

## **Chargers prove fast learners**

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Dejected and dismayed, Bo Colas sat alone on the Morse Event Center floor on April 14, shortly after the Eugene Chargers dropped their second straight game to open their inaugural International Basketball League season.

Exhausted after playing the entire second half, Colas spoke of the frustrations of losing, of a team not in sync.

Oh, how long ago that seems now.

That last-minute, three-point loss to Central Oregon - and another close defeat the next night to the Hotshots in Bend - was the low point in an otherwise memorable maiden season for the Chargers, who turned an 0-3 start into a 13-7 finish, guaranteeing themselves no worse than third place in the 12-team West Division.

The highlights included a seven-game winning streak that put the Chargers within striking distance of the division title, and All-Star seasons from point guard Larry Morinia, shooting guard JR Patrick and Colas, the team's inspirational leader.

Colas, a former Florida center, averaged 22.6 points and 16 rebounds per game.

"Obviously he was our MVP," Chargers co-owner Tony Alvarez said. "He was one of the top two players in the league."

For coach Kenya Wilkins, the success on the court coincided with what he called the team's "bond of brotherhood."

During a team meeting before the Chargers' season-ending victory Sunday in Colorado, Wilkins tried to put the season in perspective, telling his players how much they meant to him.

"It's not just the season of basketball (that's memorable), but these guys being together and believing in each other," Wilkins said.

Wilkins and team officials continue to believe that a semi-pro team can thrive in Eugene, despite sparse turnouts at home games.

"This stuff takes time and awareness," said Carl Berman, the team's head scout and director of corporate sponsorships.

From the very beginning, the Chargers were clearly aware of Wilkins' high demands.

The majority of his first practices involved tireless running exercises, and when a player would show up late or not be properly equipped, the entire team ran sprints.

"I wanted to get these guys conditioned physically and mentally so when we had some tough trips we had an advantage," said Wilkins, 30, the former Oregon point guard in his first head coaching gig.

Wilkins quickly endeared himself to the players.

"Kenya could tell me to run anything and he's not going to break me," said Morinia, who led the team with 24.8 points and 8.1 assists per game.

"If he asks me to run through a wall, I'm going to find a way to run through that wall, even if I don't necessarily believe that's how I should be doing it."

Morinia's cool demeanor, matched with Colas' energy inside and Patrick's deft shooting touch, proved to be a fierce combination, leading the team to a stretch of nine wins in 10 games midway through the season.

The Chargers have opted to forgo the IBL's season-ending championship tournament, held in Elkhart, Ind., beginning July 13.

Many of the Chargers have other commitments; they will branch out to other semi-pro leagues or explore opportunities overseas.

"Some of the guys will go on to real deals elsewhere, and they'll do well," Berman said.

Former Oregon forward Jay Anderson, invited to the IBL All-Star game as an alternate, joined the team on April 21 and averaged 14.5 points and 6.6 rebounds, one of seven players who averaged double figures in scoring.

A handful of other locals provided depth off the bench.

Sheldon High product Andy Perry (3.4 assist per game) and Pleasant Hill native Travis Melvin (4.9 ppg) shared time at backup point guard.

Josh Harbert, a standout at Marist High and Northwest Christian College, averaged five points in seven games.

Although no one has officially committed to returning next season, many said they would be open to the possibility.

"I think coming here and playing for Kenya is one of the best things I've ever done," Morinia said.

"Even if I don't come back to Oregon, I will always keep his number."

Wilkins and Alvarez said they will begin preparations earlier for next season, hoping to acquire commitments from players as early as this fall.

A full roster wasn't assembled for this season until the week before the first game, and team officials blamed that for the team's 0-3 start.

"We put the team together fairly quickly," Wilkins said. "It was a big mistake ... not organizing practices a little sooner. That cost us the (division) championship."

Wilkins also plans to partner the Chargers with his Game Time Basketball Academy and form several local youth teams under the Chargers name.

He hopes to include some of the current Chargers as assistant youth coaches.

"We need to have a bunch of good guys (on the roster) who play hard and are unselfish, and I think we accomplished that," Wilkins said. "True basketball fans will appreciate that, and I think they'll come back next year."