
October 26, 2010

LeBron James Stimulates Miami Economy Along With Fans as Heat Starts Play

By Mason Levinson and Simone Baribeau

[LeBron James](#) will be helping more than South Beach when he plays his first game for the Miami Heat tonight.

James, the National Basketball Association's reigning two-time Most Valuable Player, said he was "taking my talents to South Beach" -- a glitzy strip of nightclubs, hotels and restaurants -- when the 25-year-old announced in July that he was leaving the Cleveland Cavaliers and joining the Heat to play with fellow All-Star free agents [Dwyane Wade](#), 28, and [Chris Bosh](#), 26.

In addition to making the Heat the favorite to win the NBA title, the trio already has spurred a rebirth across the bay in the downtown area outside AmericanAirlines Arena.

"We're well aware that the eyes of the world will be on Miami, and we wanted to put our best foot forward," said [Marc Sarnoff](#), chairman of the [Miami Downtown Development Authority](#) and a city commissioner. Heat owner "[Mickey Arison](#) probably gave us a better stimulus package than 10 Barack Obamas combined."

Workers donated from the city, state, Dade County and some private industries are sprucing up Biscayne Boulevard, the main drag in front of the arena. That includes painting, landscaping, replacing broken sidewalks and improving lighting. Expressway ramps to the area also are being refurbished.

Police Presence

Extra police are being considered for game nights, as well as an extension of the city's no pan-handling zone to include the arena area.

"Everything that could have been done within the timeframe before the Heat opening night has pretty much been done," said Sarnoff.

James may create as much as \$21 million in new economic activity to Miami, less than 1 percent of the city's overall tourism revenue, said [Chris Lafakis](#), an economist at [Moody's Economy.com](#).

"There's absolutely going to be more people coming from out of town," he said in a telephone interview. "But given the size of Miami's economy, it's not going to be a noticeable boost."

Miami, which went 47-35 last season, is a 17-10 favorite to win its first NBA title since 2006, according to gambling website Bodog.com. The Los Angeles Lakers are second favorites at 5-2, meaning a successful \$2 bet on the Lakers to defend their NBA title would pay \$5 plus the original wager. The Heat open in Boston against the Celtics and play their first home game Oct. 29 versus the Orlando Magic.

Late Arrivals

When that game gets under way, Heat officials want to be sure fans are in their seats, breaking a trend of late arrivals that was a hallmark of past games there.

"Most people don't show up until the middle of the first quarter," Julio Rojas Sarmiento, a 23-year-old fan who grew up in Miami, said in an e-mail. "It won't be a problem anymore though."

Bloomberg

October 26, 2010

Heat officials aren't taking chances. They've created a program called "Fan Up, Miami!," urging ticket holders to show up before tip-off by giving early arrivers discount cards for concessions and merchandise.

A difference from past seasons has already been felt inside the arena, according to Hall of Famer [Kevin McHale](#), who covered a preseason game as an analyst for Turner Inc.'s TNT.

"There was an atmosphere in the exhibition game that surprised me," McHale said on a conference call. "There was a vibe in that arena and they're going to have that vibe during every home game."

The Heat's All-Star infusion is also likely to benefit teams throughout the NBA.

Single-Game Sellout

"My guess is that the Heat is not going to play to too many empty seats on the road," NBA Commissioner [David Stern](#), who will be in Boston tonight, said at a news conference last week. "It's certainly not a zero-sum game. There's been an addition because many teams are selling the Heat as part of a package, part of a grouping of games."

For example, the only way for Sacramento Kings fans to buy a ticket for the Heat's Dec. 11 visit is to also purchase one for the Kings' Dec. 8 game with the Washington Wizards. Prices for the package range from \$83 to \$472.

Eighteen of the NBA's 30 franchises have sold out single- game tickets to Miami's first or only visit this season, according to [USA Today](#).

Season-Ticket Sell Out

Sales of Heat season tickets sold out the day of James's announcement as word leaked out about his intentions, though his handling of the decision process drew heavy criticism.

The Cavaliers learned of James's plans as they were televised, prompting owner [Dan Gilbert](#) to call the decision a "cowardly betrayal," by James, who is a native of Akron, Ohio, which is 40 miles from Cleveland.

A Seton Hall University Sports Poll found that 22 percent of respondents view James less favorably because of how he handled the free-agent process, with just 2 percent viewing him more favorably.

The criticism will give James an edge as he tries to claim his first championship, though injuries and other obstacles likely will keep the Heat from topping the all-time win-loss mark set by the 1995-1996 Chicago Bulls, according to former Bulls player [Steve Kerr](#). That team, led by [Michael Jordan](#) and [Scottie Pippen](#), went 72-10.

"I just don't think that's a record that's going to be touched," said Kerr, now a TNT analyst.