

Bucks celebrate title, Nets go without Irving as NBA opens



MILWAUKEE: Giannis Antetokounmpo of the Milwaukee Bucks is introduced before a preseason game against the Dallas Mavericks on October 15, 2021 at the Fiserv Forum Center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. — AFP

WASHINGTON: Giannis Antetokounmpo chases another title, the Brooklyn Nets move on without Kyrie Irving and LeBron James unveils his new supporting cast when the 2021-22 NBA season begins today. The NBA's 75th anniversary campaign tips off with the Brooklyn Nets at Milwaukee as NBA Finals Most Valuable Player (MVP) Antetokounmpo and the rest of the Bucks raise the club's first championship banner since 1971.

The Greek superstar, a two-time NBA MVP, averaged 30.2 points, 12.8 rebounds, 5.1 assists, 1.2 blocked shots and 1.0 steals a game last year in the playoffs as the Bucks ended a half-century title drought.

Milwaukee will try to become the first NBA champion from the Eastern Conference to repeat since James led Miami to titles in 2012 and 2013 as the league aims for its first full 82-game per club campaign since 2018-19 after consecutive seasons shortened due to COVID-19.

The Nets have been part of the NBA off-season's biggest drama with the loss of Irving for refusing to have a COVID-19 vaccination. City regulations in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco forbid attending large indoor public gatherings without being vaccinated, meaning Irving could not play in Nets home games and would miss most of Brooklyn's regular-season contests.

"I chose to be unvaccinated and that was my choice and I ask y'all just to respect that choice,"

Irving said. "I'm going to stay in shape, be ready to play, be ready to rock out with my teammates and just be part of this whole thing."

As a result, the Nets decided the star guard will not be part of the team at all rather than be available on a part-time basis. Brooklyn still offers formidable talent with two-time NBA champion and 2014 NBA MVP Kevin Durant up front and 2018 MVP and three-time scoring champion James Harden in the Nets backcourt.

Patty Mills, an NBA champion with San Antonio in 2014, signed with the Nets in August after sparking the Australia Boomers to a bronze medal at the Tokyo Olympics. The 33-year-old guard from Canberra could see more minutes with Irving absent.

"When you lose a talent as great as Kyrie, we have to be tighter, we have to be more connected, we have to have guys play bigger roles and be more responsible with the details," Nets coach Steve Nash said. "No one is going to come in and imitate Kyrie. So how can we make up for his loss as best as possible? Through all the collective work we do... coming together and really building a team."

— the first time the 36-year-old has missed so many games in a single season. James, however, is confident that the extra rest since last season will benefit the Lakers more than most.

"Last year after coming off the bubble it literally took everything away from you," James said during the Lakers' recent pre-season training camp. "Any little bit of energy that you had, it was completely gone when we left there. To come back into the season with the quick start that we had, kind of the life of the party was just kind of stale. You know, rightfully so. Guys just didn't have an opportunity to get a mental break."

Oldest roster

James says he has noticed a marked transformation in energy levels during the Lakers' preparations for this season. "You could definitely feel the energy shift a lot more in this season the first two practices compared to last," James said as training camp got underway. The extra rest may prove decisive for a Lakers roster which has the oldest average age of any team in the NBA, coming in at around 30.9 years per player.

That's due to a summer rebuilding process which has seen the Lakers bring in a raft of seasoned professionals headed by 32-year-old Russell Westbrook, who joined the team in a blockbuster trade with the Washington Wizards in August that sent Kentavious Caldwell-Pope, Montrezl Harrell and Kyle Kuzma in the opposite direction. Other new signings include Rajon Rondo (35), DeAndre

'Going to take a minute'

The NBA season's opening night also features James and the revamped Los Angeles Lakers playing host to the Golden State Warriors. Stephen Curry, Draymond Green, Andrew Wiggins and the rest of the Warriors hope to welcome back guard Klay Thompson from an Achilles tendon injury in December or January.

The Lakers have surrounded James and Anthony Davis with a new collection of talent, including Russell Westbrook, Dwight Howard, Rajon Rondo, Trevor Ariza, Malik Monk, Kendrick Nunn and Carmelo Anthony.

