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NBA commissioner: Miami Heat is a global sports obsession

BY DOUGLAS HANKS

NBA Commissioner David Stern placed the Miami Heat at the center of basketball's universe this season, saying the arrival of LeBron James thrusts the city into a global sports obsession.

"You're going to begin to see Chinese characters in ads in the [AmericanAirlines] Arena," Stern said during a Friday lunch sponsored by local business groups. "You're going to see the impact of globalization."

Stern's appearance in downtown Miami added to the playoff atmosphere surrounding Friday's regular-season debut of James, Dwyane Wade and Chris Bosh. With team officials warning of downtown gridlock and city leaders comparing the trio's star power to Washington's economic stimulus program, Stern described how the three players have transformed the Heat into a phenomenon.

He noted that the Heat's first regular season game in Boston this week drew the NBA's largest audience ever on cable, and that he fields questions about Miami from around the world -- including at Beijing press conferences.

While some local estimates figure the Heat will add \$20 million to the local economy this season, Stern joked he's insulted by that figure and prefers predictions of a \$1 billion boost.

"You think sometimes the whole world has lost its mind, and perhaps with the Miami Heat it has," he said during the \$75-a-plate lunch at downtown's Intercontinental hotel, an event sponsored by the Beacon Council and Miami's Downtown Development Authority.

League commissioner since 1984, Stern said the Heat stands-out as an instant sensation.

"I've been at this for 40 years, and I've never seen anything quite like it -- the 'three amigos' who decided they wanted to spend their careers in Miami," he said.

For all the hype, the Heat still had hundreds of tickets to sell for Friday's game. And while prices on scalping websites hovered around \$70 for the 400 section, they drop down to under \$20 for the Heat's second home game on Tuesday (albeit against a team many consider an NBA snoozer, the Minnesota Timberwolves).

People who scooped up season Heat tickets in July when LeBron James first defected from Cleveland to Miami now realize they can't get top dollar for seats inside the AmericanAirlines Arena, said Stub Hub communications director Glenn Lehrman.

"It's good for the fans," Lehrman said. "I think you're going to have an over-saturated market."

Even so, fans were paying big for good seats at Friday's home opener. Stubhub reported someone paid \$25,000 for a pair of courtside seats next to the Heat bench.

With James, Wade and Bosh presumed to dominate the season, expectations couldn't be higher for the Heat. Playing to the hometown crowd, Stern didn't try very hard to dampen the outlook.

"I suppose it would be premature to send the championship trophy to Miami," he said. "But I have a feeling we're going to see some pretty good basketball in Miami."