

Rockets NBA champs, victory is sweet after two failures

HOUSTON (AP) — Good-bye Choke City. Hello NBA Champions.

The city's long-suffering sports fans at last put the jinx behind them Wednesday night when the Houston Rockets beat the New York Knicks 90-84 in Game 7 for its first NBA title and the city's first major-league sports crown.

The crowd, screaming all night for a victory, went wild as the game ended and the players, a few fans and dozens of photographers rushed the court.

Houston's professional sports drought ended in style as the Rockets won at home in The Summit for everyone to see.

"Houston, Houston, Houston," chanted the sold-out crowd of more than 16,000 during the post-game pandemonium as they waited for the Rockets to receive the NBA Championship trophy.

"I knew it was going to happen," yelled Tony Meador as he jumped in the aisle in the final seconds of the game. "I feel good! I feel wonderful!"

"I'm going home and get me some champagne," Meador said.

Rockets coach Rudy Tomjanovich said it "meant everything" to win at home.

"These people did everything for us," Tomjanovich

said of the fans.

"The Rockets went out and took it!" exclaimed NBA Hall of Famer Calvin Murphy, who played for the Rockets from 1970-83.

"I never thought I'd see this day," said Murphy, who attended the game and performed baton twirling during halftime.

Fans of Hakeem Olajuwon and Co. felt the same way even if they weren't that supportive when the Rockets lost two home games to open the Western Conference semifinals against the Phoenix Suns.

"We're going to party all night," said Robert Hatter, who was on his feet for much of the game.

"It (winning) means everything to me," Hatter said. "This is all I've been thinking about all week. I haven't been able to sleep and I'm not going to be able to sleep tonight."

On the hottest sports night in Houston's history, the fans came out early and loud, placards in hand and title hopes in their hearts.

"I'm so proud of Houston, I'm so proud of this team," said Texas Gov. Ann Richards, who attended Game 7. "It means that Texas is the No. 1 champion sports state in the world. I'm telling you on this one. I just had a feeling

it was our year."

The Summit was the place where everyone wanted to be, and one hopeful fan even stood outside the arena before the game carrying a cardboard sign that read "Will work for Rockets tickets."

Impromptu parades of motorists carrying signs broke out near The Summit, southwest of downtown. Police spokesman Rick Hartley said no problems were immediately reported.

Around the city, cars streamed down Main Street monitored by horseback police patrol.

Tomjanovich wore his lucky tie and black suit, and Rockets red-and-yellow clothes were de rigueur for the night. His wife Sophie, also superstitious, made her customary entrance after the first quarter.

The now-usual, but still small group of celebrities included director and fanatic Knicks fan Spike Lee, Magic Johnson and comedian Richard Lewis, a New Yorker whose all-black outfit stood out in the sea of red.

The already loud crowd erupted in cheers when Houston's Robert Horry got the first basket of the game.

And they just kept screaming. Fans had long been waiting for this one — the chance to win it all in one game.

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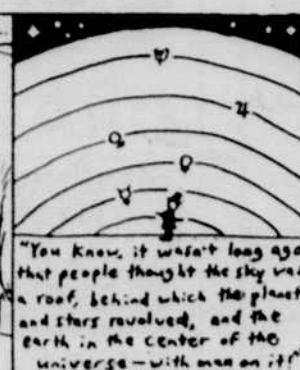
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