

Fischer, Racers intend to become, remain part of the community

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This time last year Bob Fischer had never heard of the fledgling International Basketball League.

Today the enthusiastic businessman from Hoffman Estates is not only one of the best ambassadors the Portland, Ore.-based league has, he's the man betting hoops fans in Elgin and the surrounding Fox Valley area will embrace the IBL's brand of above-the-rim basketball in a family-friendly environment.

Fischer owns the IBL's Elgin Racers, who debut tonight in the first of 10 home games with a 7:15 p.m. tipoff against Lake County (Ill.) at Judson College's Lindner Fitness Center.

Tonight's season opener is the culmination of a whirlwind year for Fischer, an eastern Washington native who played college basketball at Pacific Lutheran.

Currently the owner of a technology company in Hoffman Estates called Advanced Distribution Solutions, Fischer is a self-described basketball nut. He has coached his son and daughter in numerous park district and AAU games, has been a Bulls season ticket holder for years and plays in two or three competitive leagues annually.

His friend and teammate in one of those leagues was Eddie Hebert, who played college basketball at Wisconsin-LaCrosse. Hebert phoned Fischer last spring with the news he had made the roster of the Windy City Dawgs, a new IBL team what was set to play at Harper College.

Fischer immediately stepped up to support his friend's new professional team by buying 16 seats for his company. Not surprisingly, basketball-crazy Fischer loved the new product. And why wouldn't he?

The IBL is built to entertain. The league relies on an up-and-down-the-court, up-tempo style, a pace dictated by some rules differences from the NBA. The IBL uses a 22-second shot clock, lets players inbound the ball immediately after made shots and forces them to cross midcourt in eight seconds.

Fischer took in six or seven Windy City Dawgs games last year at Harper College. Though he wasn't overly impressed by Harper as a venue for professional basketball, he and his groups were having a great time watching the entertaining basketball the league offered. They were becoming fans.

"Then we got a call that said the games were canceled," Fischer said. "The team had gone defunct. The next day I got a call from the commissioner who said, 'I heard you wanted to buy the team.' "

Fischer said he hadn't put out any feelers. "I thought I had invested \$5,000, it was a bad investment and now I was just going to walk away," he said.

But startup sports leagues with franchises in trouble at midseason are known to reach out to any and all sponsors to save the integrity of the schedule. Though Fischer had never seriously entertained the notion of owning a pro basketball franchise, the idea of taking over an IBL team intrigued him from a business perspective.

That's because the league attempts to keep its franchises profitable by guaranteeing owners a maximum of one road trip that requires air travel per season, thus reducing overhead. Most road games in the 26-team league are only a bus ride away.

Also, salaries are limited to between \$30 and \$300 per player per game.

Fischer agreed to bankroll the remainder of the Windy City Dawgs' season last year, as he put it, "to fulfill the team's commitment to the community."

However, the new owner began searching for better options as soon as the season ended last June. That search eventually brought Fischer to Elgin, where he was greeted with open arms by local officials.

Before he knew it Fischer was meeting with the assistant city manager and city employees were recommending coaches right and left, including former Elgin High girls coach Lee Turek, South Elgin High boys coach Jim Harrington, and former Purdue star Everette Stephens, now the boys coach at Elgin Academy.

Fischer eventually settled on James Condill, a veteran area coach who has worked at Crystal Lake Central and Judson College among other stops.

The city even came up with the name Racers, which pays homage to Elgin's history as an auto-racing hub in the early 1900s due to the popularity of the Elgin National Road Race that was held here. The city even designed the Racer mascot young fans will undoubtedly come to love.

Fischer held conversations with officials at Elgin Community College about playing at the new Spartan Events Center, but negotiations hit a snag due to the number of police officers that would have been required on game nights. It was too much overhead for a team that only charges \$8 for adults, \$4 for kids.

That's when Judson men's and women's basketball coach Jim Cook, the general manager of the Racers, set up a meeting with officials at Judson college. A deal was soon struck with the private institution.

Said Cook of the Racers: "I think this is great for the city of Elgin. We've never had anything like this and I think it's going to bring a lot of excitement to Elgin and Judson College."

Seventy players tried out for 17 roster spots in February. Those selected gladly accepted the lean salaries in exchange for exposure and the chance to play against top competition in front of friends and family while keeping their day jobs.

Take new Racer Thomas Streetie for example. The 6-foot-tall guard played high school basketball at Chicago-Taft for Frank Hood, who was the boys basketball coach at St. Edward this past season. Employed in a good job at Elgin-based Safety-Kleen Corporation, Streetie has lived in Elgin for the last 12 years since he came to play for Elgin Community College. He wanted the chance to showcase his skills, but not at the cost of his job.

"This is the best thing that could have happened for me at this time in my life," Streetie said. "I've been wanting to play at the next level, and they brought that level here to Elgin."

Other players like former Elgin High star Marcus Smallwood, who will join the Racers once his team in Finland's elite league completes its season, and former Larkin star Sherick Simpson, who has played overseas for eight years, finally have the opportunity to play close to home.

"I love the game, so it's rewarding to play here in Elgin," said Simpson shortly after he threw down a monster jam in Tuesday's exhibition game against players from Judson College and some Elgin city employees.

"We're all looking forward to (tonight). Hopefully, they'll keep coming out to watch us play this year as we keep growing as a team."

Now that professional basketball has arrived in Elgin, the community will ultimately decide whether the franchise succeeds or fails. That decision will be made partly at the turnstiles. One endorser of Racers basketball is Elgin city councilman Tom Sandor, who welcomed the team to town before Tuesday's exhibition game.

"This is great for the families," Sandor said. "Now they can come see a high-quality sporting event that isn't going to break the bank. You can bring a family of four out for less than \$25 bucks. It'll be a fun thing for our people."

But the Racers' long-term success will be determined more by how much support it garners from the business community.

"If we don't have sponsors, we don't have a team," Fischer said plainly. "I don't care how good the players are. We could have Horace Grant, Toni Kukoc and Scottie Pippen playing with us, but if we don't have sponsors, we're not going to have a team. We don't have TV or radio revenue to rely on and we don't charge that much for tickets."

"Our goal is to manage our losses, to keep them under \$25,000 this first year, and we'll struggle with that. But we're working hard to get sponsors and we're working hard to get fans. Competitive, family-friendly, fun, basketball is our goal and our guys are working so hard at being good members of the city."

So is Fischer, who isn't a carpetbagger looking to make money off the people of Elgin. He wants his team to become part of the fabric of this community. To that end the Racers have already joined the downtown business association and the Rotary Club, they are involved with the Kiwanis Club, they've already donated several computers to the Elgin boys and girls clubs and the front office intends to initiate a kids reading program similar to that of the Kane County Cougars.

The players will also put on clinics in the area, local high school coaches and their players will be asked to participate in certain events on game nights and locals of all kind will be featured before, during and after games. At Tuesday's exhibition game the Streamwood High pep band was on hand to entertain and a Streamwood music student sang the national anthem. A local breakdancer will perform at tonight's game.

Fischer has made a commitment to be an upstanding member of the Elgin community. Now the business community must step up and support the Racers via sponsorship so that this area can maintain a much-needed entertainment option.

"We're part of this town," Fischer said. "We're in it for the long haul. Elgin's growing. This area's growing. We've got a good team and we're going to be here for a long time."