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Respect for veteran sign of HEAT bonding

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By **CHRIS PERKINS**
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As soon as Heat forward Juwan Howard took the microphone and stepped to center court Sunday at AmericanAirlines Arena, he was serenaded by a now-familiar chorus from teammates: "17! 17!"

Howard was chosen among all the Heat players to address about 5,000 season ticket holders before Sunday's public scrimmage. His words were cordial, but the thing that stood out was the chant and laughs from teammates: "17! 17!"

"Those guys are funny, man," Howard said with a smile.

It seems anytime Howard does something good nowadays, it's followed by the chant. The refrain refers to his graybeard status in the NBA.

"My teammates are acknowledging the fact I've been playing 17 years, and they're showing they appreciate that and respect it," Howard said. "It's a testament to them being good guys."

It's also a testament to the Heat managing to maintain a sense of humor in what are mildly trying times.

With guard Dwyane Wade out of the lineup due to a strained right hamstring and custody hearings in Chicago, forward LeBron James still recovering from a right hamstring issue, and practically the entire backcourt hobbled by some ailment, the Heat can still have fun. That's not easy when you consider the high-profile sniping and bright spotlight focused on this team.

But Howard's treatment is a prime example of how this team is bonding. He gets serenaded anytime he does something.

"In practice if I make a shot, if I beat somebody down the court, they say, '17,' " Howard said with a sheepish grin. "I guess that's my nickname."

All up and down the Heat roster you see signs guys are bonding and getting along. Guard Eddie House, who forward James Jones called a "glue guy" and a good person to have in the locker room because he gets along with everyone, is emerging as a large personality. So is swingman Mike Miller.

In fact, those two came up with Howard's nickname.

"Mike Miller, and then of course Eddie House added on to it, then it just trickled down, like a domino effect," Howard said, shaking his head. "Those are funny guys, man."

--Wade announced on his Twitter account he won't be at Monday's game against Charlotte in Miami. Wade has been in Chicago tending to custody matters related to his divorce. But he wouldn't play anyway. He's still sidelined by a strained right hamstring. Coach Erik Spoelstra said he's still planning to have Wade for the Oct. 26 season opener at Boston.

Miami has three pre-season games remaining counting Monday's game against Charlotte. It plays Thursday at Atlanta and Friday against Orlando in Tampa. Considering the Heat opens the regular season with three games in four days it's unlikely Wade will play in the pre-season, opting instead to be as healthy as possible for that busy start of the season.

--The estimated crowd of 5,000 season ticket holders (the public scrimmage was only open to season ticket holders) at the Triple-A was a good draw considering the scrimmage went head-to-head against the Miami Dolphins, who, for now, before the NBA season has started, cling to the crown of Most Popular Team in South Florida.

--Sunday's public scrimmage only lasted for one 12-minute period. The team had already gone through a full workout on their practice court upstairs at the Triple-A.

For the record, red team starters were G Carlos Arroyo, G Mike Miller, F LeBron James, F Chris Bosh and C Joel Anthony. White teams starters were G Pat Beverley, G Kenny Hasbrouck, F James Jones, F Udonis Haslem and F Zydrunas Ilgauskas.

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