

Miami Heat trade Shaq O'Neal to Phoenix Suns

Special to Sentinel-Voice

PHOENIX - The Phoenix Suns have acquired Shaquille O'Neal in a stunning, blockbuster deal that sends four-time All-Star Shawn Marion and Marcus Banks, who played for UNLV, to the Miami Heat.

The improbable pairing of the speedy Suns and the slow but once-mighty O'Neal became official when he cleared a physical exam he took this week.

The trade, a dramatic move by first-year Phoenix general manager Steve Kerr, signals an unexpected change in philosophy for the Suns, adding a 7-foot-1, 325-pound center who has won four NBA championships but has been plagued by injuries in recent years and turns 36 next month. O'Neal has been out with a hip injury and underwent an MRI exam in Miami on Tuesday. He flew to Phoenix the next day for the physical.

"I'm well aware that I'm on the line," Kerr told The Associated Press. "That's my job. That's why I'm sitting in this seat. I'm comfortable with the decision. I think it gives us a better chance to win, and a better chance to win in the playoffs." O'Neal has averaged 25.6 points and 11.5 rebounds in his 14-plus NBA seasons.

This season, plagued by injuries and going through a divorce, he's averaging 14.2 points. His 14-year streak as an All-Star choice came to an end this year.

He missed much of the 2006-07 season with a knee injury and finished that year

with career-lows in games (40), scoring (17.3 points), rebounds (7.4), minutes (28.4) and free-throw percentage (.422).

"It was a very, very hard decision for me. When Shaq came to the team four years ago, I always felt it was forever. We won a championship with him. We wish him nothing but the best," Riley said. "We have to move on with our team. We're rebuilding. This is not the most desirable place to be right now." The Heat have lost 19 of their last 20 games and have the NBA's worst record at 9-37.

Phoenix gambled that Shaq will be healthy and more motivated when he moves to the desert.

For the three-plus seasons since Steve Nash came to town, the speedy Suns have been darlings of NBA fans grown weary of the slow style that has prevailed for years. But the Suns have fallen short in the playoffs, never making it to the finals.

The addition of O'Neal doesn't necessarily put the brakes on the running game, Kerr said.

"We ran when Kurt Thomas was here. He got the rebound, and everybody else ran down the court," Kerr said.

"We're still going to run, but we feel like we'll have a better halfcourt team." Marion, weary of being third fiddle to Nash and Amare Stoudemire, asked to be traded before the season began. He didn't get his wish and, although he refused to talk publicly about it, remained unhappy with his

role.

Still, his talents fit well with the fast-paced style that coach Mike D'Antoni wanted, especially with his ability to finish on a fastbreak. He also was the team's best defender, guarding everyone from Tony Parker to Yao Ming. Marion, who has spent all of his 8 1/2 NBA seasons with Phoenix, made the All-Star team five times, including the last three seasons.

This year, though, he failed to make it, while Nash

and Stoudemire did. Marion has an NBA career averages of 18.4 points and 10 rebounds per game. This season he's averaging 15.8 points and 9.9 boards.

The Suns have the best record in the West (34-14) but have not played up to their own expectations. Their interior defense is among the NBA's worst. Kerr apparently felt that without a large presence inside, Phoenix could not combat the big men, such as Andrew Bynum and Tim Duncan, in the play-

offs.

With O'Neal on the court, Stoudemire can play his more natural power forward position.

O'Neal's move west adds fuel to the already intense rivalry between the Suns, the Lakers and his old teammate Kobe Bryant.

The trade required a significant financial commitment from the budget-conscious owner Robert Sarver because O'Neal is scheduled to make \$20 million this season and \$20 million more

each of the next two.

Marion makes \$16.4 million this year and could opt out of the \$17 million final year of his contract after this season. Banks has been in and out of the Suns' rotation the past two seasons.

The Heat also waived Luke Jackson.

O'Neal entered this season talking about how he wanted to win at least one more title, saying his "legacy" wouldn't be complete unless he left the game with at least five rings.

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Judge: Vick needn't forfeit entire bonus

MINNEAPOLIS - Atlanta quarterback Michael Vick, serving a jail term on dogfighting charges, will be allowed to keep at least some of \$20 million in bonuses from the Falcons.

The NFL team sought to recoup the bonus money, claiming Vick couldn't earn it because he had been suspended by the NFL. League Commissioner Roger Goodell after the quarterback pleaded guilty to federal charges.

Vick and three other men pleaded guilty to running a dogfighting operation on land Vick owned in Virginia. Vick is serving a 23-month term in prison because of that plea. The four men also face state charges in the cases.

U.S. District Judge David Doty in Minneapolis recently overturned an arbitrator's decision that Vick should repay the bonus money to the Falcons. The judge said such a repayment would violate the NFL's collective bargaining agreement, which says bonuses cannot be forfeited for years the player has already performed.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution said it wasn't clear whether Vick would be ordered to repay any of the \$20 million and said Atlanta Falcons officials wouldn't say if they plan to pursue the case further.