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Planning All-Star Weekend

NBA coordinator Gail Hunter on how AS10 was set-up.

by Kyle Stack

With the National Football League season completed and Major League Baseball two months from Opening Day, it's the NBA's time to capture the sports world's attention with its signature All-Star Weekend. This year, the NBA is doing it bigger than ever. Dallas will host the weekend for the first time since 1986, with events beginning Feb. 11 and wrapping up Feb. 14 with the 60th annual All-Star Game, which will be played in 80,000-plus seat Cowboys Stadium.

As Senior Vice President of Events and Attractions for the NBA, Gail Hunter holds the task of ensuring the All-Star operation runs as planned. Among the many year-round and All-Star-related events under her control is NBA Jam Session, a three-day carnival-like event which will run February 11-13 at the Dallas Convention Center. SLAMonline recently spoke with Hunter about this year's Jam Session, her other All-Star responsibilities and exactly how the NBA will play a basketball game in the Dallas Cowboys' new stadium.

SLAM: What are your responsibilities related to All-Star Weekend?

Gail Hunter: It's kind of a hybrid set of responsibilities because you know you're the master of nothing but you're involved in everything. I am basically the main liaison between the NBA, the host committee and all the city agencies. I coordinate monthly meetings with the League and the North Texas host committee, which is about 60 individuals from Dallas, Arlington, Fort Worth — the visitor's convention bureaus, public safety offices, the fire and transportation departments. We put together the overall operational plan.

SLAM:When does the planning for the weekend begin?

GH: About a year ahead. Last year, January 4, we came down and had our initial meeting with the planning group. A group of about 60 came from North Texas to Phoenix (the host city of 2009's NBA All-Star Weekend) last year the day after the All-Star game. Then we started coming to Dallas once or twice a month.

SLAM: What unique challenges does Dallas present as an All-Star city?

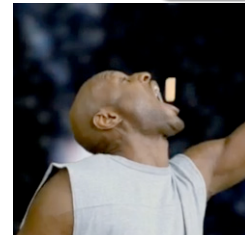
GH: We created our biggest challenge and our biggest opportunity by putting the game at Cowboys Stadium. Our Friday and Saturday events are at American Airlines Arena and we have a whole other infrastructure to be in place at Cowboys Stadium. We'll have over 80,000 fans to attend the game, so it's obviously bigger than anything we've ever done. That, as well as two different sets of municipalities and transportation plans, has been a challenge.

SLAM: What have you learned from managing recent All-Star Weekends in New Orleans and Phoenix?

GH: The biggest thing we've learned is pulling together a host committee. You bring the people in early and the various agencies have a stake in the planning actually become apart of the planning process. Within the last five years, that's been a more dynamic part of our planning. For example, you can't form a transportation plan without sitting with the police department and making them part of the discussion. Understanding what's important to the city and how their various agencies work together is critical. We spend a lot more time in the All-Star cities than we did 10 years ago.



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The Rest is Still Unwritten

SLAM: You managed Major League Baseball's All-Star FanFest from 1991-98. What have you taken from that experience to incorporate into managing Jam Session?

GH: The importance of working with the host team and building on their success and fan base. That's where it starts. I learned that from baseball. If you're in San Diego working with the Padres, then you have to be reflective of that. Being in New Orleans [in 2008] and understanding what's going on there [with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina], we have to be respectful of that. We started a whole day of service for NBA Cares.

SLAM: What are the most challenging aspects of managing Jam Session?

GH: The coordination of all the various entities that have space on the floor. It's not all NBA assets that we bring from a warehouse. We have a number of marketing partners that are apart of the event. Adidas is a presenting partner so it's coordinating what's important to adidas that we can put on the floor and that's attractive to fans. We have our own NBA initiatives that are important. It's about managing the budget to make sure we're being cost-effective. But it is our big celebration so we don't want to affect the fan's overall experience.

SLAM: What are a couple highlight events this year at Jam Session?

