



DENVER: In this Nov 10, 2016, file photo, Golden State Warriors guard Stephen Curry, center, jokes with teammates Kevin Durant, left, and Klay Thompson during the Warriors' NBA basketball game against the Nuggets in Denver. With all that was made before the season about adding Kevin Durant to an already star-studded roster, Golden State's players have jelled just fine. —AP

BASKETBALL

NBA RETURNS FOR A BREAK-NECK FINISH TO REGULAR SEASON

DENVER: LeBron James, Steph Curry and the rest of the NBA players and management have had a chance to catch their collective breath, kick their feet up for a few days and rest up after a frenetic first three-and-a-half months of the season.

The big stars had their fun in New Orleans. Those who weren't chosen for the All-Star game got away for some beach time. Coaches and executives took the time to engage in self-scouting and trade talks to figure out how they want to approach the last two months of the regular season.

When play resumes tonight, a few hours after the trade deadline expires, it will be a six-week sprint to the finish. The No. 8 seed in the Western Conference is up for grabs as well as pretty much every seed in the East. The jockeying for position could turn the final hours before the

deadline into a frenzy.

And though the league has been idle for a week, it will not look the same when the games return. DeMarcus Cousins moved from Sacramento to New Orleans in a stunning trade. Jeanie Buss and Magic Johnson cleaned house with the Los Angeles Lakers. The Houston Rockets have fortified their bench by adding Lou Williams and big-name stars like Jimmy Butler, Paul George and Derrick Rose are waiting to see if they will be on the move as well.

And let's not forget Carmelo Anthony, though the Knicks' All-Star has final say-so in a move. With all the chaos and uncertainty flying around, James said there is no reason to panic in Cleveland.

He assured Cavaliers fans before the break that the team was going to be just fine even if it wasn't able to make any

more moves, but injuries to Kevin Love and J.R. Smith have given other teams in the East confidence that the No. 1 seed can be had.

"As long as I'm in the lineup, we've got a chance," James said after it was announced that Love would miss six to eight weeks to recover from knee surgery. "We're good. Kev is out for an extended period of time. JR's been out. But I'm in the lineup, obviously we've got a chance against anybody."

Hard to argue with the logic, considering James has appeared in six straight NBA Finals. But that won't stop the Celtics, Wizards and Raptors from giving chase. Boston is in second place, just two wins behind Cleveland, the surging Wizards have rocketed up the standings and are in third and the fourth-place Raptors just acquired Serge Ibaka to bolster their defense and climb back into the hunt.

Down the ladder in the East, seventh-place Chicago, eighth-place Detroit and 11th-place Charlotte are teams to watch near the deadline. If the Bulls decide to trade Butler, a full-blown rebuild would be started in Chicago. The Pistons have floundered after a promising start to the season and could look to move struggling point guard Reggie Jackson while the Hornets could try to acquire some help for Kemba Walker to jump back into the chase.

In the West, the top of the standings look a little more stable with the Golden State Warriors the clear favorites and third-seeded Houston with five more victories than the fourth-seeded Clippers. But five teams are within three wins of eight-seeded Denver, though the Pelicans certainly pushed themselves to the forefront by landing Cousins.

Suddenly the 11th-seeded Pelicans arguably have two of the top 10 players in the league in Cousins and Anthony Davis, giving New Orleans an enormous frontcourt that should be cause for concern all the way to the Bay Area. "We can wreak havoc on this league," Cousins said. "Will it happen overnight? Probably not, but our potential is scary." — AP

WIZARDS ACQUIRE BOGDANOVIC IN TRADE WITH BROOKLYN NETS

WASHINGTON: The Washington Wizards added scoring punch to their bench on the eve of the trade deadline, acquiring swingman Bojan Bogdanovic from the Brooklyn Nets.

