

Ice Cube enjoying the good days in 3rd year of Big3

By DAN GELSTON
Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Ice Cube and Dakota Johnson were snapped this week in Los Angeles rehearsing for a new movie. Johnson was dressed in a white top, black leather jacket and distressed jeans. Cube? He kept it sports chic: a Raiders hat, dark shades and a Killer 3s T-shirt straight out of the Big3 catalog.

Whether sitting courtside in Philly or filming in Hollywood, Cube remains the famous face of his 3-on-3 half-court basketball league. Cube is serious about growing the Big3, heavy on nostalgia, into more than just another niche sports league. The rapper/actor and his league of former NBA players have made it to a third season, barnstorming this summer from Birmingham to Brooklyn, shooting 4-pointers in pickup-style games where the first to 50 points wins.

"It's Ice Cube. Everything's going to be big," said Greg Oden, the No. 1 overall pick of the 2007 NBA draft.

Cube is a die-hard Los Angeles Lakers fan, publicly welcoming All-Star Anthony Davis to the team this offseason and expressing his disappointment in Magic Johnson's departure. But hours before NBA free agency was set to formally begin, Cube was at Temple's Liacouras Center getting ready for a Big3 triple-header, his interest in the million-dollar deals landed by potential future stars of his league dimmed by the Sunday games ahead.

"Nah, I ain't worried about the NBA tonight," Cube said. "I've got my own league to worry about right now."

The Big3 has hit snags like any growing sports league, but it showcases its former slam dunk champs in a national TV deal with CBS, expanded this year from eight teams to 12, hits 18 markets in 11 weeks and dropped the minimum age requirement to 27.

Cube, though, wants the Big3 in Season3 to get, well, bigger.

"We need more interest from mainstream sports media outside of when I'm doing an interview," Cube



In this July 16, 2017, file photo, LL Cool J, second from front left, and Ice Cube watch the action as The Power plays the Ghost Ballers during the first half of a BIG3 basketball game in Philadelphia.

AP Photo/Rich Schultz, File

said. "Having this level of talent, I didn't think it would be as hard as it is to just get national attention on the league. It's being done top class with some of the biggest names to ever play basketball. We've got basketball gods as part of this league. I don't understand, what's not to like?"

At Temple, fans roamed the concourse sipping \$10 Big3 Baller Lemonade (Bacardi rum and lemonade) and waiting to pounce from their seats for a photo op of a Hall of Famer like Big3 coach Julius Erving. Some Big3 players might even sit next to fans in the lower bowl — yes, that was former Knicks guard Nate Robinson in a Philadelphia Phillies Bryce Harper jersey leaping out of his seat high-fiving players and fans. And while the star power may not rival the A-listers at a Lakers or Knicks game, Cube sat next to Kentucky coach John Calipari and just a few seats down from fellow rapper/actor LL Cool J in the front row.

Philadelphia basketball icon Sonny Hill turned to league commissioner Clyde Drexler and told him, "Great crowd for no promotion."

That's part of Cube's beef.

The lower bowl was pretty full at Temple and fans stretched to the second level, some there on a 2-for-1 ticket deal, to catch a glimpse of former 76ers Reggie Evans and Jason Richardson, Oden, Glen "Big Baby" Davis and Carlos Boozer. It's no Dream Team, but the collection of past-their-primetime players still put on a show of flashy dunks and extra-long range shooting that reminded fans why they were NBA starters and lottery picks. The half-court game wipes out the big man lumbering down the court playing little defense. When Ricky Davis hit a 3-pointer for Ghost Ballers, he simply turned around and took two steps toward Bivouac's Will Bynum to man up.

TV ratings peaked at about 395,000 a game last

year on Fox and the first week of action this year on CBS averaged 900,000 viewers.

"We're close to being in profit," Cube said. "We've still got a little work to do. But the interest is there."

Cube envisions a day when current NBA stars play in the Big3 or some retired greats (think Vince Carter) move straight from NBA retirement into a league that allows hand-checking and is home to the 14-second shot clock.

Cube, and BIG3 co-founder and owner Jeff Kwatinetz, have pushed that their brand of hooping is more than an old-timer's league.

"I think there's a snob-business to the fact that people think just because these guys are not part of the NBA, they're not the highest level of basketball that we have," Cube said. "That's just not true. The NBA only has so many spots. To be honest, the guys that we've got, the basketball IQ is 10 times better than most

players that's in the NBA. They might not be able to chase John Wall 82 games down the court, but as far as knowing how to play the game, being in shape, what's not to like?"

Big3 games have rekindled the idea of an NBA comeback for a handful of players.

"Some guys want to keep their competitive juices going," Cube said. "Some guys feel like they didn't do what they're supposed to in the league. Or didn't have the opportunity to, so they feel like they have something to prove."

Josh Childress went from the Big3 to a training camp contract with Denver. Xavier Silas signed with the Boston Celtics after a stint in the Big3. Jason Terry retired from the NBA in 2018 and signed with the Big3.

"With the money they're giving now, that's a no-brainer," Ghost Ballers forward Jamario Moon said. "A lot of us still have something left in the tank."

