

NBA Sunday

By Michael Lee

Seattle's Sonics Go From Boom to Bust

Storied Franchise Appears To Be on the Verge of Move to Oklahoma City

By MICHAEL LEE
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Boston Celtics all-star guard Ray Allen spent more than four seasons with the Seattle SuperSonics before being traded last summer. He said he became concerned about the team's future in that city the minute Starbucks Chairman Howard Schultz sold the team for \$350 million to a group led by Oklahoma City businessman Clay Bennett in July 2006. Although Bennett said at the time that he was committed to keeping the team in Washington, Allen never believed him.

"The fate was set that moment when the team was sold," Allen said last week. "There were a lot of local buyers interested in buying the team at the time and [Schultz] went with the Oklahoma City ownership. They put down a couple of dollars and ultimately that's what sold it for him. He went for more money. Once they did that, everybody knew down the line the team would [leave]."

That Sonics' departure is closer to inevitable since NBA Commissioner David Stern and three NBA owners visited Oklahoma City last week and stated that they will recommend that it be the franchise's future home when the NBA Board of Governors vote on the proposal on April 18.

One NBA owner, speaking on condition of anonymity, said he would be "shocked" if the Sonics' relocation bid wasn't approved. "I know it will upset the people in Seattle," the owner said. "My preference is that we'd have a team there . . . but the train has left the station."

A federal lawsuit, scheduled to be heard in June, will determine whether the Sonics can break the lease at Key Arena before 2010. After bickering for several months with local government officials over a new, NBA-acceptable arena, Bennett is hoping to influence Seattle to accept a \$26.5 million buyout on the final two seasons of the lease — an offer that was earlier rejected by city officials. He even said he is willing to leave behind the team name, logo, colors and 41-year history.

Bennett's proposal and New Jersey Nets owner Lewis Katz's praise for Seattle during the visit to Oklahoma City made it seem as if Seattle could get a future expansion franchise, much like Cleveland, which was awarded an NFL team four years after the original Browns left for Baltimore in 1995. But during a conference call last Thursday, Stern said that expanding to 32 teams domestically is "not tops on our list."






A league source said this week that Stern likely won't reward Seattle with another team if the city pro-

Greener Pastures?

If NBA owners approve the Seattle SuperSonics' relocation to Oklahoma City on April 18, it will be the third franchise to move this decade. The past two relocation proposals were met with little to no opposition — the Grizzlies received unanimous approval to leave Vancouver for Memphis in 2001 and the Hornets got a 28-1 vote for a move from Charlotte to New Orleans in 2002. In both of those instances, the teams failed to make a dramatic improvement in the standings and moved to smaller markets where fans have been slow to embrace them.



BY TED S. WARREN — ASSOCIATED PRESS

	 CHARLOTTE (1997-2002)	 N. ORLEANS (2002-2007)	VANCOUVER (1995-2001)	MEMPHIS (2001-2007)
 AVERAGE ATTENDANCE	17,203	16,041	15,632	15,316
 COMBINED RECORD	216-162 (.571)	183-227 (.446)	101-359 (.220)	217-275 (.441)
 PLAYOFF APPEARANCES	4 app. 15 wins	1 app. 2 wins	0 app. 0 wins	3 app. 0 wins

ceeds with the lawsuit and attempts to force the team to stay in Seattle the next two seasons. Stern hinted that he would like to avoid a messy split.

"I want to make it clear that the Sonics' proposed move is not a question of fan support but an issue of arena capability, and the path by which we got to the place was an issue with a move, whether they proposed to move," Stern said. "But I think that our history speaks for itself, and depending upon the circumstances under which we depart cities, that has some-

thing to do with our ability and willingness and speed in returning."

Allen said he doesn't believe that the NBA is done in Seattle, the nation's 12th largest market.

"I think it'll be a blessing in disguise because ultimately, somebody is going to step up and say, we need a team back here," Allen said. "Local ownership, local government, they'll do something because over the first two years, they are going to realize the impact that the team had in their city, what they've lost."

THE DISH

After 15 Years, Webber The Warrior Calls It Quits

Chris Webber retired after 15 seasons last week because of knee soreness, putting a premature end to the Webber-Don Nelson reunion in Golden State. The conclusion was smoother than the first pairing — which resulted in Webber being dealt to the Washington Bullets in 1994 — and Nelson said afterward that they will remain lifelong friends.

Nelson added that he was sad to see Webber's comeback bid finish after just nine games. "I was hoping that he could get up and be a productive player this year, go out and maybe play another one after this," Nelson said. "But the knee won't support him."

The 6-foot-10 Webber averaged 20.7 points and 9.8 rebounds for Golden State, Washington, Sacramento and Philadelphia. Nelson was asked if he thought Webber had a Hall of Fame career. "That's not for me to determine," said Nelson, a finalist for the Hall of Fame who should be selected on April 7. "He'll go down as one of the great power forwards." . . .

Since Owner George Shinn negotiated an escape clause allowing the team to move in 2009 if it doesn't average 14,735 fans per game, the New Orleans Hornets have sold out eight of their past 13 games, and have averaged 14,361 since Dec. 1.

THE FOURCAST



ROCKETS AT SPURS
Today, 1 p.m.
WJLA-7, WMAR-2

The Rockets are 2-1 against the Spurs this season, but they have yet to score 90 points in any of those games.



WARRIORS AT MAVERICKS
Wednesday, 9:30 p.m.
ESPN

After suffering a monumental first-round upset last postseason, Dallas is 2-0 against the Warriors.



HORNETS AT MAGIC
Tuesday, 7 p.m.

Orlando is one of four teams — all in the Eastern Conference — the Hornets haven't beaten.



76ERS AT HAWKS
Friday, 7:30 p.m.

After losing in Atlanta on Feb. 4, the 76ers won 19 of their next 25 games.