Washington also got forward Chris McCullough in the deal and sent a lottery-protected 2017 first-round pick, Marcus Thornton and Andrew Nicholson to Brooklyn. The Wizards announced the trade Wednesday night. Bogdanovic, 27, averaged a career-high 14.2 points a game as a starter for the struggling Nets. He will add depth to the Wizards, who are in third place in the Eastern Conference.

"Bojan is a very good shooter and a talented overall scorer whose versatility gives us an added dimension as we gear up for the stretch run," general manager Ernie Grunfeld said in a statement. "He is a proven starter that will provide us an added boost off the bench and allow us to be creative with our lineups."

With the addition of Bogdanovic, a pending restricted free agent, Washington continues its push to challenge the NBA champion Cleveland Cavaliers, Toronto Raptors and Boston Celtics in the East. The Wizards have won 18 of their past 21 games and surged up the standings after a slow start under new coach Scott Brooks.

"I like where we are as a team, but we're not satisfied," Brooks said. "We're not just going to be happy with what we've done in the first half. We want to come out and play good basketball throughout the season."

It's the second consecutive season the Wizards traded their first-round pick at the deadline after acquiring power forward Markieff Morris from the Phoenix Suns in 2016. Morris is a starter along with All-Star John Wall, Bradley Beal, Otto Porter and Marcin Gortat, while Bogdanovic is expected to be their sixth man. — AP

NBA LEGEND YAO MING NAMED CHINESE BASKETBALL CHIEF

BEIJING: NBA Hall of Famer Yao Ming called for "urgent" reform and said he was facing a multitude of problems as he was elected president of the Chinese Basketball Association (CBA) yesterday.

The giant former Houston Rockets centre, 36, arrives at the post as China searches for new superstars and more glory days for its national team, which has largely stalled since his retirement in 2011. Yao, the first league head not drawn from government ranks, has long advocated reform of how basketball is run in his country, which has failed to produce anyone close to his calibre.

"At the moment, the most urgent matter is the reform of the CBA, which we must set on a virtuous cycle that will increase our influence and vitality, and bring new ideas to the fore," he told a news conference in Beijing.

"The biggest problem is that there is no 'biggest problem'. The problems are everywhere. I believe this is a common thing to encounter in the process of reform." He did not give specifics.

Yao was quoted by Chinese media as earlier telling the CBA he would work in the spirit of an official push by Communist Party authorities to reform China's sports management, part of an effort to transform the country into a sporting superpower.

Yao has previously advocated change "with the ultimate goal of improving the level of the national team", while not relying excessively on importing foreign talent to China's league. He has also called for enhancing the fan experience in what is rated as China's most popular sport.

CHINA'S 'GREAT WALL'

Now an investor in his former team Shanghai Sharks, whom he led to the Chinese title in 2002 before packing his bags for the NBA, Yao indicated he would dispose of his share in the club in light of his CBA appointment.

The 7-foot-6 (2.29m) Yao towers over basketball in China after his a ground-breaking eight-season NBA career, in which he became a popular global ambassador for the sport.

Chinese fans began to dream of glory in the early 2000s when Yao partnered with fellow 7-footers Mengke Bateer and Wang Zhizhi to form China's basketball "Great Wall".

Yao led the team to three straight FIBA Asian championships in the 2000s, but the national team has only won the title twice over the past decade, including the latest edition in 2015, and has consistently struggled in Olympic competition.

They are currently ranked 14th in the world.

Yao was the NBA's first overall draft selection in 2002 and the first player drafted number one who didn't play collegiately in the United States. He has continued promoting the game after he was forced into retirement in 2011 by repeated foot injuries. —AFP



HOUSTON: In this Friday, Feb. 3, 2017 file photo, retired Houston Rockets center Yao Ming speaks during his jersey retirement ceremony at halftime of an NBA basketball game between the Rockets and the Chicago Bulls in Houston. The Chinese Basketball Association has voted unanimously to appoint NBA Hall of Famer Yao as its new president. — AP