GH: We annually host a youth basketball tournament, the Gatorade Invitational. When we started, it was 16 boys and girls middle school teams. We typically have done a play-in tournament a couple weeks before Jam Session with 64 teams, where we play down to 16 teams inside Jam Session. This year, we're bringing all 64 teams inside Jam Session. We've created a space, five courts going simultaneously with boys and girls with 64 teams playing and going down to an eventual champion. Just the ability to bring all those kids and their families and to celebrate youth basketball is really exciting for us.

We also have our mini-arena that we built, which will seat 3,500 fans. TNT is doing their H-O-R-S-E game there, so we'll have Kevin Durant there and the D-League has their All-Star game there. (Note: Rajon Rondo and Omri Casspi will also compete in the H-O-R-S-E competition.) There are still a lot of ways for fans to get up close and personal to their favorite stars.

SLAM: A recent story noted you led a cause to plant over 2,000 trees in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Can you explain that?

GH: One of the things that was important here in North Texas, Arlington specifically, was that they wanted to leave something behind when we were gone, and that was to plant 2,010 trees. We started with the city of Arlington to build the first tree and to work with where all the trees would go. It was definitely the city's initiative and the last tree will be planted this week in Dallas.

SLAM: Given the vastness of Cowboys Stadium, how will you ensure that all the fans at the All-Star game can enjoy the game and not just watch it on the huge video board?

GH: It's not only the big screen but all the screens throughout the concourses, making sure they'll be on the game. The fact that we're in a stadium of this size, our entertainment has to be bigger. That means bringing the game entertainment up in the stands so that all the fans can enjoy it.

SLAM: Are you altering the seating arrangement of the stadium?

GH: We're building a seating bowl around the court. We're building what you would call the lower level. It's similar to what the NCAA does when they host a game in a dome. We've got 7,000 temporary seats that are being built as we speak. And the floor is put in the middle.

SLAM: You also run NBA Nation, which is a mobile basketball playground that tours around the country during the spring and summer. What do you have planned for 2010?

GH: It's going to go to ten markets and it's going to be as big as ever. We're going to continue the Sprite Slam Dunk-in contest that we did this past year. The finals are actually being held at Jam Session, so there's four finalists who will be on the court Friday night, February 12. LeBron [James] will be in attendance as one of the judges for the contest. (Note: DeMar DeRozan and Eric Gordon will compete against each other at halftime of the T-Mobile Rookie Challenge & Youth Jam that night.) Some version of that will go on with NBA Nation. We're just starting the planning on this year's tour.

SLAM: Can you explain some of the NBA's international ventures that you are overseeing?

GH: One of the things that is different is typically our schedule has been in the summer in order to take our players overseas. Last year, we did about 450 international grassroots events. This year, we're going to go year-round. We'll head into some markets we haven't been before, including to the Middle East and India. We're just at the start of the planning cycle. We'll do three of our Basketball without Borders events in Singapore, Barcelona and Senegal. Those are all new sites for that event.

SLAM: I've read that you have an affinity for social media. What role has that played in the ventures that you manage?

GH: It's made it really personal for us. For example, last year on the NBA Nation tour, we had our tour manager from the site able to share the excitement. We had NBA legend Daryl Dawkins on the tour, and he was Tweeting and posting messages on Facebook. It's allowed us to be more timely. We've had fans who have voted on events via social media. When we were taking NBA Nation to Portland last year for the first time, we started gathering fans from the Trail Blazers and people started showing up on site because they heard about it through social media. We've been able to use Twitter and Facebook to gather excitement about this All-Star Weekend. It's been phenomenal and learning what the fans have to say.

SLAM: If someone asked you to give him or her a reason to attend All-Star Weekend or to watch it on TV, what would you say?

GH: I would say it's not just about basketball. If you're a fan of entertainment, we have that covered. To watch families come to Jam Session and to watch kids interact, they can see players who are bigger than life and

'Potential' is now passé for Michael Gilchrist.

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enjoy the excitement. It's big, it's colorful and watching other people get excited has a way of energizing the city. People see other people coming from all over the world and it's something you want to be apart of. Even if you're not a fan, you get excited.

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