

# NBA lockout ends before season cancellation begins

Fans can expect a season of about 50 games to begin in February

By Chris Sheridan  
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — The NBA and the players' union reached an agreement today to end the 6-month-old lockout and save what's left of the season.

After a secret all-night bargaining session between commissioner David Stern and union head Billy Hunter, the deal was struck sometime around 6 a.m. — just 29 hours before the league's Board of Governors was set to vote on canceling the remainder of the season.

The owners' and players' negotiating committees recommended approving the six-year deal, which gives the NBA an option for a seventh year.

The players approved it 179-5 in a ratification vote at the union's law office this afternoon, a union spokesman said. The league's Board of Governors will vote Thursday.

A season of about 50 games would begin the first week of February, with training camps not

starting before Jan. 17.

"Oh, I'm so relieved it's unbelievable," Milwaukee Bucks coach George Karl said. "It's like I let a balloon out of my stomach. The knots are already loosening up in my neck. I get to do what I love to do."

The union agreed to accept 55 percent of revenues in the fourth, fifth and sixth years of the agreement, sources told the AP. Players would get 57 percent if the league exercises its option for the seventh year. In the first three years, there is no limit on the percentage of revenues players can receive.

The settlement also means Michael Jordan must now decide whether to retire.

"Michael is going to analyze the deal, see what Chicago wants to do and then make an informed decision," agent David Falk said. "I'm not certain what his time frame is."

Under terms of the new agreement, a grandfather clause allows any player to sign for 105 percent of his previous salary. That means Jordan, who made about \$33 million last year, could get about \$34.7 million from the Bulls.

No other team can offer him anything close to that amount.

Among the other compromises: — The union agreed to a \$14 million maximum salary for players with 10 years' experience. Players with one to five years' experience can get a maximum of \$9 million, and players with six to nine years' experience can get \$11 million.

— The union agreed to a three-year rookie scale with teams holding an option for the fourth year and the right of first refusal in the fifth year. First-round draft picks will be grouped into three categories by where they were selected — 1-9, 10-19 and 20-29 — with the highest picks eligible for higher percentage increases in their salaries from year to year.

— The league accepted the union's proposal for an "average" salary exception and "median" salary exception, with both being phased in during the next three years. As a result, every team will have the right to sign two additional players each season, even if they are over the salary cap.

— The annual allowable salary increases will be 12 percent for players with so-called Larry Bird rights — those free agents re-signed by a team without regard to the

salary cap — and 10 percent for others.

— Changes to free agency timing rules will be phased in, with free agents counting 200, 250 or 300 percent against their old team's salary cap until that team re-signs them or renounces their rights.

— The league agreed to higher minimum salaries than it had been offering, although the exact amounts weren't immediately known.

No professional sports union had ever agreed to a maximum salary before, but the NBA had been pushing for one throughout the lockout. The union initially refused, then suggested a luxury tax be charged to any owner who signed a player for more than \$15 million. The league kept holding out, and eventually the players relented.

Once the deal is finalized and the lockout is lifted, it will unleash a three- to four-week frenzy of activity with teams scrambling to fill rosters, make trades and sign some of the 200 free agents on the market while also holding abbreviated training camps.

"We'll probably have eight months of NBA basketball

squeezed into four months, with trades and signings," Karl said.

Among the free agents are Jordan, Scottie Pippen, Dennis Rodman, Charles Barkley, Antonio McDyess, Rod Strickland and Damon Stoudamire.

"Obviously, it will be very busy," said agent Mark Bartelstein. "We've got a lot of free agents, so we've got to find them homes and teams. Get other guys into camps. Get up and rolling. I'm sure I'll probably talk to a lot of teams today."

The league and the union had been fighting over how to divide an estimated \$2 billion in annual revenue.

"I don't think anyone won. Both sides lost on it," Indiana Pacers guard Fred Hoiberg said. "I think it will take some time to get the game back to where it was. Hopefully, we can get back to work soon and put a good product on the court."

The league's Board of Governors had scheduled a meeting for 11 a.m. Thursday, and Stern and deputy commissioner Russ Granik had said they would recommend canceling the rest of the season if an agreement wasn't reached.

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