

PRO BASKETBALL

Feelings of Foreboding in Sacramento as the Kings Wither

From First Sports Page

native and former star guard for the Phoenix Suns, provided the starkest assessment.

"It feels," Johnson wrote in his blog, "like a slow death."

As is often the case when teams and cities break up, this is a story about money, politics, missed opportunities, broken promises, hard feelings and blame cast in a dozen directions. It is clouded by a national recession and the N.B.A.'s struggle to sustain teams in small markets.

But it is, at its core, about the arena itself — an aging, charmingly smallish building that looked outdated within 10 years of its construction in 1988.

Recently rebranded as Power Balance Pavilion — but still known colloquially as Arco — the arena seats 17,317, the second-lowest capacity in the league. Its 32 luxury suites and 150 club seats are paltry by modern standards. The "back of house" features — locker rooms, green rooms and staging areas needed for concerts, circuses and other events — are limited. The N.C.A.A., which used to hold tournament games at Arco, now regards it as substandard.

The city has rejected multiple proposals to build a new arena, most recently abandoning a complicated three-way land-swap plan. The last time the arena issue reached the ballot, in 2006, Sacramento County voters overwhelmingly rejected two measures that would have raised public money to fund an arena.

On Thursday in New York, the Maloofs will address the N.B.A. Board of Governors and make their case. They have until April 18 to file for relocation. A vote could come any time after that.

The Kings need only a majority — 16 of 30 teams — to win approval. No franchise in modern N.B.A. history has been denied a relocation request.

The Maloofs have already applied to trademark the name Anaheim Royals.

There is little dispute among Sacramento officials about the need for a new arena, not only for the Kings, but for concerts, ice shows and other entertainment.

Bob Cook, a fifth-generation Sacramentan, was one of the investors who brought the Kings to Northern California. He called the proposed move, which he opposes, "gut-wrenching," but said he understood the Maloofs' position.

"It's not their fault," said Cook, who remains a minority shareholder. He added: "I don't think the Maloofs wanted to move from Sacramento. I think it just got to the point where the frustration was just overwhelming."

Many fans and city officials do blame the Maloofs, for their perceived political failings, their public missteps and the poor product on the court. The Kings have the league's lowest payroll, \$44 million, and are finishing their fifth straight losing season.



STEVE YEATER/ASSOCIATED PRESS



JIM WILSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES



HECTOR AMEZCUA/SACRAMENTO BEE, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

There is widespread suspicion, both in Sacramento and in N.B.A. ownership circles, that the Maloofs are either broke or in severe financial distress. The family sold its beer distributorship last year. The Maloofs' Las Vegas casino, the Palms, is said to be in trouble, with Bloomberg News reporting in January that the family might sell controlling interest. Forbes magazine has estimated that the Kings lost about \$9.8 million last year, a figure the team disputes.

The Maloofs have declined all

interview requests. But two people with close ties to the family, including a Sacramento businessman who has worked with them, said the speculation was off base. Although Maloof Enterprise is "stressed," the family's personal wealth is secure, said the businessman, who spoke on condition of anonymity to protect his relationship.

"They're not personally at risk," he said. "They're not broke. They've got an enterprise that needs improvement."

A task force appointed by

Fans made banners, urging the Kings to stay put. Mayor Kevin Johnson of Sacramento said the team's plan felt "like a slow death." The Kings lost a heartbreaking Game 7 to the Lakers in the 2002 Western Conference finals.

Johnson is conducting a feasibility study for a new sports and entertainment complex, to be built on public land near the downtown rail yards. But the study will not be completed until May, and there is still the question of how to finance a \$500 million arena without public money.

"Is it too late?" Cook said, repeating a reporter's question. After a six-second pause, he said: "I'm not sure. It may be."

By the team's account, 11 arena proposals have come and gone in the last 11 years. They died for lack of financing or political support, voter opposition to public funding and — depending on the source — a lack of leadership by team owners, city hall and the N.B.A.

This has led to a strange sort of self-loathing among some of the Kings' most ardent supporters.

"It's really our own fault," said Amber Williams, the president of a local marketing firm, who blamed a small-town mentality for the arena failures. "I don't think any logical, thoughtful person looks at this as the Maloofs' issue. This is really our issue as a city."

