

Hornets find OKC to their liking; Brown draws crowd during outing

By Darnell Mayberry
The Oklahoman

The Hornets are here.

They're down at Bricktown and at local malls and restaurants.

PJ Brown even took a trip to Wal-Mart on Sunday night.

"That wasn't a good idea," joked Brown, a 12-year NBA veteran. "I almost couldn't get out of there."

Brown had simply found himself caught in the wave of hysteria surrounding the state's first NBA team. He graciously signed autographs and posed for pictures with fans who didn't even know his name. At 6-foot-11, they figured he must be associated with the team.

Yes, the Hornets are here. It's been official for two weeks and speculated the past month.

But nothing resonated that fact louder than Monday's team media day at the Ford Center, when all 18 players on the team's training camp roster pulled their jerseys over their heads for the first time.

And bounced balls. And shot 3-pointers. And playfully heaved half-court shots.

They did so on Oklahoma soil. They will for the next six months.

So the next time you see an extremely tall man at Braum's or Phillips 66 engulfed by hoards of overly excited people, it just might be a member of Oklahoma City's newest sports team.

"You can tell people are excited about the Hornets and about NBA basketball coming here," Brown said. "They're looking forward to it, and it's going to be a lot of fun. I think we're going to have a good relationship with the fans this year."

Several players and coaches echoed Brown's sentiments Monday, looking forward to playing the season in Oklahoma after their home city of New Orleans was deemed unsuitable in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

"The city of Oklahoma (City) has been fantastic," Hornets coach Byron Scott said. "I think our guys, on a normal basis, probably would take a lot longer to feel at home. But I think in this situation, it's going to come relatively quick and that they're going to adapt to this environment and love it just like they loved New Orleans. I think it's going to be a fun thing for all of us."

Scott seemed most impressed with the more than 9,000 season tickets that have already been sold.

"From a business standpoint," he said, "we talked about if we had 6,500 season tickets sold for the year it would be fantastic. And we're going to probably double that.

"That to me is amazing on how receptive the people have been here in Oklahoma City and how much they love the game of basketball and how much they're excited about having us here. We're going to make sure they get their money's worth."

Hornets newcomer Rasual Butler, a third-year player, was expecting to play in New Orleans after an offseason trade dealt him from the Miami Heat. Oklahoma City is far from South Beach, he said, but is more than an acceptable replacement.

"I love Oklahoma," Butler said. "I stepped off the plane, and people knew automatically I was a Hornets player. I'm just excited about trying to compensate them for their hospitality by coming out here and playing extremely hard and giving them a good showing."

Butler, a native of Philadelphia, didn't know anything about Oklahoma and had only visited the state once back in college when his LaSalle team played Oklahoma. Still, he was anxious to play here.

"I just wanted to go somewhere where we were going to get a lot of support," Butler said. "A place where we could come out and have the fans going crazy and supporting us and just really being enthusiastic and giving us that sixth-man boost."

Others, such as guard Speedy Claxton, thought of the headaches any new city would bring.

"The city's new to everybody, so it's going to be tough" Claxton said. "Normally, when you get to a new team, everybody that was there before will be able to help you settle in and make it easy.

"But everybody's new here, so nobody knows where a barber shop is, or where to get your car washed or take your dry cleaning. It's going to be a whole new experience."

Those overly excited people in checkout lines throughout the city should make it feel the same.