Oden, just 31 but one of

the biggest busts in NBA history, is using the Big3 as a final shot to have fun playing basketball in front of a 2½-year-old daughter who will need YouTube clips to see his glory days at Ohio State. Oden still feels the aches and injuries that curtailed his promising career. He trudged back to a makeshift training room area not much larger than a voting booth, pulled open a black curtain and sought treatment. Oden rubbed a scar on his left knee and complained of soreness to a trainer, walking out with both knees wrapped in bags of ice.

"I'm not hurting, hurting," Oden said with a smile. "I'm not trying to resurrect a career, believe me."

Big3 players can make at least \$100,000 per season and coaches said the league provides them an NBA-type lifestyle in travel and accommodations.

"You can't go down from what the NBA was," former Seattle SuperSonics star and Big3 coach Gary Payton said. "That's what (Cube) did. He made per diem. He gives you first-class flights. There's first-class hotels. You can't go down from that or players don't want to come."

Payton said he's long been tight with Cube and heard the pitch for the league years before its inception. Payton says he's so tight with Cube that he claimed he inspired the classic line, "It's ironic, I had the brew, she had the chronic/The Lakers beat the Supersonics" in Cube's seminal hit "It Was A Good Day."

"That was because of me! He wanted to get at me," Payton said, laughing. "That's good. He did it, man. That's why he put Seattle on there, because we used to beat on LA a lot."

Cube wants to give his players more of what they miss from their NBA days, such as Big3 highlights as a regular staple on highlight reels and published game stories that treat the players seriously and not just as a "where are they now?" curiosity.

"In a perfect world, nobody's worried about me in three, four, five years," Cube said. "They're just worried about the league and what it's doing."

NASCAR ready for 1 final round of Daytona summer fireworks

By JENNA FRYER
AP Auto Racing Writer

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — The midpoint of the NASCAR season is here, making one last holiday weekend run at its birthplace, trying as always to deliver a white-knuckled thrill fest on the high banks of Daytona International Speedway.

The series is riding a high into Saturday night's race following Alex Bowman's first career Cup victory last week and a new rules package that NASCAR leadership believes has immensely improved the on-track product.

"It's been an extraordinary year," Steve Phelps, who took over as president of NASCAR late last season, said Friday. "I think the racing product has been exceptional. By and large, the fans are incredibly excited about what they see."

The numbers support Phelps' assertion that the racing is indeed more competitive than it was this time last season, when Kevin Harvick, Kyle Busch and Martin Truex romped over the competition during a summer stretch in which the three could not be beat. There have been 602 green flag passes for the lead in 17 races, up from 383 at this point last year. The average number of lead changes is nearly 19 per race, up from 15.88, and four races this season have produced record-setting green flag passes for the lead.

Conversely, though, there



Storm clouds move over Daytona International Speedway causing a delay of events before a NASCAR Xfinity auto race on Friday in Daytona Beach, Fla.

AP Photo/John Raoux

have been just seven winners this season, with the lion's share of the checkered flags going to Joe Gibbs Racing and Team Penske. Gibbs drivers have combined to win 10 races, and Denny Hamlin led a 1-2-3 JGR sweep of the season-opening Daytona 500, while Penske drivers have six wins.

Hendrick Motorsports is finally showing signs of a turnaround behind Bowman's victory at Chicago-

land and Chase Elliott's win at Talladega, but it can't be overlooked that the parity the new rules were intended to create has not trickled down to the rest of the field. Stewart-Haas Racing is winless so far — the organization won 12 races last year — but the domination to date by two teams does not have NASCAR worried.

"The Penske-Gibbs piece, those teams have figured things out," Phelps said.

"There have been plenty of opportunities for Kevin Harvick to have won. I think that's going to balance out. I don't think alarms are going off that it is just a Gibbs and Penske show."

Daytona, an unpredictable and often crash-filled race, has been known to produce wild-card winners and last year the victory went to Erik Jones. But winning on the 2.5-mile superspeedway requires strategy, a lot

of luck and, lately, alliances made through the garage.

Hamlin and the Gibbs group brokered a deal with Hendrick Motorsports before the Daytona 500 to work together while drafting, and that put three Gibbs drivers on the podium. The Chevrolet camp fumed that Hendrick would work with rival manufacturer Toyota, while the Ford drivers bickered they didn't do enough to try to put the blue oval in

victory lane.

By Talladega in April, the heads of Ford and Chevy demanded their teams work with one another, and it worked for the first Chevrolet win of the season.

The plotting for Saturday night began before the teams even arrived in Daytona.

"We were talking about it just the other day as a group," said Gibbs driver and defending race winner Jones. "We've got some strong race cars. Unfortunately, there is only five Toyotas out there and that doesn't give us a lot to work with, especially with the other manufacturers having more."

"We will do all we can. I know we will have fast cars, but it's definitely going to be manufacturer driven with the other two linking up and sticking together. I think they saw what Toyota has done in the past."

Tension started in the first practice of the weekend, on Thursday afternoon when Brad Keselowski deliberately rear-ended William Byron to send a message that he will not tolerate blocking during the race. It might have been the warning shot on what Saturday night could look like in the final race run at Daytona on the July Fourth weekend.

The event is being moved to August next season as the regular-season finale, ending a run that began in 1959. The change is part of a scheduling shake-up that fans have demanded, with more changes coming in 2021.