

Prokhorov Pledges Better N.J. Nets

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Devin Harris going for a shot in the Nets' 101-98 win over the Pistons. **Bill Kostroun**

NEWARK, New Jersey — Billionaire Mikhail Prokhorov said the New Jersey Nets will be better, although he backed off his bold prediction of making the playoffs this season.

In a champagne toast before New Jersey's season-opening 101-98 victory over the Detroit Pistons on Wednesday night, Prokhorov asked fans to give the Nets time to rebound from a franchise-worst, 12-win season.

"We have 82 games you know; at the end of the season we will be much better," said Prokhorov, the first non-North American owner of a National Basketball Association franchise. "We will be much better with time."

His first game as the owner certainly was better, as the Nets rallied from a seven-point deficit in the final 1:40 to win, allowing Prokhorov to stand and cheer his team at the final buzzer.

A year ago, the team lost an NBA record 18 straight games to start the season.

One of Russia's richest men, Prokhorov purchased 80 percent of the Nets and 45 percent of

the Barclays Center Arena project in Brooklyn, New York, from developer Bruce Ratner late last year.

Since Prokhorov took over, the Nets have changed drastically.

Billy King has replaced Rod Thorn as general manager. Avery Johnson is the new coach and there are only four players back from last season's 12-70 team.

"It's a young team; it's 11 new players," Prokhorov said. "We just need time."

The self-assured Russian quipped that he was calm before watching his team play at the Prudential Center and he was hoping that his team could have some fun.

Prokhorov did not have much fun getting to the United States. His plane was delayed, and he arrived at the arena less than an hour before game time. He intended to spend the rest of the week in the United States, seeing his team play three times, including a Sunday matinee against LeBron James and the Miami Heat.

"It's a competitive league, and I like challenges," Prokhorov said.

With the free-spending Prokhorov in control, the Nets thought they had a shot at landing James, Chris Bosh or Dwyane Wade in the attractive free agent market in July. Instead, they failed to lure any stars to New Jersey.

Prokhorov said he learned that the Nets lacked drawing power to lure superstars.

"When you have the worst record in the league, it's not easy to break the role between the team franchise and the great players, but the station is changing and I am very optimistic."

The Nets plan to play their home games in Newark for the next two seasons, and Prokhorov was positive that the team's new arena in Brooklyn would be ready for 2012-13.

Prokhorov laughed about the billboard battle the Nets and Knicks are waging in Brooklyn. The Knicks put one up recently, featuring Amare Stoudemire.

"I saw the picture, but I think Amare, he is very sad," Prokhorov said. "It looks like he wants to play in Brooklyn in a couple of years."

Prokhorov would not comment on the possibility of the Nets acquiring Carmelo Anthony from Denver, which was rumored before the season. He also would not comment on the upcoming labor talks with the players association, telling reporters to talk to Commissioner David Stern, who was at the game to announce that the NBA draft would be held there in 2011.

Unlike the previous owner, Prokhorov did not sit courtside for the game.

"I like to have a bird's eye [view] because it's very important for me to understand what is the structure, what is the logic of the team," said Prokhorov, who likes to play basketball when home. "When you sit courtside, you feel the emotion and it is not easy to understand what is going on."

Finishing up his meeting, Prokhorov took a sip of champagne. He rarely touches alcohol.

When asked about taking a sip, he quipped that watching the Nets might make him addicted to sipping champagne.

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