Most NBA teams need to make several roster moves just to have enough players under contract for training camp

MIAMI (AP) -- NBA arenas are about to be unlocked.

For the first time since the lockout began on July 1, NBA players are going to be welcomed back to their team facilities, said league spokesman Tim Frank. The league sent a memo to clubs Tuesday announcing the move, plus giving teams permission to begin speaking with agents at 9 a.m. Wednesday - though deals cannot yet be offered, and no contracts can be signed before Dec. 9.

Teams may host "voluntary player workouts" and physicals. Training camps will not open until Dec. 9, and the regular season is expected to begin Christmas Day with marquee matchups, including a Miami-Dallas rematch of last season's NBA finals.

A person familiar with the league's Christmas schedule told The Associated Press on Tuesday that the NBA will feature five games this year on Dec. 25 instead of the originally planned three. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because the NBA does not plan to announce the Christmas lineup until later this week. The decision for the league to schedule five Christmas

games was first reported by The New York Times.

It's not quite business-as-usual yet, but getting facilities open again is a huge boost for both teams and players.

The league also said owners, general managers, and coaches are now free to comment publicly about things such as contracts, plans for future free agent signings, the team's prospects for the upcoming season, and other comments on typical topics. Teams have not been allowed to do that during the lockout and clubs were allowed to make contact with players only with preapproval from the league.

And they still can't talk about the league's collective bargaining agreement. At least, not yet.

Since the NBA and its players reached a tentative agreement on how to end the lockout early Saturday morning, neither side has known if workouts would be permitted before camps begin. Such informal workouts are customary, typically beginning two to three weeks before camp as players begin getting themselves into the best possible condition.

When NFL camps opened after that league's lockout earlier this year, a number of players - it seemed more than usual - were either injured in the preseason or rehabilitated from offseason surgeries at a slower pace than first anticipated.

One of the byproducts of the lockout is that it kept players from meeting with team physicians and trainers, as many had been used to for years, and teams tried to find the right balance between conditioning and protecting players from risking injury by doing too much too soon.

By opening at least a week before training camps formally begin, the NBA may be able to minimize those problems somewhat.

While most of the league's players have been working out on their own or in small groups for

weeks anyway, many have said that little can replicate the experience of being at an NBA facility, replete with training rooms, whirlpools, ice tubs and other aids to recovery and rehabilitation.

Some players, including LeBron James and Dwyane Wade, spent time earlier this month at a makeshift training camp in Oregon in an effort to replicate the NBA workout environment.

"Anything you can do to get your body ready before training camp will help," Wade said at the time, before the tentative settlement was reached.

Allowing teams and agents to resume dialogue is also significant, since there are dozens of players who had contracts expire when last season ended and will try to either re-sign with their most recent teams or find new clubs.

Most NBA teams need to make several roster moves just to have enough players under contract for training camp, so having agents and club executives speaking now will speed up that process.

Among the notable free agents available: Nene, Tyson Chandler, Jamal Crawford, David West, Shane Battier, Caron Butler, Grant Hill, Josh Howard and Samuel Dalembert.

The players and owners eventually came to agreement on the framework of a new 10-year collective bargaining deal, which either side may opt out of after six years. It leaves the NBA with its second shortened season (the first was the 50-game 1998-99 season), with the hope of getting in 66 games instead of a full 82-game schedule.