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Lakers' Jordan Clarkson downplays financial component of pending free agency

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Lakers guard Jordan Clarkson works with children during his Nike JC6 Basketball Camp on Tuesday in Corona. MINDY SCHAUER, STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

By MARK MEDINA / STAFF WRITER

CORONA – The infectious smile on Jordan Clarkson’s face masked something he rarely felt on the basketball court.

“I’m tired,” Clarkson said. “I’m tired right now.”

The [Lakers](#)' second-year guard could compete in seemingly every practice drill and every minute of every game. Lately though, Clarkson has felt jet lag since making both a Nike-promotional trip to the Philippines and to Beijing on behalf of NBA Cares.

That did not stop Clarkson from spending his 24th birthday on Tuesday overseeing his inaugural basketball camp at the Players Edge Sports Complex. Nor has it inhibited Clarkson from completing daily workouts and training sessions with the Lakers at their practice facility in El Segundo.

So it seemed fitting Clarkson unveiled T-shirts for the campers with the message: "Basketball Never Stops." After all, Clarkson's continuous devotion to the craft he loves explained his ascension from the No.46 pick in the 2014 NBA Draft to a significant Lakers starter on a young roster. That dedication could also result in a hefty payday for Clarkson, who will become a restricted free agent later this month with an expected qualifying offer.

Both Clarkson and the Lakers view [their partnership](#) as long-lasting. At what cost, though, does Clarkson expect the Lakers to show after finishing last season second in points (15.5) and first in minutes played (32.5)?

"I don't know. I'm not even looking at that kind of stuff," said Clarkson, who deferred to his sports agency, Octagon. "They can take care of all the money stuff. I'm just here about basketball."

The Lakers will have up to \$60 million in cap space to spend on a roster that will include the No.2 and No.32 picks in this month's draft, D'Angelo Russell, Julius Randle, Larry Nance Jr., Anthony Brown, Lou Williams and Nick Young. As much as the Lakers will have flexibility in filling Clarkson's pockets, they also want enough to make other splashy free-agent signings.

The Lakers can take different approaches to retain Clarkson, presuming he does not just accept a qualifying offer worth up to \$2.8 million just to become a restricted free agent again in 2017.

The Lakers could quickly negotiate a deal after July 1 to prevent any team from offering Clarkson something out of their price range. Or the Lakers could ensure more spending power in the next two years by matching any of Clarkson's offer sheets. Larry Coon, an independent NBA salary cap expert and IT director at UC Irvine, said the Lakers could pay Clarkson around \$5.5 million for the next two seasons using the so-called Gilbert Arenas rule. After that, Clarkson would then receive a hefty pay raise around \$22-\$23 million per season.

Yet, other variables will likely emerge that have nothing to do with dollars and cents. It also has to do with loyalty and appreciation.

“We had [two tough years](#), but I don’t want to be a guy that is afraid and will run away from challenges,” Clarkson said. “I want to be a part of the situation when it turns around because I was here when it was down. I never want to leave.”

Clarkson puts in a lot of hours at the Lakers’ practice facility.

He has focused on tinkering with his shot quality and decision-making with a goal of shooting at least 40 percent from 3-point range next season. He has completed endless drills to ensure better passing, pacing and finishing. And he has bulked up more and studied more film after partly contributing toward the Lakers ranking 26th out of 30 NBA teams last season in points allowed (106.9).

“We weren’t a good defensive team at all, period. Me saying that was out of frustration with myself,” Clarkson said, referring to his exit meeting. “I can be a better defender. It’s one of those things where I like to always find something wrong so I can get better.”

Presumably that would entail Clarkson’s preference to start with second-year guard D’Angelo Russell in the Lakers backcourt. Yet, that speaks more to Clarkson’s competitiveness than any sense of entitlement.

“I will do anything a team asks me to do,” Clarkson said. “If it’s to come off the bench, I would impact the game by coming off the bench. If I were to start, I would impact the game as a starter. I would impact the game either way.”

Clarkson has also tried impacting the game in other ways.

During his Nike trip to the Philippines, Clarkson accommodated underprivileged children by playing host to a clinic and handing out basketball gear. The East West Bank sponsored 50 youths, some of whom attend the local Boys and Girls Club to attend Clarkson’s camp through Thursday. Clarkson also has teamed with family members and close friends as camp instructors.

“It gives the kids energy and hope that I’m here,” Clarkson said. “I want to give them the feeling that I have confidence in them.”

In a few weeks, Clarkson will find how much confidence the Lakers have in him.