

Former La Salle basketball star faces drug charges

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Former La Salle University basketball star Kareem J. Townes was in Federal Custody yesterday, one day after he and a friend were arrested on charges that they sold 537 grams of crack cocaine to an undercover drug agent.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Charles B. Smith ordered Townes, 27, and Eric Hartage, 27, held at the Federal Detention Center in Center City pending a formal bail hearing Wednesday in Federal court.

"I want to say that Kareem Townes had nothing to do with this," Hartage said. Townes dressed in a hooded blue sweatshirt and jeans, said nothing during the brief court appearance except that he had hired lawyer A. Charles Peruto Jr. to represent him.

Peruto said that he was "shocked to hear that Kareem is in trouble again." Peruto said Townes was acquitted last year of cocaine-related charges in a trial in Philadelphia Common Pleas Court. "We argued that people just take advantage of his celebrity," Peruto said. "he has a contract to play in Italy for \$150,000 a year. He doesn't need to sell drugs."

Both men were charged with conspiracy to distribute and possession with intent to distribute more than 50 grams of crack cocaine. Hartage was also charged with disruption of more than five grams of crack cocaine. If indicted and convicted of the charges, said Assistant U.S. Attorney Louis J. Lappen, each could face a mandatory 10-year, no-parole prison term because of the tough federal penalties involving crack, a processed and more highly addictive form of cocaine.

Townes, of the 2200 block of Geritt Street in the Point Breeze section of South Philadelphia, had an outstanding career at South Philadelphia High School and played at La Salle record for most points in a game, 52, which he scored Feb. 4, 1995, against Loyola (111). He finished that season with an average of 25.9 points and was named to the All-Big Five team. He led his team in scoring the three seasons he played, and he sank 300 three-point baskets for his career, second most in La Salle history.

A 6-foot, 3-in guard with rail-thin legs, Townes joined the Los Angeles Lakers as an undrafted rookie after leaving La Salle and hung around through one of the roster cuts.