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Hornets to call Oklahoma City, Baton Rouge 'home'

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OKLAHOMA CITY -- Chased from their home by Hurricane Katrina, the [New Orleans Hornets](#) have found a temporary refuge and a fresh start.

The Hornets announced plans Wednesday to play 35 home games in Oklahoma City and six others in Baton Rouge, La., after a relocation agreement was approved by the city council.

The New Orleans Arena sustained extensive water damage from the hurricane and will take months to repair. But even if New Orleans is ready to welcome the team back before the 2005-06 season ends, the Hornets are locked into their 35 dates at the 19,675-seat Ford Center.

The team will alter its home jerseys so they read "Hornets" on the front. The road jerseys will feature the words "New Orleans," but a patch on the shoulder will recognize Oklahoma City. In standings and statistics, the NBA plans to call the team the New Orleans/Oklahoma City Hornets.

Playoff games also would be played in Oklahoma City, and the Hornets will have the option to stay for an extra year.

"This whole thing is somewhat bittersweet," owner George Shinn said. "I've got a fine line to walk. I want to be enthusiastic to the people here and let them know I'm proud and that we're going to make this thing work. I also want to make sure that people in New Orleans have hope because they've gone through a lot.

"It's not even real. It's unreal what they're going through. I want to try to give them hope and to let them know our goal is to come back."

All of the Hornets' games against Eastern Conference opponents will be played in Oklahoma City. The games scheduled for Baton Rouge are Dec. 16 against Phoenix, Jan. 13 against Sacramento, Jan. 18 against Memphis, March 8 against the [Los Angeles Lakers](#), March 18 against Denver and March 21 against the [Los Angeles Clippers](#).

The three games scheduled for Baton Rouge in March could be moved to New Orleans if circumstances permit, league attorney Joel Litvin said.

"I was in New Orleans just this past week. It is a terrible, terrible feeling to see all the homes that, to me, look destroyed," Shinn said. "It's not just the arena. If the arena is in playing condition, will there be fans there? I don't know how many people will come back and how quickly they'll come back."

Numerous other cities -- including San Diego, Las Vegas, Nashville, Tenn., and Kansas City, Mo. -- also made offers to host the team for the upcoming season, but Oklahoma City had what few others could offer -- a top-quality arena with few scheduling conflicts.

The city already has a Triple-A baseball team, an arena football team and a minor-league hockey team, but has never had a major league sports team.

"We are going to prove to the world that Oklahoma City is a major league city," Shinn said.

In addition to use of the city-owned Ford Center, built in 2002, the city will make provisions for the Hornets to have a practice facility, downtown office space and housing for the upcoming season. Approximately 7,500 tickets for each of the 35 games will be priced at \$20 or less.

"We have a minimum amount of risk for a really substantial reward," Councilman Patrick Ryan said.

The move also makes geographic sense. While Oklahoma City is more than 700 miles away from New Orleans, the Hornets' Southwest Division foes in Dallas, San Antonio and Houston won't have to trek far to play games here.

Oklahoma City will be the Hornets' third home in five seasons. The team, which moved from Charlotte in 2002, ranked last in the league in attendance last season with an average of 14,221.

City Council members unanimously approved a lease that would provide financial support for the Hornets should their revenue drop. If the team does not earn 5 percent more in local revenue than it made in New Orleans last season, taxpayers and local businessmen must pay the team as much as \$10 million.

If the team exceeds last season's revenues by more than 5 percent, Oklahoma City would receive 80 percent of the proceeds to cover about \$2 million in expenses for game-day operations, housing, office space and arena improvements for the Hornets.

Approximately 7,500 tickets for each of the 35 games will be priced at \$20 or less. Fans will be able to buy season tickets in the lower bowl for \$999.

"I'd rather have a full house at a medium price than half-full at a high price," said Shinn, who compared the approach to the strategy that helped make the Hornets the No. 1 team in average attendance during its first eight seasons in Charlotte.

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