Two months ago, Williams's firm, Glass Agency, sponsored a series of billboards under the heading SacDeflated, featuring a deflated basketball and the tag line, "If the Kings leave, we all lose."

But, Williams said, "I don't think we ever thought we were going to save them, to be honest with you."

It has not stopped fans from trying.

Two weeks ago, Carmichael Dave (who goes only by that alias) started an arena fundrais-

ing effort dubbed "Here We Build," on Twitter. Within 24 hours, fans had pledged \$140,000 toward a new arena. A local chain of Jiffy Lube shops plastered the hashtag #HereWeBuild on six electronic billboards. As of Friday, pledges had surpassed \$575,000, according to organizers.

"The city of Sacramento, much like it has done historically, has completely dropped the ball," Carmichael Dave said. "So leave it to the citizens."

Another campaign, called Here We Stay, has organized rallies and promoted ticket drives, all in the hope of showing the Maloofs that Sacramento, despite its political failures, still supports the team.

"We're still here, we still believe in you," said Michael Tavares, a member of the Here We Stay group, summing up the mission.

At their peak, the Kings were a high-scoring marvel built on athleticism, speed, clever passing and consummate teamwork, fueled by Chris Webber's post play, Peja Stojakovic's 3-point shooting and Vlade Divac's grit. For a time, Arco Arena was the most raucous spot on the N.B.A. map.

But Webber was never the same after a devastating knee injury in the 2003 playoffs. Team officials waited too long to rebuild, and the Kings slipped into competitive irrelevancy. Fan support waned. Then the 2008 recession hit.

Sacramento is a government town with a tiny corporate base, high unemployment (12.9 percent) and one of the nation's highest home foreclosure rates. The city has a \$45 million budget deficit. Can it afford a state-of-the-art arena?

"I'll answer the question with a question," said Grant Napear, the Kings' longtime play-by-play announcer. "Does it make sense to lose an employer that employs 1,000 people, that brings a lot of tax revenue and a lot of overall revenue to an economy that is in the dumpster?"

Orange County is beckoning, with a population twice the size of Sacramento County's, a healthy base of Fortune 500 companies and the nation's second-largest television market. The Kings, who now earn about \$13 million in broadcast rights, might double that figure.

If the Maloofs are determined to go, there is little that Kings fans can do now except cheer and hope. They remain surprisingly loyal, cheering loudly at introductions and chanting "dee-fense" to the final buzzer.

On Wednesday, the Kings will play perhaps their final game in Sacramento, against the Lakers. Emotions will be high and the roars no doubt deafening. Maybe the cowbells will return for old time's sake. Then the lights will go out.

"If the Kings move," Napear said, "I don't think you'll ever see N.B.A. basketball back in this city in our lifetime."

OFF THE DRIBBLE

'Cs and Bulls fans comparing # of titles is like Oprah and Gates comparing their billions. I would like just 1 please.'

BASKETBALL JOHN,

a Utah Jazz blogger, on his Twitter account, @SLCDunk, in response to an argument about the various championships of the Celtics and the Bulls. The Jazz has yet to win a title.



JACOB WEINSTEIN/FREEDARKO

A caricature of Joe Johnson from one of FreeDarko's books about the N.B.A.

FreeDarko Goes Dark

Started by a group of friends from a fantasy league to write about basketball for fun, FreeDarko ended up becoming the first of what became a long line of irreverent basketball blogs.

After countless posts over the years and two successful books about the N.B.A., the site will publish its final post Monday.

The mainstays Nathaniel Friedman (a.k.a. Bethlehem Shoals) and the illustrator Jacob Weinstein will be going on to other pursuits, but they took some time to discuss the site and its impact. The complete interview is available at ntimes.com/offthedribble.

BENJAMIN HOFFMAN

Q. Do you feel like you achieved your goals with the site?

NATHANIEL FRIEDMAN If I may be so bold, I think we've had some influence in the way younger folks write and think about basketball. Maybe we've even made sports a little more appealing to people who don't get off on X's and O's or tired macho posturing. As far as the audience is concerned, we published two books that sold surprisingly well, so sure, mission accomplished!

