

Leaving NKorea, Rodman Calls Kims 'Great Leaders'
By The Associated Press
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PYONGYANG, North Korea (AP) — Ending his unexpected round of basketball diplomacy in North Korea on Friday, ex-NBA star Dennis Rodman called leader Kim Jong Un an "awesome guy" and said his father and grandfather were "great leaders."

Rodman, the highest-profile American to meet Kim since he inherited power from father Kim Jong Il in 2011, watched a basketball game with the authoritarian leader Thursday and later drank and dined on sushi with him.

At Pyongyang's Sunan airport on his way to Beijing, Rodman said it was "amazing" that the North Koreans were "so honest." He added that Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung, North Korea's founder, "were great leaders."

"He's proud, his country likes him — not like him, love him, love him," Rodman said of Kim Jong Un. "Guess what, I love him. The guy's really awesome."

At Beijing's airport, Rodman pushed past waiting journalists without saying anything.

Rodman's visit to North Korea began Monday and took place amid tension between Washington and Pyongyang. North Korea conducted an underground nuclear test just two weeks ago, making clear the provocative act was a warning to the United States to drop what it considers a "hostile" policy toward the North.

Rodman traveled to Pyongyang with three members of the professional Harlem Globetrotters basketball team, VICE correspondent Ryan Duffy and a production crew to shoot an episode on North Korea for a new weekly HBO series.

Kim, a diehard basketball fan, told the former Detroit Pistons and Chicago Bulls star that he hoped the visit would break the ice between the United States and North Korea, said Shane Smith, founder of the New York-based VICE media company.

Dressed in a blue Mao suit, Kim laughed and slapped his hands on a table during the game at Jong Ju Yong Gymnasium as he sat nearly knee to knee with Rodman. Rodman, the man who once turned up in a wedding dress to promote his autobiography, wore a dark suit and dark sunglasses, but still had on his nose rings and other piercings. A can of Coca-Cola sat on the table before him in photos shared with AP by VICE.

Smith, after speaking to the VICE crew in Pyongyang, said Kim and Rodman "bonded" and chatted in English, though Kim primarily spoke in Korean through a translator.

Thursday's game ended in a 110-110 tie, with two Americans playing on each team alongside North Koreans. After the game, Rodman addressed Kim in a speech before a crowd of tens of thousands of North Koreans and told him, "You have a friend for life," VICE spokesman Alex Detrick told AP.

At an "epic feast" later, the leader plied the group with food and drinks and round after round of toasts were made, Duffy said in an email to AP.

Duffy said he invited Kim to visit the United States, a proposal met with hearty laughter from the North Korean leader.

Kim said he hoped sports exchanges would promote "mutual understanding between the people of the two countries," the official Korean Central News Agency said.

North Korea and the U.S. fought on opposite sides of the three-year Korean War, which ended in a truce in 1953. The foes never signed a peace treaty, and do not have diplomatic relations.

Rodman's trip is the second attention-grabbing American visit this year to North Korea. Google's executive chairman, Eric Schmidt, made a four-day trip in January to Pyongyang, but did not meet the North Korean leader.

The Obama administration had frowned on the trip by Schmidt, who was accompanied by former New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, but has avoided criticizing Rodman's outing, saying it's about sports.