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Magical moment in Orlando

"Heart of champion" all started with Game 1 rally in 1995 NBA Finals. **PAGE C3**

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Not sitting on sidelines

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SPORTS SUNDAY

HOUSTON CHRONICLE • JUNE 7, 2020 • SECTION C



RELAUNCH READY

Rockets owner Tilman Fertitta discusses NBA's return, team's title hopes and his pride in Houston's peaceful protest in respect for George Floyd

Q&A BY JONATHAN FEIGEN ON PAGE C2 • PHOTO BY BRETT COOMER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Q&A WITH ROCKETS OWNER TILMAN FERTITTA



Brett Coomer / Staff photographer

Rockets owner Tilman Fertitta is excited about the NBA's return and the chance for his team to compete for a championship.

Q. How do you feel about the NBA's plan to play with the one-site, 22-team scenario next month and getting back to basketball?

A. "I think we're all excited to see sports today. I think we're really excited to see the NBA because in the NBA we really know our players. Fans know their personalities. We're so lucky to have the team we have. When you look at James (Harden) and Russ (Westbrook) and P.J. (Tucker) and Eric (Gordon), it's exciting. I think we have as good a chance as anybody.

"I think the NBA and team owners have taken our time to make sure we did this right and it's safe for everybody. I know that everybody is excited to play. I didn't want to play if the players didn't want to play and everybody's happy to play."

Q. Throughout the coronavirus crisis, you have often described the return of sports as valuable. Why is that?

A. "We all love sports. That's just America. People get emotional about their sports teams and their cities. With the whole emotion with the pandemic, I think we need sports more than ever."

Q. As one of the most high-profile business leaders in this city, the most diverse city in the country, and with your role at the University of Houston, what can you do as a community leader to address the issues or what message would you want to send following the killing of George Floyd, particularly after joining the march on Tuesday?

A. "As a Houstonian, I am proud that 60,000-plus people came together and marched to show their respect for George Floyd and the entire movement. And people of all different backgrounds and races were unified as one in Houston to come together for the cause. I was proud as a Houstonian, it was peaceful, respectful and we showed the rest of the country that we can protest in a way that we all came together, the community leaders, the police department and 60,000 people.

"I don't think any other city has had gentlemen like Bun B and Trae tha Truth come together, and the family of George Floyd, Sheila Jackson Lee, Sylvester Turner and Art Acevedo. It made you proud to be a Houstonian. Everybody

came together to have this wonderful march after the atrocious crime to a fellow Houstonian, George Floyd.

Q. Why did you choose to attend and be part of the crowd?

A. "As a Houstonian, an American and a human being I look forward and am determined to being part of the solution to uplift the underprivileged community in our nation. Under no circumstances is inequality acceptable in this country or anywhere else. There is racism. There is police brutality. I will use my leadership and my resources and my place in this city to not just point out the problem but to be part of the solution.

"We all realize now that Colin Kaepernick was ahead of his time. It took this tragic incident for not only myself but for so many more Americans to realize it."

Q. The topic of the Hong Kong tweet has come up again lately. The President brought it up. It came up on your CNBC interview. What would you want people to know about your position about that issue?

A. "The tweet was seven words. There was nothing wrong with the tweet. That's why one hour later I told ESPN when I was asked 'Are you going to get rid of Daryl Morey?' I was like, 'Are you crazy? Why would I get rid of Daryl for that tweet?' I think Daryl's one of the best general managers in the league. Plus, we truly enjoy working with each other. To this day, we plan on working with each other, and I expect Daryl to be here for years to come."

Q. On the CNBC interview, you distinguished between speaking out on domestic and international issues. Why?

A. "What I meant was, and I thought I made it clear, that in America we can say whatever we want to say. We don't have to worry about our government doing anything against us when we speak up. But we do have to worry if we're somewhere else, about an authoritarian government penalizing us. And it could be penalizing you in many ways. I was 100 percent saying American citizens can speak out on our soil and nothing will happen to us. Not everybody has the same

freedoms we have."

Q. Back to basketball, as someone in the hospitality industry during a pandemic, will that affect decision making on the basketball side of your business?

A. "I don't understand why people would think that. The Rockets operate totally separately. There's nothing more important than winning a championship. If I could buy a championship, I would write out a check and do it. I'm never going to let a player or a tax keep me from winning a championship."

Q. This is such an unprecedented season. How does that affect evaluations and decisions from Mike D'Antoni and the idea of playing without a center and the roster?

A. "We're getting ready to play eight games and go into the playoffs. When we start those playoffs, it will be like any other season. We're focused on what's going on on the court. It doesn't matter if there's fans in the stands or not. There's going to be an NBA champion. Twenty years from now, nobody's going to know it

PROUD OF HIS CITY, PROUD OF HIS TEAM

By Jonathan Feigen STAFF WRITER

With the NBA moving closer to a return amid the coronavirus crisis and ongoing protests around the country following the killing of George Floyd, Rockets owner Tilman Fertitta addressed issues on the court and far from it.

Speaking from his office at the Post Oak Hotel, the chairman and sole owner of Landry's Inc. and chairman of the University of Houston Board of Regents discussed the NBA return-to-play plan, Rockets prospects and joining Tuesday's march and protests in Houston.

was a shortened season. Just like I don't know who was or wasn't a champion when there were shortened seasons. I don't see any asterisks. I know San Antonio has five rings and LeBron (James) has a few rings. I would be more than happy to win a championship this year."

Q. And the evaluations in the off-season will be the same as after any other season?

A. "I think I have one of the NBA's great coaches in Mike D'Antoni. And I think I have one of the best basketball ops groups, Daryl and his whole team. Personally, I love Mike. But I'm going to leave it up to the general manager. I surely would like to have Mike back. If Daryl wants to have Mike back, I'm sure Mike is going to be back."

Q. The Rockets have been built and rebuilt around James Harden and Russell Westbrook. Are you still confident that they can lead this team to a championship?

A. "I don't think I can have two better guys to try to lead us to a championship, and they deserve it for their legacy. I want them to win a championship for their legacy because they are two of the greatest players at what they do that have ever played the game. Nobody deserves a championship more than James Harden, Russell Westbrook, P.J. Tucker, Eric Gordon and Austin Rivers, guys like Robert Covington. They deserve a ring. We're going to do everything in our power to make that happen."

Q. There have been incredible ups and downs in the past few years. How have you liked being the owner of the Rockets?

A. "Owning a team in your hometown is the greatest gift a man and sports fan can get. What's interesting is I love that they told me I'm the 35th-longest season-ticket holder of the Houston Rockets. I've had season tickets now for like 40 years. It feels really good, really good, but it's not going to be great until we win a championship. And then, we win another championship. That's why I said, if I could just write out a check to buy a championship, I would be the first person in line."

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