The hope is to try and recapture the magic that produced a championship in the COVID-19 bubble last year. The Lakers lost to Phoenix in the first round of last season's playoffs. "It's going to take a minute for us to become the team we know we're capable of being," James said. "It's all about being patient with the process, understanding that we're going to have frustrating moments. Nothing is worth having if it's not worth working for."

James, a four-time NBA MVP, is chasing his fifth NBA crown. He will turn 37 in December but remains a skilled scorer and passing threat.

"Nothing he does surprises me," Lakers coach Frank Vogel said.

Simmons back with 76ers

The Philadelphia 76ers, last season's Eastern Conference top seeds, lost to Atlanta in the second round of the playoffs and have had to contend with Australian guard Ben Simmons sitting out pre-season workouts until Sunday. "The next step is getting him integrated with the team," said 76ers coach Doc Rivers, who declared Simmons in "decent shape" but not "game shape."

With Simmons back in the fold alongside star big man Joel Embiid, Philadelphia again figures to be a team to beat in the East. The 76ers open tomorrow at New Orleans with the host Pelicans troubled by their own missing star in Zion Williamson, out with a broken right foot suffered in the off-season. Williamson averaged 27.0 points, 7.2 rebounds and 3.7 assists a game last season for the Pelicans, who plan to give the big man more tests in two weeks to determine his status.

Utah and Phoenix, the only teams to win 50 games last season, improved in the off-season. The Jazz added swingman Rudy Gay and center Hassan Whiteside while the Suns, who lost to Milwaukee in the NBA Finals, kept star guard Chris Paul and added forward JaVale McGee to go alongside Bahamas big man Deandre Ayton. The NBA Finals are set to return to their typical June timeframe. — AFP

First 82-game season since pandemic



Rejuvenated LeBron, Lakers eye return to NBA summit

LOS ANGELES: LeBron James and the Los Angeles Lakers launch their bid to return to the summit of the NBA today with a new roster and a rejuvenated mindset after a badly needed first full off-season in two years.

A year ago, James had only just finished leading the Lakers to their 16th NBA championship with a 4-2 series victory over the Miami Heat after a grueling season upended by the pandemic. The purple and gold confetti that greeted that victory had barely been swept up, however, before James and his teammates were hauling their weary bodies into another season just 72 days later.

While the NBA has rejected suggestions that injuries had spiked as a result of the compressed off-season, what is not in dispute is that injuries affected the Lakers last term more than others. After a strong start to the season, the Lakers were derailed after both James and Anthony Davis suffered long-term injuries, with the team eventually bowing out in the opening round of the post-season.

Davis played only 36 of 72 games in 2020-2021, while James made only 45 appearances due to injury

Jordan (33), Kent Bazemore (32), Carmelo Anthony (37) and Trevor Ariza (36).

While some have wondered whether the relatively advanced years of the Lakers roster might be the team's undoing, Lakers head coach Frank Vogel prefers instead to emphasize the squad's basketball IQ. "Age does equal experience," Vogel said. "IQ and intelligence help you win, and in terms of motivation, the motivation for us is that trophy, not what people are saying. This group is highly driven to get back on top and I don't really think about anything about what anybody's saying about our age. But I do agree that the experience will be necessary and help us win."

James also brushes off the viral jokes that have been made about the Lakers' merry band of thirtysomethings. "The narrative about our age," James said. "I kind of laugh at it. I actually do really laugh. I'm not just saying that."

Anthony, meanwhile, a close friend of James' since the duo played on opposing teams in high school, is now two decades later a teammate and confident that the accumulated mileage and knowhow of the Lakers' roster could return the team to the pinnacle of the NBA.

"A lot of times when you put a group of players together, a group of talent like we have, it doesn't work out," Anthony said. "But I think where we're at in our careers and understanding what we have to do, understanding the sacrifices that we all have to make in order for us to work, that's the beauty of the actual journey that we're about to go on." — AFP



LOS ANGELES: In this file photo taken on May 25, 2021, Los Angeles Lakers' US player LeBron James stands during the second half of Game Two of the Western Conference first-round playoff series at the Phoenix Suns Arena, in Phoenix, Arizona. — AFP