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AAU tourneys fight over drawing cards

By TRISTAN AIRD LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL

There figure to be plenty of competitive games this week as AAU basketball season heats up in Southern Nevada. But the fiercest battles might happen behind the scenes, between attorneys and shoe company executives fighting over which tournaments can showcase certain teams and players.

Officials for the Las Vegas Fab 48, scheduled to begin Wednesday at Bishop Gorman, have hired counsel that is considering legal action against Nike for allegedly interfering with the tournament.

In a letter obtained by the Review-Journal, attorney Bryan Freedman claims to Nike general counsel Hilary Krane that several teams featuring elite college basketball prospects have been threatened with the loss of future Nike sponsorship if they play in the Fab 48. The letter, dated July 12, claims that Nike demanded some teams breach their written contracts with the Fab 48.

"Fab 48 is not affiliated with any shoe or apparel company, so participation in the Fab 48 by Nike-sponsored teams does not violate the terms of Nike's grassroots basketball sponsorship arrangements," the letter reads.

"Nonetheless, Nike's representatives have been acting in a manner that can only be construed as an unlawful attempt to destroy our client's business."

Freedman, a Los Angeles-based attorney, said that as of Monday afternoon no lawsuit had been filed against Nike, but remains "very much so" a possibility.

A phone message left Monday with Krane's office was not returned.

The issue is contentious because fans and media flock to tournaments featuring elite recruits. Losing marquee players and teams can mean less revenue.

The consensus top prospect in the 2013 class is Chicago Simeon forward Jabari Parker, who plays for the Mac Irvin Fire AAU team. Parker, who has graced the cover of Sports Illustrated, recently announced he trimmed the list of colleges he is considering to 10 finalists.

Parker was originally scheduled to play in the Fab 48, but Mac Irvin Fire coach Mike Irvin confirmed Monday that his team instead will play in the Las Vegas Classic. The Las Vegas Classic is organized by Bigfoot Hoops, run by longtime Nike grassroots coach Hal Pastner.

"We just changed it," Irvin said of Mac Irvin Fire's tournament affiliation.

Parker's playing status, however, could be in limbo because he recently suffered a fracture in his right foot, according to the Chicago Tribune.

Freedman's letter claims that Nike has essentially used bullying tactics to steer elite teams away from the Fab 48.

"If we start subpoenaing bank records and documents, we may find out there are monetary incentives," Freedman added.

Asked why Nike might interfere with a tournament that has no shoe company sponsor, Freedman said: "Absolute power corrupts absolutely."

"The reality is, Nike is aware of the fact that we have agreements with teams," Freedman said. "They have no legitimate basis to direct teams to not play in the tournament, especially when it's a tournament that's not sponsored by a competing shoe company."

Gorman coach Grant Rice, an organizer of the Fab 48, said he was "surprised and baffled" some Nike-sponsored teams had backed out of the Fab 48.

Gorman is a Nike-sponsored athletics program, and Rice said some Nike teams remained in the Fab 48.

"The bottom line is, the show goes on, and there are enough teams for all the tournaments to be successful," Rice said.

The Fab 48 began in July 2010 with a marquee field of teams, and continued to grow last summer. The event filled the void left by the Reebok Summer Championships, which were suspended in February 2010 when Reebok yanked its sponsorship amid the sagging economy.

The other marquee local event is the adidas Super 64, which will be without some star power at Rancho this week after the adidas-sponsored Florida Rams and three other teams were recently banned by the NCAA because of ties to a professional agent.

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