

Beat: Sports

Ex-NBA star Rodman returns to N. Korea for Kim's birthday

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USPA News - Former U.S. basketball superstar Dennis Rodman arrived in North Korea on Monday along with a team of former NBA players to play an exhibition game to mark the birthday of his friend Kim Jong-un, saying the leader of the reclusive country is trying to make changes. Rodman, who is nicknamed "The Worm" and was known for his fierce defensive and rebounding abilities during his basketball career, landed at the international airport in the North Korean capital of Pyongyang on Monday.

He was accompanied by a team that includes former NBA All-Stars Kenny Anderson, Cliff Robinson, and Vin Baker. It comes just two weeks after Rodman concluded his third trip to North Korea to help train the country's national basketball team ahead of Wednesday's exhibition game to mark Kim's birthday. The supreme leader is believed to turn 31 on January 8, which makes him the world's youngest head of state. "I just want the world to know, not just the United States, that these guys didn't have to take their time and effort out of their holidays with their families to come here," Rodman told the BBC on Monday, referring to other NBA players on his team. "This is a great thing they wanted to do. People need to understand that." Rodman added that the exhibition game is not about money, but only about "having connections and opening doors for people to come here and say, 'Hey, North Korea is not bad,' you know?" He told the BBC: "The marshal (Kim) is actually trying to change this country in a great way." Former NBA player Charles D. Smith, who will also participate in Wednesday's game, said the team is made up of "a lot of guys that really care." "It's not about bringing dream-teams. It's about guys that are coming that want to be a part of this, that care, and really, that care about humanity," he told the BBC. Rodman, after returning from his third trip last month, had told reporters that Kim was too "busy" to meet during his short visit, but added that they would meet again at a later date. "I'm not worried about it. I will see him again," the ex-NBA star was quoted as saying on December 23, despite previously having said that he was eager to have "a good conversation" with "friend for life" Kim. The basketball superstar has repeatedly insisted he would not bring up sensitive issues such as the recent execution of Kim's uncle and the continued imprisonment of a Korean American man. "I'm just going over there to do a basketball game and have some fun," Rodman said last month, as quoted by China's CNTV. Rodman first visited North Korea in late February after tensions had soared in the wake of the North's third nuclear test and Pyongyang's hostile response to new international sanctions and joint South Korea-U.S. military drills. He attended an exhibition basketball match with Kim and called the North Korean leader "an awesome guy" and his "friend," raising eyebrows in the United States and elsewhere. His second visit took place in September.

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