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Wednesday, April 23, 2003

SPORTS
THE BATTALION

New arena not yet paying dividends

By Mark Babineck
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HOUSTON — As the clock counts down to the opening of their new downtown arena, the Houston Rockets have yet to sell about two-thirds of the building's 94 luxury boxes that were among the main reasons they wanted a new taxpayer-backed home.

Team President George Postolos said Tuesday that the \$200 million, 775,500-square-foot arena is on schedule to open for concerts and other events in September. He also said he's confident the Harris County/Houston Sports Authority will reach a buyout agreement on the Rockets' lease at Compaq Center, which runs through the first month of the NBA season.

Many of the suites that have sold are among the best in the house, Postolos said, but some prime suites remain available.

"Not all the good ones are gone," Postolos said during a news conference at the team's downtown sales office, which includes a mock suite. "People still have time to get down here."

The Rockets complained that Compaq Center, the NBA's second-oldest arena,

didn't have the luxury boxes and other moneymaking amenities needed to allow the franchise to remain financially competitive. The arena, built in 1976, was among the first to have such suites and boasts 20 skyboxes above the upper deck.

At least one of those tenants, Dynegey Inc., said Tuesday it will not re-up at the new arena as it and other companies tighten their belts during difficult economic times. Dynegey spokesman John Sousa said the Houston-based company sometimes donated use of its suite to several charitable organizations this season rather than use it to wine and dine clients.

Dynegey is ditching its suite as part of its "continuing focus on reducing our administrative costs," Sousa said.

Also unresolved is the name of the building, which currently operates under the working title of Houston Arena. Postolos said he has a short list of Houston companies as well as a list of national and international companies, some of which he said were attracted to the Rockets because of the buzz generated by Chinese center Yao Ming.

"It may not be a traditional sports advertiser," Postolos said.

Like the suite sales and the Compaq Center lease, Postolos said he was confident a naming rights deal would be in place before the 2003-04 season. But also like the other issues, there's work left to be done.

The new arena boasts 18,500 new seats, some of which already have been installed in the second deck. The building increases seating capacity by 2,250 and capacity in the lower bowl, which Postolos said fans have told them they prefer, by 2,800 to nearly 10,000.

Postolos added that 2,500 of the seats — more than the total added capacity — will cost \$25 or less, he hoped would appeal to fans who can't afford the high-dollar seats.

Improvements fans should notice once Compaq Center will be wider concourses, more restrooms and concession stands and the highest resolution video screens in the NBA, a title Postolos said is currently held by the Dallas Mavericks' new home.

"We appreciate the high standard the set," Postolos said of American Airlines Center, which opened in 2001. "But a technology has advanced, we're in a position where we'll be able to have incredible high-resolution screens."

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Texans narrow field of draft selections

By Mark Babineck
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HOUSTON — The Houston Texans have narrowed down the potential choices for their No. 3 overall pick to two players, assuming they don't trade it, general manager Charley Casserly said Tuesday.

Casserly, addressing reporters ahead of Saturday's draft, for obvious reasons couldn't name names, but said the team theoretically would have two players with whom to begin negotiating if Cincinnati and Detroit use their picks as expected.

"We have settled on a couple of players and we'll make a

final decision in which ones we'll take before Saturday's draft," Casserly said, adding that they've also placed a trade value on each of their picks and will "entertain trades" now through their time on the clock.

If the Bengals were to take Southern Cal quarterback Carson Palmer and the Lions pick Michigan State receiver Charles Rogers, conventional wisdom leaves the Texans to choose from names such as Miami receiver Andre Johnson, Arizona State defensive end Terrell Suggs, Kansas State cornerback Terence Newman and Utah offensive lineman Jordan Gross.

Casserly also predicted that



CASSERLY

if a team were to trade up for the Texans' pick, it would be a short jump up the board rather than a franchise moving from far back

in the first-round pack. He added that the team has set a limit on how far down it's willing to trade.

He also reminded reporters that the first pick isn't the only one of its league-high 13 that the Texans could trade.

"We'll be flexible in every round, trading up or down," he said. "We would like to

acquire picks for next year."

Overall, Casserly gave high marks to the available crop of wide receivers and defensive linemen, while saying the pool of running backs and offensive tackles "maybe not as strong as in other drafts."

Casserly drew a chuckle when asked if he and other general managers read materials written by "draftniks" such as ESPN's Mel Kiper Jr. and Ourlads Scouting Services. Casserly said he receives and reads the information, taking a few nuggets away here and there, but would never base a draft on such publications.

"It's good stall reading," Casserly said.

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