

## Heat fans pack house for home opener

*Wade, James, Bosh and the new season*

By Mike Clary and Sarah Talalay, Sun Sentinel

The buzz over [Miami Heat](#) basketball burst into a rim-rocking roar on Biscayne Boulevard Friday as hoop fans jammed AmericanAirlines Arena to celebrate the first home game of a star-spangled season that many believe can have only one ending: an [NBA](#) championship.

Perhaps the only thing higher than South Florida's expectations at the start of the Heat's 22nd National Basketball Association campaign was the combined on-court thrill potential of its three mega-stars, [Dwyane Wade](#), [LeBron James](#) and [Chris Bosh](#).

"They have the star power to be a great team, a dynasty," said Jose Callejas, 17, a [Hollywood](#) High School junior who described himself as a rabid fan. As for this year's NBA title? "I'm confident," said Callejas, getting a confirmative nod from his sister Gladys, 18. "They should do it."

Other longtime fans offered a more cautious appraisal. "They have the talent, but they have to prove themselves," said Gil Epstein, 61, of Plantation, who with his wife Lea has been a season ticket holder since the franchise's first season in 1988.

Two hours before the game against the [Orlando Magic](#), Los Angeles resident Rodd Rafieha, 21 and his two brothers, dressed in black -- as Heat management had urged -- gloried in the overheated atmosphere surrounding the Big Three. (For those who may have forgotten to dress in black, the Heat handed out 20,000 "I. Was. There." T-shirts). They took in the pre-game concert by Miami rapper Pitbull on the East Plaza even while looking ahead to the post-game partying they would do at Mansion on South Beach.

With airfare, tickets, hotels and sustenance, Rafieha said they would spend \$15,000 this weekend.

That's exactly the kind of economic benefit everyone from T-shirt vendors to tourism officials hope will attend the ballyhooed Heat.

**An analyst at [Moody's Economy](#) said signing James almost immediately meant a \$21 million a year boost to tourism revenues. Since then, projects that were slowed or stalled by the economic downturn have been revived, according to city officials.**

**"This is our ultimate economic stimulus package, an historic moment for the whole area," said Alyce Robertson, director of Miami's Downton Development Authority, who planned to watch the game from the year-old Botequim Carioca, a Brazilian restaurant across the street from the arena.**

Nearly lost in the commotion of the inaugural home game was a protest by Miami's police union, unhappy with recent salary and pension cuts, and alert to an opportunity to air their concerns before an audience that went well beyond the city limits.

At 6 p.m., after a brief thunderstorm, a line of police cars with sirens wailing made a loop on Biscayne

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Boulevard in front of Bayside, but did not pass by the arena or impede traffic for long.

A few scalpers did show up. Juan Christian, 37, had a pair of season tickets. But after he and his wife had a second child, he said, she urged him to cash in at least the home opener tickets. The Miamian was asking \$200 each for seats close to the floor, and about 7 p.m. he said he'd found a buyer. "He's at the ATM right now," said Christian.

Inside the arena, the concourses had a festive opening night and pre- [Halloween](#) feel. Beer vendors were dressed in costume, including as Batman and a court jester.

Along with shirt, caps and mouse pads, also on sale were Heat specialty license plates. "I always wanted to have a Heat plate," said [Tony Gonzalez](#), a season ticket holder from Kendall. "I thought I'll go ahead and take advantage here. I never go to the tag agency. I usually renew by mail."

The stands were packed just after 8 p.m. when Wade did his signature hoop-pull up and LeBron James seemed to draw out his pregame chalk ritual a bit longer to play to the full house.

Clarence Clemons performed the national anthem on saxophone. The new player introduction video, backed by [Phil Collins](#)' "In the Air Tonight," had a sexy, fashion feel to it as one by one the Heat players appeared on the jumbo screen over the court.

Wade, a team co-captain, then came to center court to thank the fans and "ask you guys to continue this atmosphere so we can have a great home court advantage."

Back in June, Daniel Sage of [Boca Raton](#) got some advice from his son.

"He said, 'if you want to make an investment, buy Heat season tickets'," said Sage who bought four 17 rows behind the Heat bench. That was before James and Bosh decided to join the Heat and Sage worried when he thought Wade might leave the Heat.

The investment paid off and Sage couldn't have been happier to be at Friday's home opener.

"At first I was going to sell them and make some money," Sage said of the opening night tickets. "But I thought how can I not be here? I could make some money or have an experience you'll remember for a lifetime."