklahoma buy a minority share of the team from George Shinn, saying that he didn't even know how the Hornets would get out of their lease with the city.

"I have no idea," he said, "because we're not planning to break it."

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Washington Post

4/15/2006

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/04/14/AR2006041401719.html?nav=rss_sports

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Notebook

Hornets Dress Up for Oklahoma City

Saturday, April 15, 2006; Page E10

The New Orleans Hornets wore jerseys with Oklahoma City on the front for their regular season home finale there last night.

As a middle ground between the team's temporary home and its permanent one, players had been wearing home jerseys with Hornets on the chest and a small OKC patch on the shoulder.

"I think it's just a way of showing Oklahoma City how much we appreciate them for all they've done for us this season," Coach Byron Scott said.

A small NOLA patch to recognize New Orleans was sewn on the right shoulder in place of the OKC one.

Michael Thompson , the Hornets' director of corporate communications, said the team had been planning the gesture since the start of the season.

The Hornets will play 35 games in Oklahoma City next season and six in New Orleans. The team moved temporarily to Oklahoma City after Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans in August.

Owner George Shinn , who repeatedly has said that the team will remain in New Orleans, addressed the crowd before the game and a video montage was shown on the center court scoreboard to thank the fans.



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Seattle Post-Intelligencer

4/20/2006

http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/basketball/2030AP_BKN_Hornets_Wrapup.html

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Hornets improved, but wanted more

By Murray Evans
Associated Press Writer

OKLAHOMA CITY -- The Hornets had little time to plan and prepare when they suddenly took up temporary residence in Oklahoma City after Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans.

Despite the whirlwind move and the subsequent uncertainty surrounding the franchise's future, the Hornets quickly took a liking to their new home. They became one of the NBA's pleasant surprises, finishing with 20 more wins than last season - the best improvement in the league - and remained in playoff contention until the final week of the season.

But the Hornets, who finished 38-44, will spend awhile thinking about what might have been. In sixth place in the NBA's Western Conference at the All-Star break, they lost 21 of their last 30 games, including eight straight during one stretch.

Early in the season, "we competed at a big-time high level," coach Byron Scott said Thursday. "We didn't let anybody outwork us. Some things just caught up to us. Mentally and physically we got fatigued. We had to pick up the level of our intensity and we couldn't pick it up."

Scott said that was because of the team's lack of experience. However, that the Hornets even were in position to be talking postseason was a victory in itself, general manager Jeff Bower said.

"You've got to understand what happened here," Bower said. "We started the season and totally changed the expectation levels, to the point where you could even ask the question if missing out on the playoffs stinks.

"To me that's the ultimate compliment or success, to come from 18 wins to totally change the expectations of everybody watching the team, to get to a point where playoffs are expected, almost. It's a hard, hard journey that rarely gets accomplished in one year."

Several Hornets likely will contend for individual awards. Point guard Chris Paul averaged 16.1 points, 7.8 assists and 5.1 rebounds per game and appears to be the leading candidate for rookie of the year. Forward David West, who had three game-winning shots, is a candidate for the league's most improved player and guard Speedy Claxton might have a shot at the sixth man award.

Scott appeared on some midseason lists as a coach of the year candidate but his name received fewer mentions as the team faltered late in the season.

"I'm proud of what we were able to accomplish as a team," West said. "We were able to scrap it out and improve on what we did last year, coming back and making a statement. I think because of the way we played as a unit, a lot of guys are getting some individual attention and that's good for us as a whole."

Oklahoma City never before had a major-league franchise and fans strongly supported the team. The Hornets sold out 18 of their 36 games at the Ford Center, where they had an average attendance of 18,717.

Adding in the five games they played in Baton Rouge, La., New Orleans and Norman, Okla., the Hornets' average attendance of 18,168 ranked 11th in the league. Last season, the Hornets ranked last in attendance with an average of 14,221.

"The fans in Oklahoma were good to us," West said. "They took care of us. They made us feel like

this is a place that we'd like to be. A lot of guys fell in love with this place in terms of the atmosphere and the environment that goes on in the arena."

The Hornets have said they will play 35 of their 41 home games next season in Oklahoma City and six games in New Orleans. After that, the franchise's future is uncertain. NBA Commissioner David Stern has said the league plans to return the Hornets to New Orleans and frequently has cited a lease with the New Orleans Arena that requires the team to return.

Team owner George Shinn has offered support for that official position, but not as definitively as Stern.

"The people in Oklahoma City ... have stepped up and proved to the whole world that they are a major-league city," Shinn said. "We are very blessed to be here, very fortunate to be here. We're looking forward to next year with a lot of enthusiasm and a lot of excitement."

