

Elgin Racers in it for passion of game

New owner, players live for their dreams

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Basketball has always been big to Bob Fischer, so big that he bought the minor-league Elgin Racers.

And the sport also has snared many of his players, who harbor dreams, realistic or unrealistic, of making it as professionals.

Together they debut Friday in the 2,000-seat gymnasium at Judson College in Elgin as an International Basketball League team.

"I have played organized basketball since I was a little kid. I still play, and my kids both play," said Fischer, who also owns Advanced Distribution Solutions Inc., a Hoffman Estates technology company. "I'll be doing more watching than playing in the near future."

Thomas Streeby, 32, of Elgin, is grabbing the opportunity to keep playing competitively. A maintenance engineer at an industrial waste recycling company, the 6-foot guard played ball at Taft High School in Chicago and at Elgin Community College during the 1994-1995 season.

"I may not be as fast or as athletic as I used to be, but I am smarter and physically stronger than I used to be," Streeby said.

Fischer, 43, bought the former Windy City Dawgs, which played last year at Harper College in Palatine, for \$45,000. He had been a financial sponsor of the franchise, which he said was mismanaged.

His ownership group has a solid business plan and support from Elgin and advertisers, he said.

"I am like the Oreck vacuum guy: I liked it so much I bought the team," Fischer said, adding that making money was not his motivation for buying into the 2-year-old minor league, which is based in Portland, Ore.

Fischer estimates it will cost \$100,000 to operate the team during its three-month season and another \$20,000 in league fees.

"We really wanted to be part of a big city and have a team with a city name," Fischer said. "For us, that was key."

The players aren't taking to the court for the money either, because they earn \$50 to \$300 a game. The Racers range in age from 20 to 32, and their backgrounds include playing overseas, in college and in NBA tryouts.

Many see the league as a place to hone their skills for another shot at moving up the pro basketball ladder.

For 10 years, Streety has devoted many summer weekends to competing in traveling tournaments, park district leagues and other semi-pro leagues around the Midwest. He is really excited about the opportunity to play for his "No. 1 fan," son Derrick, 10.

"We have been practicing really hard, and the coach has been drilling us really hard," he said. "I think we are ready."

Head coach Jim Condill, who has been an assistant men's basketball coach at Judson and has worked with local high school teams, said he likes what he sees.

"We've got some good people here. They are all just really good people," he said. "And I think they are all going to be good players."

John Moore, 23, of Bellwood, who played at Lewis-Clark State College in Idaho, said he dreams of the NBA but looks forward to the challenges of the IBL.

"I will bring an all-around intensity and energy to the team," he said.

Streety doesn't mind the role of mentor and believes his experience can help some of the younger players, on and off the court. "I am always willing to help guys like that," he said.

The Racers will play 22 games through June. There are 28 teams in the league, which features a 22-second shot clock--it's 24 seconds in the NBA. That and an 8-second limit to move the ball past half court are designed with scoring in mind.

"This is going to be a fast tempo, high speed, great shooting, exciting team to watch," Fischer said.

Paul Milsap, the team's marketing director, said players will participate in community events such as disaster and sports safety training as well as reading and Internet safety programs.

"The community will embrace us based on what we do throughout the year, not just the season," Milsap said.

The aim is to create a family-friendly atmosphere with low ticket prices, interactive games for children and prize giveaways.

"We want the kids to be excited to be here. They can walk right up to the players and talk to them," Milsap said.

At a recent City Council meeting, Mayor Ed Schock said he is "very excited to have them in Elgin."

Fischer said there have been hurdles to the launch, but he is confident the Racers are pointed in the right direction.

"It's like a church," he said. "It needs a community behind it to be successful."