JACOB WEINSTEIN Debatable. We definitely succeeded in entertaining ourselves for six years, but I can't speak for anyone else. If nothing else, I do think we created a space for an outsider perspective on basketball, and sports in general.

Q. At this point, with the Bethlehem Shoals brand appearing in other outlets, do you wish you'd used your real name at the outset?

FRIEDMAN A little. Jacob succeeded in wriggling out of Big Baby Belafonte, but that's an even less plausible byline. I try and stay philosophical about it. If I hadn't been writing as Bethlehem Shoals, and FreeDarko hadn't gone for this cultlike obscurity all along, we may not have had the same appeal. Do we have a mystique? If so, I don't think we would with Nathaniel Friedman at the helm.

Q. Will you and Jacob still collaborate?

FRIEDMAN Definitely. We worked together before FreeDarko — it's how we met, actually — and we will again in the future. It also helps that we both have solo books in mind that we're pretty stoked to work on.

Q. You have done plenty of work in short form (Twitter), medium form (blogs) and long form (books). Which way do you see yourself going in the future?

FRIEDMAN Everywhere at once, same as before. I'm working on a book proposal on tragically shortened careers (and Leonard Cohen songs). With David Roth, I'm blogging the N.B.A. playoffs for GQ.com. I'm trying to take it easy on Twitter, for everyone's sake, but sometimes, a line just has to live there. There are a lot of features I'm hoping to write freelance. I have a baby on the way. Does that count?

WEINSTEIN I've always been partial to books. I somehow lucked into a Cullman Fellowship at the New York Public Library and am going to be working on a graphic novel about the 1952 World Table Tennis Championships in Bombay while I'm there. It's going to be a different sport and different format, but thematically it will share a lot in common with the FreeDarko ethos.

Q. Did you think there was any way Darko would still be in the N.B.A. when FreeDarko went dark?

FRIEDMAN Tall people are not like you and I. They can live forever if they want to.

Moore Is the Headliner Of a Deep W.N.B.A. Draft

By The Associated Press

Maya Moore began the month by becoming the third two-time selection as the Associated Press player of the year. On Monday, Moore is expected to be selected No. 1 over all by Minnesota in the W.N.B.A. draft.

Lynx Coach Cheryl Reeve would not confirm that Moore was going to be the team's pick. But she did not deny it, either.

"If I were to confirm that, I'd be in big trouble," she said in a recent conference call with reporters. "The assumptions that are being made are not off base, and this franchise is excited about the prospect of a very talented player out of the University of Connecticut."

Moore averaged 19.7 points, 8.3 rebounds, 3.5 assists and 53 percent shooting from the field over her four seasons at UConn, including 22.8 points, 8.2 rebounds and 4.0 assists as a senior. She finished fourth on the N.C.A.A.'s career scoring list with 3,036 points, including 36 last Sunday night in UConn's loss to Notre Dame in the Final Four.

And Reeve said Moore stood out for more than just her numbers.

"The aspect that everyone always talks about that translates to success on our level is Maya's work ethic," Reeves said. "When your best player is your hardest-working player, great things happen to you."

The Tulsa Shock, which finished 6-28 last year in its first season after moving from Detroit, will pick second and is expected to select 6-foot-8 Liz Cambage, a 19-year-old Australian. Cambage has drawn comparisons to Lauren Jackson, another Australian

and the three-time W.N.B.A. most valuable player, who was the same age when she was selected No. 1 over all by Seattle in 2001.

But The Herald Sun of Melbourne, Australia, recently reported that Cambage did not want to play for Tulsa. Shock Coach and General Manager Nolan Richardson said he would not be swayed by those comments.

"If that's the person we will choose to pick, then that's the person we will choose," Richardson said. "Whether or not she decides to play, that would still be her option."

Cambage denied saying she did not want to play in Tulsa in an interview posted on the league's Web site last week.

