

## Heat to get rings, then meet Celtics

Written by Tim Reynolds

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The Associated Press

MIAMI — LeBron James is finally getting his championship ring. Somehow, that seems like an ancillary element to opening night in Miami.

It's Boston vs. Miami, a rematch of last season's Eastern Conference finals that went seven games before the Heat prevailed. It's Ray Allen vs. the Celtics for the first time since he left after five seasons to join Boston's biggest current rival. And, oh, it's also the night where the Heat celebrate last season's NBA championship with a splashy ring-and-banner ceremony.

"We'll honor and respect what we were able to accomplish before the game," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said.

After that? All business — for both teams.

The Heat and Celtics practiced simultaneously Monday in Miami, because Boston arrived a day ahead of schedule to avoid dealing with the brunt of Hurricane Sandy. And both preached the same mantra — yes, it's a big game, but win or lose, both teams will still have 81 games left to go in the regular season when they wake up Wednesday morning.

"If we win, do we get a trophy? We get one win and that's it," Celtics coach Doc Rivers said.

"And if we lose, which we don't want to do, we get one loss and it doesn't mean we still can't win it. But at the end of the day, we're all human. ... These games, they don't really have more meaning, but they do have more meaning."

It comes as no surprise to either side that the schedule-makers sent Boston to Miami for ring night.

"Every time there's something big going on," Heat forward Chris Bosh said, "we're playing the Celtics."

There has been a slew of upgrades at the arena over the summer — slightly different looks here and there, a new nightclub and restaurant, more concessions and bars for ticketholders to enjoy. The Heat will even offer fans the chance to purchase championship-ring-related merchandise, designed in the same manner as the players' title-reward jewelry.

The upgrades extend to what's going to be on the court as well.

Miami kept its championship rotation intact, plus added Allen and Rashard Lewis to the mix.

Allen knows it will be unusual to see the Heat get their rings, especially since five months ago, he was busy trying to thwart their title march.

"I'm excited for these guys, having spent time around them over the last two, three months, getting to know them and their families," Allen said. "I'm happy for them that they won, but at the same time, they beat me and put us out. I understand the emotions that Boston will feel, watching the whole ceremony. But at the same time I'm excited for these guys. And once it's over with, it's business as usual."

Boston figures to be better as well. Jason Terry now comes off the Celtics' bench, there's an influx of youth in the rotation, Jeff Green is back after heart surgery, and the remaining members of what was a Big Four — Rondo, Paul Pierce and Kevin Garnett — are loaded up for another championship push.

"It's just another basketball game," Rondo said.

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Not even he probably believes that. The rivalry and the Allen reunion, make no mistake, weighs heavily on both sides. Neither Garnett nor Pierce has spoken to their former shooting guard since he signed in Miami.

“We’re not going to make this into a Ray Allen or Paul Pierce, Kevin Garnett, Rondo thing,” Pierce said. “Right now my focus is on playing in the game tomorrow vs. the Miami Heat. Everything’s that happened has already happened. He’s here. He’s happy to be here. We wish him the best for his family and the situation, but I’m more focused on the Boston Celtics.” It’s the second ring-night in Heat history.

It’s almost certain to go better than the first one after Miami’s 2006 title.

Any mention of the score from that Chicago-Miami opener — 108-66 — still makes Dwyane Wade and Udonis Haslem cringe. They’re the last two players remaining in Miami from that Heat team, which endured the worst opening-night loss ever for a reigning champion.

“I just remember we got beat,” Wade said. “I don’t remember the game. That’s how long ago that was. Different time.”

Haslem remembers plenty.

“It sticks,” Haslem said. “But it’s six years later. You learn and you move on and you try not to let it happen again. We’ve got a different group of guys. We’re smarter, me and Dwyane are. And we understand the challenges of defending the title now. We were naive. At that point, we thought we could do it again the next year and just do it again and do it again and do it again.” Well, actually, that is James’ goal.

He didn’t come to Miami for one title. He came for multiple ones. That’s one of many reasons why even he’s downplaying the ring ceremony and placing his focus squarely on another marquee matchup with Boston.

That being said, he’s not overstating it, either.

“Game one doesn’t determine who’s the better team,” James said. “I mean, it’s game one. Tomorrow night will not be what we want to be in April.”

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