



Former Indiana Pacers forward Ron Artest is expected to join his new team, the Sacramento Kings, for tonight's game against the Celtics in Boston.

# Kings won't smile for long

G uys who own Las Vegas casinos had better know a thing or two about bluffing. And obviously, they relish a gamble.

But those aren't the only reasons Sacramento Kings co-owners Joe and Gavin Maloof were all smiles when the deal that brought them Ron Artest from Indianapolis was finally sealed.

Artest has that effect on everybody. At first.

He's funny and sincere, he arrives full of energy, and more to the point, Artest is conscientious about showing up for work. Until he loses interest.

And then? Well, the Maloof brothers probably know something about that, too. Plenty of people walk out of their Palms Hotel and Casino every night with fewer dollars and less sense than they walked in with.

Who knew they had so much in common with their customers?

"We're gamblers," Gavin Maloof said. "So we're going to take a chance on him."

As he spoke, Joe was standing nearby. This was Wednesday in Madison Square Garden, where the Kings arrived to play the Knicks. Separated by a few feet during a whirlwind round of interviews, it seemed as though the two were sharing a script.

"We're gamblers," echoed Joe.



Jim Litke

Neither was much more forthcoming about their plans to keep Artest happy and focused and how it will differ from what the Bulls and Pacers tried.

"The Kings are a family," Joe said.

A family with a depleted roster and a lousy record, it should be noted. And a coach, Rick Adelman, who was overmatched trying to keep semiprofessional troublemaker Chris Webber in line.

Who do you think will be favored in the inevitable Adelman-Artest standoff? And will the Palms take bets?

"All that's in the past," Gavin said at another point. "We want to look forward; otherwise we wouldn't have made this happen."

The problem with Artest is not just his past, but his pattern.

With each new beginning, he says all the right things, works his tail off and earns the respect of his new teammates and old adversaries on the court.

And then he does something to screw it up.

He throws an elbow at a meaningless juncture in a game or a fit after a tough loss. He gets fined or suspended, or both. He comes back saying all the right things, working his tail off ... and then decides he needs more time off to produce a rap record.

Artest was that way for more than two seasons in Chicago and for 4½ seasons in Indianapolis after that. He never lied or played to get out of work, the way Dennis Rodman did (whose number "91" Artest wore for a while in tribute). He never manipulated team executives, coaches or teammates to get his way, the way Michael Jordan did.

Maybe that's why people who've spent time with Artest say he's so open and honest — almost childlike — that it's difficult to stay mad at him for long.

And why, even as he nudged Artest out the door, Pacers boss Donnie Walsh wished him well.

"Maybe this was not the right team for a guy like Ronnie," Walsh said. "Really, Ronnie couldn't get out from under it, and I hope he does in Sacramento because everyone needs a fresh start."

Artest conceded as much Thursday in a rambling interview with ESPN from his home. He wished the Pacers and their new hire, Peja Stojakovic, well.

He said he would miss Indianapolis and that his wife and four kids wanted to stay there. He left out the part about jettisoning most of last season and the first half of this one, but he's apologized enough for that.

Even though he's scheduled to join the Kings for tonight's game in Boston, Artest said he still felt like a "Hoosier." He was, as always, completely sincere.

Go back and find as many stories as you can about Artest's return to the Pacers after his central role in the "Malice at the Palace" episode.

He talked about being content and ready to go. About spending time at home with family and maturing. About learning his lesson and loving Indianapolis.

Pacers president Larry Bird, who's nearly impossible to con, talked back then about how much he admired Artest.

"Not for what he did," Bird said, "but how he's come back and worked, and he's done things to improve himself."

Then he posed with a smiling Artest for the cover of Sports Illustrated's NBA preview. Only Bird's expression doesn't give away anything, perfect for a man about to call somebody's bluff.

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## Kings got better end of trade, but only if Artest behaves

By JOE DAVIDSON  
SACRAMENTO (CALIF.) BEE

### COLUMN

The reaction across the NBA on the Peja Stojakovic-Ron Artest deal was that both teams benefited. Change was paramount for both parties.

And a controlled Artest can be a dominating Artest.