Shinn said a major question is how long it will take to rebuild New Orleans.

"We're pulling for New Orleans, but we have a business to run, obviously, and we want to try to make the best decision we can," he said. "We have a lease and we plan to honor that lease, and so we'll just take a day at a time and do what's best for the NBA, for our community and for the Hornets."

Scott said the team's offseason priorities included resigning Claxton, adding two strong shooters and obtaining a "big-time nasty-type guy" who could give the Hornets a physical inside presence, especially on defense.

The Hornets have room under the salary cap and two first-round draft picks to help address those needs.

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Houston Chronicle

4/22/2006

<http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/sports/bk/bkn/3811764.html>

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Hornets hope to build on success

First year in Oklahoma City was positive for team

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY - Driving to the airport, Hornets president Paul Mott could only hope that Hurricane Katrina wouldn't hit New Orleans. Then came the sobering reality that a storm that large had to strike somewhere.

When it did, and subsequent floods forced the Hornets out of the New Orleans Arena, Mott was at a loss. Only four months into the new job, Mott and his colleagues had to figure out what to do with an NBA team that was suddenly homeless.

"We did not know what to do," Mott said. "These players' contracts are guaranteed. There's an NBA schedule that's set. We've got to play. And near as I can tell, I might have no ticket revenue and no sponsor revenue. And then it took me five days to find and make sure that every employee was alive."

The eventual solution was a temporary landing in Oklahoma City, where they were able to double their win total and move from last in the league in attendance to selling out half of their home games.

"It's one of those things that I think it's impossible to put into words," Mott said.

Time to prepare

Heading into their second season in Oklahoma City, the Hornets will have months instead of weeks to prepare. That has Mott thinking even bigger.

He wants to retool the team's radio arrangement so more people can listen to the broadcasts, and he's looking for ways to build on the team's Ford Center attendance average of 18,717.

"I'd like to sell the building out every game," Mott said.

Mayor Mick Cornett, who led the effort to bring the Hornets to Oklahoma City, also sees bigger things — in part because of the presence of rookie of the year contender Chris Paul.

"When you have the rookie of the year on your team, a lot of people want to see him," said Cornett, a former sportscaster. "We will get a lot of national TV coverage next year that we didn't get this year."

Cornett plans to meet with Hornets officials in the coming weeks to find out what can be done to make next season even better. The Hornets have said they'll play 35 games in Oklahoma City next season but the team's arena lease in New Orleans requires a return to the city in 2007-08. They'll also play six games next season in New Orleans, where two of their three games sold out this year.

Cornett said he would see if the Hornets recommend any improvements to the 19,163-seat Ford Center and consider whether they make financial sense. Michael Thompson, the Hornets' director of corporate communications, said the team may suggest a few minor adjustments aimed at fans' experiences.

"If you don't continually update your arenas, they get out of date pretty quickly and then you have to replace them," Cornett said.

Although final numbers are not yet in, Cornett believes the Hornets exceeded revenue benchmarks that would have required Oklahoma City to pay for part of the shortcoming.

In fact, Cornett believes there may be money to spare even after the city recovers its costs for helping the team relocate.

It was a year ago this week that Cornett visited NBA commissioner David Stern at his New York office and talked about Oklahoma City's prospects for a major-league franchise. Stern recommended he pursue an NHL team.

After Katrina hit, Stern called Hornets owner George Shinn to recommend Oklahoma City as a temporary location.

"I was probably the most optimistic person in town, but I think it exceeded even my expectations," Cornett said.

Research planned

Mott said his staff will research why the team was successful this year. After moving to Oklahoma so late, that's something the Hornets simply haven't had time to do.

Shinn also suggested he might be willing to increase the team's payroll in an attempt to improve the team on the court too.

"I'm not going to be crazy about it but our goal is to get better," Shinn said.

In their second year in New Orleans, the Hornets' average attendance dropped by about 1,300 to 14,332 despite the team making the playoffs for the fifth straight season. The Hornets drew about the same number last season, when they went 18-64.

Mott doesn't expect a similar drop-off in Oklahoma City.

"We have already collected deposits for a tremendous number of new full-season tickets and our renewals have gone very successful. So this talk of a second-year kind of sophomore slump? Not there," Mott said.

"I think people believe in the Hornets, they're excited about the Hornets and they want to be part of it for next year and see what this team will be like next year."

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2TheAdvocate

4/23/2006

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Cloud of uncertainty surrounds Hornets

By Les East

Special to The Advocate

Published: Apr 23, 2006

NEW ORLEANS — The New Orleans/Oklahoma City Hornets finished their season with a loss to the Los Angeles Lakers on Wednesday.

