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## Local resident working on NBA Finals production crew

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Wes Manakee at work in front of the I/O panels ahead of the start of the 2021 NBA Finals in Phoenix. The Sonora native and current Upton resident is working his second NBA Finals this year as a part of the production crew.

It's a little later than usual this year, but the NBA Finals are officially under way.

While area residents watch the Phoenix Suns and Milwaukee Bucks battle to decide who will raise the Larry O'Brien Trophy on television, one of their own will be working the finals behind the scenes.

Wes Manakee, a Sonora native and current Upton resident, is working as part of the NBA Finals production crew, working directly for the NBA as a broadcast technician and as what he described as a "liaison" between the television networks airing the games.

"I am super thrilled to be here. The NBA is one of my most loyal clients who happen to all be some outstanding people," Manakee said prior to Game 1 Tuesday night. "Me being here means I am growing professionally and that is incredibly exciting."

In his role, Manakee is tasked with making sure everything gets on the air without any issues. Among his responsibilities are ensuring fiber optic signals and Zoom network systems for press conferences are all running smoothly. Other tasks include implementing the replay system and feeds to and from the replay center, which is in New Jersey.

While it's a large operation with plenty of work to go around, Manakee had nothing but praise for the people he will be undergoing this endeavor with.

“We have a two city team so we have to have a cohesive crew for a seamless production and these guys are awesome,” he said.

A 2005 graduate of Central Hardin High School, Manakee went on to attend Western Kentucky University from 2011-2015, where he studied film studies and marketing.

What started as playing with his parents' VHS camera in Sonora when he was young turned into a love of cameras as he grew older. At Central Hardin, Manakee began taking television production electives and did some work with HCEC-TV. While some teachers had encouraged him to look into a career in production, Manakee said it was something that he didn't pursue initially.

Due to financial constraints, he was unable to attend a large university initially after his high school graduation. Instead, Manakee said he took some classes and worked a few jobs, including construction. Through it all, he continued to stay involved with production-related activities on the side. After being laid off from a construction job in 2008, he started focusing on getting into film school and ultimately found himself at what was then a new program at Western Kentucky.

“I dabbled in local videography, like weddings, ads and shorts while working construction locally but made the realization that I could make a real living in the camera world after going to WKU for film,” Manakee said. “WKU gave me a solid understanding of storytelling aspects, while interning as a promotions coordinator at WKU PBS introduced me to the hands on machinery of live television.”

It also was during his time in Bowling Green that he began to dabble more into the world of sports production. Prior to this, Manakee said he had not thought a career in sports would be something he would enter.

Manakee went from an internship at WKU PBS to his first Fox Sports television gig in 2013, working as cable wrangler behind a sideline camera. During this time, he began to meet people and make more connections in the industry. His sports production career continued to grow from there, culminating with a chance to work some of his first major events.

“In 2015 I walked the line at WKU and then was immediately off doing all sports all the time. This is when I got the hint that this was a huge opportunity,” Manakee said. “I got asked to come help out at the U.S. tennis Open in New York City. I was so excited to be in New York City for the first time I don't think I slept. I met an international tennis crew and have been growing with them since.”

Nowadays, Manakee estimates he works somewhere between 30-40 events a year and is on the road about 200 days a year. When not out covering major events, he works on local productions with some vacations sprinkled in between.

He has continued to stay heavily involved with tennis since that opportunity with the U.S. Open, working many international events for the world feed broadcast as well as the Tennis Channel. Manakee has worked all of the ATP 1000 tournaments and half of the grand slams.

Outside of tennis, Manakee has worked other events such as the NFL Draft, the NHL All-Star game as well as other hockey coverage, college football and basketball along the east coast and a growing number of MLS soccer games. Some of the more out-there events that rank among his favorite to work on include the Red Bull Flugtag and motocross races.

“I’ve had nothing but a good time. Obviously it is easy to say that now looking back but it has also been 12 tons of labor over the last 10 years,” Manakee said. “My most memorable moment for me would have to be in 2017 when my production coordinator complimented me on my work ethic and asked if I would travel with their tennis show internationally. I just knew what that meant: world experience and adventure on someone else’s dollar. I’ve never been the same since.”

With the NBA, Manakee has worked the All-Star game since 2017 and is working his second NBA Finals this year.

His first NBA Finals was last year as a part of the production team within the NBA Bubble at Walt Disney World near Orlando, Florida. For the average viewer, the bubble was already a different kind of sports viewing experience. For Manakee, it was unlike anything he’d worked in previously.

“Inside the bubble was like a fully immersive Disney ride. At one point we weren’t even sure that the wildlife was real. After over a hundred days of being locked in a job I’d say it’s pretty normal to lose your sense. The people made it enjoyable. Within the wide shots of the sports complex was a hallway of technical gear and people connecting networks of live viewers to the screens, a massive festival sized broadcast compound of sports trucks from all over the country and lots and lots of microphones and cameras,” Manakee said of his experience inside the bubble. “The work area was mostly just that: basketball courts and dimly lit corridors to technical and managerial work areas. Every area was roped off to where we could go based off requirements set by our credential passes and our testing badges.”

Aside from the work itself, Manakee also got to experience life inside the bubble as well.

There were rigorous health and safety protocols in place, but he was also able to see and meet a large variety of different people that, just like him, were living inside the massive complex for the duration of the remaining NBA season. This ranged from fellow production workers, to executives and players, among them LeBron James and Anthony Davis, who Manakee once saw taking a casual bike ride along the resort paths.

“At the hotels, away from the courts and broadcast centers, we swabbed our noses every day and paid close attention to our health conditions. We socialized with the national crew that was working directly with us and learned about what life was like in these other places around the states. It was a big adult summer camp. I learned pickleball and graciously got dominated by some very athletic referees. Being a 33-34 year old, I realized I need a lot more exercise than I had allowed in my 20s. They whooped me bad,” Manakee said. “There was a resort restaurant in the middle where I would see athletes at one table, executives at another and then us technicians and engineers enjoying the same kind of laughing, enjoyable atmosphere. Every once in a while, all of us would be treated at night to a SpaceX launch 60 miles in the distance. I have a book of memories I could write but I’m still recovering.”

While the bubble was hopefully a once-in-a-lifetime experience, Manakee said he was looking forward to a more normal NBA Finals this time around. An NBA Finals with fans and a finals being played in the teams’ home arenas.

“In any of these sports, it is crucial to have excited fans in the seats. The closer we get back to normal, the more excitement will return,” Manakee said. “I am ready to start hearing chants, cheers and jeers again. The players definitely feed off the fans. I feed off the fans. Yes, let’s get back to normal-ish.”

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