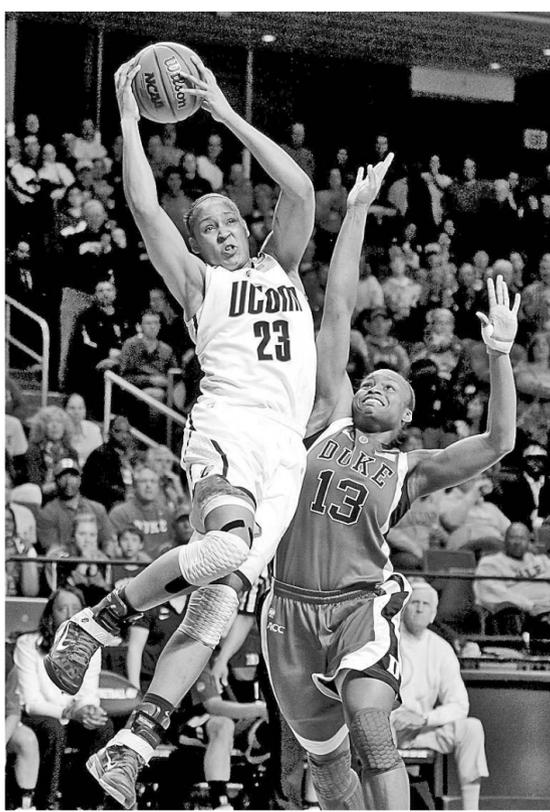
"That was taken so out of context it was ridiculous," Cambage said. "I was saying I'd love to go No. 1 and it would be nice, but Maya Moore will probably go No. 1 and I'll go No. 2."

"I really don't care where I go." After Moore and Cambage, the choices are not so clear among a pool deep with frontcourt players, including Texas A&M's Danielle Adams, Ohio State's Jantel Lavender, and Xavier's Amber Harris and Ta'Shia Phillips.

"It seems like there's a lot of bigs in the game compared to what I saw last year," said Richardson, entering his second season in the W.N.B.A.

Chicago has the third pick, the Lynx will pick again at No. 4, followed by Chicago, San Antonio, Tulsa again, Atlanta and Indiana. The Liberty, Washington and the defending champion Seattle will close the first round.

For teams looking for guards, Stanford's Jeanette Pohlen, Gonzaga's Courtney Vandersloot,



TIM SHAFFER/REUTERS

Maya Moore, left, averaged 19.7 points, 8.3 rebounds, and 3.5 assists a game in her four seasons at Connecticut.

Texas A&M's Sydney Colson and Oklahoma's Danielle Robinson are among the top backcourt players.

"It's a draft that's deep, maybe not in terms of franchise players, but players that will help W.N.B.A. teams this year," Reeve said.

Liberty Coach and General Manager John Whisenant, entering his first season leading a

squad that reached the Eastern Conference semifinals last year, praised Pohlen (14.5 points, 3.2 rebounds and 4.8 assists as a senior) and Vandersloot (19.8 points, 3.7 rebounds, 10.2 assists).

"Pohlen was the California player of the year out of high school," he said. "She has continued to improve, shoots the ball well, big and strong, thinks well."

Lavender and Phillips say they

will have to adapt to more physical play in the W.N.B.A. than they experienced in college.

"We'll have to focus in on the fact that these veterans have been doing this and know the tricks of the trade and how to do certain things to get rebounds over rookies like us," said the 6-4 Lavender, who was fifth in the N.C.A.A. in scoring at 22.8 points a game and led the Big Ten in with rebounding at 10.9. "We'll have to have a big emphasis on boxing out and really using the techniques we know to be rebounders in the league."

Phillips, who averaged 16.1 points and a team-high 12.4 rebounds, agreed.

"There are going to be a lot of taller players in the league that we didn't necessarily have to face in college," the 6-6 Phillips said. "So we're going to have to use speed and learn the tricks to give ourselves a little bit of an edge."

Minnesota also has the first two selections of the second round, giving it 4 of the first 14 picks. The Lynx also won the No. 1 pick in the lottery for last year's draft, but traded it and Renee Montgomery to Connecticut for the former Gophers star Lindsay Whalen and the No. 2 pick. The Sun then took Moore's former UConn teammate Tina Charles, who went on to become rookie of the year.

Reeve says she does not regret making that deal and likes the position the Lynx are in this year.

"I'm a former point guard and believe that guards win in this game," she said. "I'm a big believer of having leadership at that position. If I had to do it all over again, 100 percent absolutely I would do it."

"We're pleased with how things turned out, and this coming season will show us a lot."

Training camps are to open on May 15, and the season is set to begin on June 3.