"It's a good trade for everybody now, until they start playing with these guys," Hawks forward Al Harrington told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution before Wednesday's game against Cleveland. "Indiana gets some much-needed scoring punch, and the Kings get that much-needed defensive presence."

"Right now it looks real good.

But if Ron-Ron is right, Sacramento will get the better end of that deal."

Minnesota coach Dwane Casey told the Minneapolis Star-Tribune before his team played Memphis on Wednesday that the Kings have the right coach to work with Artest in Rick Adelman.

"Rick has a good disposition about him, and he'll be able to deal with (the trade) and handle (Artest)," he said. "The Kings will be better defensively."

"The personality of the team will change. Ron presents a different problem at the other end

of the floor. Defensively, he takes an option away from you or neutralizes it."

Retired NBA great Scottie Pippen wrote for NBA.com, "If you have to make a judgment on what's going on with just the trade as of (Wednesday), Artest is probably a better player than Peja and Sacramento got the best of the deal."

"From a basketball standpoint, Artest brings more to the game than Peja. Indiana (needs) a guy like Peja. From the Kings' perspective, Artest can be a vital part of the present and the future."

"Artest isn't an average player. You're talking about a guy who can go out and defend four positions and can play offensively in

four different positions."

Pippen added that the Kings had to do something to salvage their season.

"If you're Sacramento and you've lost what they've lost and haven't quite gotten back to that contending level that you enjoyed when you were battling the Lakers perennially in the playoffs, Artest can be the kind of boost that you are looking for," he wrote. "Artest is going to bring something that we haven't seen there: more toughness and a bad-boy type of mentality."

"The change of scenery could be great for Artest. ... Sacramento is currently not one of the top eight teams in the Western Conference. Artest can change

that, if he wants to."

Jim O'Brien, a former head coach with Boston and Philadelphia, wrote in a column for ESPN.com that Artest provides the Kings a needed new element of defense, regardless of risks.

"Any team trading for Ron Artest knows that it is taking a chance," O'Brien wrote. "The Kings go into this, I'm sure, with their eyes wide open."

"Considering Stojakovic's salary situation, it is probably a decent roll of the dice. Artest will immediately bring an attitude that will challenge his teammates to take their defense up a notch or two or three."

"Chemistry will be a huge issue now in Sacramento, not

necessarily in the short run when Artest has to be on his best behavior, but in the long run."

Terry Porter, a former Kings assistant and head coach for the Milwaukee Bucks, wrote in a blog for NBA.com explaining how the Kings' personality has changed with the trade.

"Artest is definitely going to bring an edge, and defensively he's going to bring something they really haven't had in Sacramento," he wrote.

"It's going to give them a shot in the arm, something they need right now."

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## • Image

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into the habit of contending.

Reclaiming their dignity will be a longer yet equally important process.

The brawl did more than wreck a season. It created a permanent stain that will never go away. The Pacers can no more distance themselves from that infamous scene than Kermit Washington can from the notorious punch that crushed the face of Rudy Tomjanovich.

Indiana's legacy and the brawl are interlocked. Video seals the intertwined fate, an indelible rap more befitting a franchise that had already earned an unsavory reputation. The Oakland Raiders and the Detroit Pistons' "Bad Boys" immediately come to mind.

Sadly, now, so do the Pacers. Before Artest changed everything, the only image problem the

Pacers ever had was anonymity. No crime in that. The worst they were ever guilty of was too many losing seasons during their first 17 or so years of NBA operation.

But winning fixed that. And then Artest broke it. Not just with his mad dash into the stands at The Palace of Auburn Hills, but with a series of juvenile and often boorish behavior that brought dishonor to the franchise.

Leading the league in flagrant fouls is no badge of honor. Neither is getting yourself suspended multiple times by the league and your own team in a single season.

Neither is requesting time off during the season to promote a rap album. Neither is letting your team down in the playoffs (the season before the brawl) with bizarre, and yet unexplained, behind-the-scenes antics that didn't get reported until long after the postseason.

This one player showered more shame on this franchise and this city than any losing streak or series of losing seasons ever did. No one player, coach or front-

office executive ever defiled himself and besmirched the reputations of those around him in a remotely similar way.

