

Cyclones' owner happy, trying to follow game plan

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Charles Warren and the Cyclones have enjoyed enormous success in their first season in the IBL, leading the league with a 14-1 record.

Central Ohio's professional sports graveyard is filled with minor league teams that had big dreams.

There is even a section reserved for basketball. Remember the Horizon? Or the Cagerz? So why is Charlie Mitchell, owner of the Columbus Cyclones of the International Basketball League, so excited?

"I'm happy with how things have gone because I know it takes time," said Mitchell, who also is the owner of Mitchell-McKinney Supply Co., which specializes in cutting and pneumatic tools. "If you don't have time and some money to hang on, it's tough in minor-league sports. It takes time to develop a team from the ground up. Our first goal was to develop a good product. That's a key that you have to have when you go to sponsors and fans for support."

The Cyclones are in first place in the East Division and have the best record in the 24-team league. They also are ranked fifth in the country in the weekly minor-league rankings by Pro Basketball News.

Becoming a team owner was a logical move for Mitchell. He has been around high-level basketball since 1996, most notably in central Ohio as coach and sponsor of the Mitchell-McKinney team in the McDonald's Summer League the last four years.

He has also had teams in other summer leagues and tournaments. The events have helped some of his players get noticed by agents so they can continue their playing careers in professional leagues around the country or in Europe.

"I think it's an understatement to say I'm a big fan," said Mitchell, who attends all of the Cyclones' games, including those on the road. "This has been a lot of fun so far. I have realized that there are a lot more moving parts than I first thought. You have to do a lot before you ever see a basketball. I think things have went well though."

Mitchell watched the first year of the IBL before deciding to bring a team to central Ohio. He liked the rules designed to promote offense and saw that it was well-received in some markets, but most importantly, he liked its timing.

The IBL schedule is played in the spring and summer. He didn't want to have to compete with Ohio State men's and women's basketball and Columbus Blue Jackets hockey for fans' attention.

"I think the strength of the league is its schedule," he said. "This is a tremendous college town and this stays away from (Ohio State's basketball) schedule. You look at the history of this town and basketball teams that have played that schedule and it's been tough on them."

With the team officially in town, Mitchell knew his summer league and tournament contacts would help Columbus field a good squad. He then made sure the team was in the community -- and not downtown away from potential fans.

Along with securing Westerville North High School as the site of the home games, players made appearances at Little League games, schools and Rotarys last March and April.

They gave motivational talks, officiated youth games and signed lots of autographs.

"I want to change opinions of pro sports," Mitchell said. "I want people to bring their kids out to see a professional game, get their picture with a player, get an autograph and just get a good impression of professional sports."

Cyclones coach Dave Cecutti talked with Mitchell once he had brought the team to Columbus and liked what he heard. He's enjoying his first year as coach.

"When I heard his model of what he wants to do, it made sense to me," Cecutti said. "A lot of people will jump into something like this with no clue. But he has a game plan on how he wants to get there."

An IBL title for Columbus would be great conclusion to a busy first season for Mitchell. The league champion will be decided by a single-elimination tournament July 13-16 in Elkhart, Ind. The host Elkhart Express is the only team to beat Columbus, winning 118-115 on May 6. The Cyclones got revenge with a 119-111 victory May 13.

"We're far from an expansion team and we've not approached anything like we are," Mitchell said. "Columbus deserves a good basketball product. They deserve a shot at the playoffs and a championship. It's great that we've got a chance at both."

At a glance

Below are the recent results and coming schedule for the Columbus Cyclones. Home games are at Westerville North High School. All games start at 7:15 p.m.:

Last Friday -- Defeated West Virginia 116-104. Columbus made 11 3-pointers, with Michael making five en route to scoring 31 points. Charles Warren (25 points) and Paul Haynes (15) had three 3-pointers apiece.

Last Saturday -- Def. Toledo 127-102. The Cyclones led 63-58 at halftime but outscored Toledo 32-15 in the third quarter. Estaban Weaver and Brownlee had 25 points each, Warren scored 18 and Haynes added 16.

Today -- At West Virginia. Columbus beat the Wild last Friday and May 18 (119-94).

Saturday -- Home vs. Battle Creek. First meeting. Battle Creek is 8-8; Columbus is 8-0 at home.

Of note: The Cyclones are 14-1 and in first place in the IBL East Division.