A day later, as the players prepared to scatter to their off-season homes, the talk centered on basketball — the dramatic improvement (20 more victories than a year ago), the impressive debut of soon-to-be-rookie-of-the-year Chris Paul, the disappointing finish (losses in their last four games and six of their final seven when a playoff berth was still attainable), and how to use the off-season to improve on a 38-44 record.

But whatever the Hornets do in regards to basketball in the off-season, it will continue to be surrounded by a cloud of uncertainty about where the franchise will ultimately operate.

The awkward New Orleans/Oklahoma City prefix will continue next season as the organization operates again out of Oklahoma City and plays 35 games there and returns to the Crescent City for six games.

NBA Commissioner David Stern has stated unequivocally the franchise will return to New Orleans on a full-time basis for the 2007-08 season, if for no other reason than the league won't break a

lease that doesn't expire until 2012.

In fact, the NBA is on the verge of announcing that the 2008 All-Star Game will be played in New Orleans as a boost to the city's recovery and return to the league as a full-time member.

That would seem to remove the uncertainty, but Hornets owner George Shinn has routinely equivocated when asked about the franchise's long-term future.

His answer always includes the word "plan" — the Hornets "plan to return" when they are legally obligated.

While he was in the Crescent City for the team's three-game, cameo appearance at the New Orleans Arena in March, Shinn was asked about his wording. Many people, he was told, hear the word "plan" and believe he is using it to leave wiggle room to change his plan.

Shinn responded he has to keep his options open in case another natural disaster befalls New Orleans. Well, that's understood. If circumstances make playing in New Orleans untenable, certainly he would be allowed to stay in Oklahoma City. How does he think he got there in the first place?

The point is: If the NBA Commissioner can say flat out that the league honors its leases, period, why can't the Hornets' owner say the same thing about his lease?

Shinn addressed the return to New Orleans with media in Oklahoma City again this week. He said the Hornets are "pulling for New Orleans." Well, New Orleans must be grateful that he isn't pulling against it.

But Shinn has made it clear that he's rooting for Oklahoma City in its quest to become a permanent NBA city. The city's support of the Hornets was impressive and enthusiastic, as attendance shot up 28 percent from last year's total in New Orleans. Of course, the team's victory total shot up more than 100 percent.

Oklahoma City would love to have an NBA franchise and the Hornets are the bird in the hand. Shinn has talked with potential minority owners in both New Orleans and Oklahoma City. As long as the franchise has one foot in each market, a tug-of-war is bound to continue.

When New Orleans and Louisiana lured the Hornets away from Charlotte in 2002, part of the deal was that the city would contribute \$6.5 million toward building a new practice facility in New Orleans East. The facility was to be built on city property.

The Hornets later decided they would rather have the facility built next to the Arena, downtown on state-owned property.

The property they want to use has great market value to the state and it was used, pre-Katrina, as a revenue generator for parking fees for Superdome and Arena events, according to Larry Roedel, counsel for the Louisiana Stadium and Exposition District, which oversees the Arena and the Superdome for the state.

The training facility issue isn't as urgent as others facing the LSED because the team's original training facility — the Alario Center in Westwego — is more than adequate.

Roedel stressed the Hornets have not used the training facility as a potential lease-breaking issue and said he doesn't believe the lack of such a facility would break the lease.

But the integrity of the lease appears to be the main thing tying the Hornets to New Orleans, and it's a long way until the start of the 2007-08 season. We haven't heard the last of the training facility, or the lease.

In the meantime you'll hear about the Hornets' basketball plans — they have money to spend under the salary cap and they own two No. 1 draft picks, their own, which will be part of the NBA draft lottery, and Milwaukee's.

Those stories will come and go, but one that will linger is the ongoing custody battle between New Orleans and Oklahoma City. Discernible progress in the region's recovery from Katrina and significant long-term commitments to buy suites and season tickets would strengthen the Crescent City's hand.

But it was just four years ago Shinn bolted Charlotte for the greener pastures of New Orleans.

In his talk this week, Shinn continued to stress that he has "a business to run," a business, it should be noted, that has been propped up for the last four years by sweetheart deals with the state of Louisiana, and now with Oklahoma.

After tossing out one more "we plan to honor that lease", he said this: "we'll just take it one day at a time and do what's best for the NBA, our community, and the Hornets."

The question remains: To which community was he referring?

Here, this 1st Season anthology appropriately ends, and both OKC and Nawlins fans wait to find out, "*To which community was he referring?*" While much off-season activity will occur with respect to acquiring other Hornets players and probably other matters, all that discussion is for another day. I hope that you have enjoyed this read of the Hornets as relates to Oklahoma City in 2005-2006!

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