In that regard, Artest is — or should I say, was — truly one-of-a-kind. And let's hope they throw away the mold.

Yes, he's someone else's problem now, but he still leaves behind problems.

It's not official, but another season seems destined for the rubbish heap.

It was heading that direction long before Jermaine O'Neal went down. His injury simply put the inevitable in overdrive.

So once again, we can only say, "Wait until next season." Maybe the Pacers will contend, maybe they won't.

But they won't have Artest. And because of that maybe, just maybe, they'll have earned back a bit of self-respect.

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## Kobe seeks suitable follow-up to 81

By JOHN NADEL  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

### LOS ANGELES

Kobe Bryant says it's just another game. Yeah, right.

When the Los Angeles Lakers host Golden State tonight, the sports world will be watching to see what Bryant comes up with as an encore to his 81-point performance.

"We'll just go out there, do what we do, try to win the game," Bryant said before practice Thursday. "That's about it. Just go out there and do what we do, same old thing. Punch the clock."

"It's just normal; it really is." Bryant scored 55 of his 81 points in the second half Sunday night as the Lakers rallied from an 18-point deficit for an 18-point

victory against the Toronto Raptors. It was the second-highest single-game total in NBA history, behind Wilt Chamberlain's astonishing 100-point performance nearly 44 years ago.

Chamberlain scored 58 points in his next game, so Bryant needs 77 to equal the two-game record.

"Kobe's going to have to resist or cave in to that temptation," Lakers coach Phil Jackson said.

Bryant said as long as people are excited about tonight's game, it doesn't matter why.

"It's good for us," he said. "I think if anything, it's given a lot of writers a lot to talk about, whether it's good, bad or indifferent."

Bryant said he feels good about the Lakers' recent progress. They've reached the halfway point of the season with a 22-19 record thanks to a 7-3 record in their past 10 games. Bryant has averaged 44.5 points during that stretch, raising his season average to an NBA-leading 35.9.

"We've made some significant strides," Bryant said. "I look for us to make more significant strides. We're not in a position where we're playing our best basketball."

After facing the Warriors, the Lakers open a seven-game road trip Sunday in Detroit against the streaking Pistons, who have a league-best 35-5 record.

"We want to go into the road trip playing with some momentum, playing with some kind of rhythm," Bryant said.

Jackson said he hasn't given any thought to how many points Bryant might score against the slumping Warriors (19-22), who've dropped eight of their past 10 games, including a 110-104 loss to the Lakers in Oakland on Jan. 14. Bryant scored 38 in that game.

"We're not looking for Kobe to score 50 or 30 or 80," Jackson said. "We're just looking for it to fit together. We want players to blend their talents together."

## • Injury

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE B1)

compensate in certain areas," O'Neal said. "The area where I got the tear is one of the areas that's been bothering me an awful lot, and it just got to the point my left ankle was hurting in the second half of games. I was really overcompensating at the hip area, which put a lot of stress on that (groin) area."

O'Neal leads the Pacers with 20.9 points and 9.8 rebounds per game. Stojakovic has a 16.5-point scoring average. He is expected to

join the team today, though he won't play tonight against the Cavaliers.

Indiana has a 21-20 record and is third in the Central Division.

"Anytime you can acquire a player with his abilities as a shooter and a scorer — and we happen to think he's a better defender than people give him credit for — we certainly need what he can bring us, especially with Jermaine out now," Carlisle said.

Artest, who was suspended by the NBA for instigating a brawl with Detroit fans early last season, averaged 19.4 points for the first 16 games this year.

He was deactivated in early December after asking to be

traded, however, and that distraction and the recurring injuries to other players started a steady slide for the Pacers.

"When things are going bad, you want to be there and play and help the team win," O'Neal said. "Unfortunately, that mind-frame ultimately hurt my team because I hurt myself by coming back too early."

O'Neal said he would let the groin heal completely and wouldn't return too early.

"It's torn. I don't have any choice," he said. "I can barely walk straight, so I know I can't play. ... The serious nature of this injury could be career-threatening down the road."

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