

James' 'decision' offers other star players enticement to bolt

With all the attention paid LeBron James over his recent "decision" of where he was going to play next year — with the climax having been the ridiculous ESPN hourlong special on July 8 — any question of whether it would thrust open an ugly Pandora's Box for the NBA needed just a couple of weeks for a definitive answer.

Seemingly with all the key free agents entering this offseason already signed, sealed and delivered for the upcoming season, one had come to think that the next "decision," a la James', would have to wait until next offseason. Those foreseen as topping next year's free agent class are Carmelo Anthony and Tony Parker, with Anthony hedging on signing an extension with Denver in recent days and Parker already decided that he will be a free agent following next season.

A little more than two weeks after the James comedy hour, though, New Orleans point guard Chris Paul — deemed by most as one of the top five players in the league — surprisingly made it known through an unnamed source that he wants to leave New Orleans and "play with another superstar."

Then again, Paul had laid down some recent groundwork in his supposed desire to play elsewhere, having made a public statement at a charity golf tournament that he was open to being traded if the Hornets didn't exhibit a commitment to building a

championship team.

It wasn't until learning of this latest news that Hornets officials, including the recently hired tandem of head coach Monty Williams and general manager Dell Demps — both first-timers in their respective positions — arranged to meet with Paul Monday, in hopes of convincing him to back off the threat.

ON THE SUBJECT OF SPORTS



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Otherwise, Demps will have to juggle the prospect of either keeping Paul, shipping him to one of his desired landing spots, or even trading him to the team that offers the Hornets the best deal, even if it's not on Paul's "list."

At risk for the new GM — who learned of Paul's purported desire to be traded on the same day he was hired (Thursday) — is that if he chooses to keep his star guard, could that result in holding onto a malcontent that might sour the locker room for the next two years, and replicate the poor showing of last season? Or by trading him to one of the few teams on his "list," does that tamp

down demand, and therefore lessen what New Orleans gets in return? Or does he simply trade him to the highest bidder, and wash his hands of Paul?

And if Demps does work a deal with a team on the "list" — from the large picture scheme of things — does that then immensely increase the likelihood that other NBA stars with years remaining on a contract will look to force their way out of town?

The first real clue to Paul's intentions, though, was in his ditching his basketball and marketing agents earlier this month, in favor of joining LRMR Marketing, an agency founded by close friend and NBA superstar — you guessed it — LeBron James.

Barely a day passed since the news about Paul was learned, and his new agent, Leon Rose — the same agent for ... you get the idea — has begun gauging the interest of NBA teams for Paul's services via trade.

While the Hornets had an unexpectedly poor 2009-10 season, finishing in last place of their division, 18 games back and eight games below .500, it could be argued that much of that drop was because of Paul's lengthy time off the floor, as three injuries caused him to miss 37 games. In looking how good the team was two years earlier, when the Hornets finished one game short of making the Western Conference Finals, one could easily chalk up last season

as simply a one-year blip.

Even before last season's struggles, the team ended solidly at 49-33 for 2008-09, but in playing as the seventh seed in a strong Western Conference was quietly bounced in five by Houston.

The high point, though, was finishing as the conference's second seed at 56-26, to go with their strong showing in the playoffs, after which Paul agreed to a four-year extension worth \$68 million, and all seemed well then in New Orleans.

Since then, the departures of two people Paul had grown close to — through the firing of head coach Byron Scott last November and the trade of center Tyson Chandler to Charlotte last July — likely have also soured Paul on his current situation in the Big Easy.

But in seeing how the Miami Heat practically overnight went from a lesser light to a team most expect to contend for a championship next season, it seems obvious Paul wants a piece of that action.

In the weeks since Miami added James and Chris Bosh, South Beach fans are so excited months before the opening tipoff that thousands continue to sign up en masse to be added to the Heat's growing season ticket waiting list, while businesses in a flash have offered up all sorts of LeBron and Heat-themed items, with Paul seemingly wanting a little bit of that love as well.

It's not that he's thinking of

going to Miami, as there is no room for a player of Paul's salary on the Heat roster, but instead is thinking of wanting to build a new team in much the same way. And we're not talking about trying to lure talent to New Orleans, as Wade successfully did with James and Bosh, but instead where Paul has to shoot his way out of New Orleans, even with that ball-and-chain thing called a contract, with two years remaining on it.

Evidently, the Hornets' quiet offseason — having only resigned reserve center Aaron Gray — has Paul convinced the Hornets aren't pressing to win now.

It wasn't enough for us to learn that Paul wants out of New Orleans — we've heard where he wants to play next, with New York, the Los Angeles Lakers and Orlando initially reported as being on the list, only for ESPN to then add Dallas and Portland to the mix.

In knowing that the Magic have been a top Eastern Conference team the last few years, the prospect of adding Paul to a roster with Dwight Howard, Vince Carter and Rashard Lewis could have the squad competing with Boston and Miami in making a run for a title next year.

Even New York has become an enticing landing spot, with millions in untapped cap room that once was intended for LeBron's arrival. With Amar'e Stoudemire having been the Knicks' lone big

addition, adding Paul could end the days of New York being a league laughingstock — likely not enough to challenge for a title, but preferable to what Paul seems to consider a sinking ship in New Orleans.

Taking a page from James and Bosh, Paul has been purported to have voiced wanting Anthony to leave Colorado for the Big Apple to make a new superstar trio on the East Coast.

Then there's the Lakers. Who wouldn't want to play with the repeat NBA champs, with Kobe Bryant and Pau Gasol, and create a superstar trio there?

And why are we learning this all through a third party, some unnamed source? That is because if Paul made his demands known publicly, he'd be hit with a fine by the league. For a guy collecting paychecks amounting to \$17 million annually, the extent to which he's bent over to avoid a fine that would amount to tens of thousands of dollars is comical.

Maybe it's because he's under the false impression that by not making his demands publicly, somehow his image will get hammered much less as a result? He should ask LeBron how much of his image has taken a hit (outside of Florida) since his hour on ESPN — starting with the thousands of Cavalier LeBron jerseys still burning in trash cans and streets across the country.

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