
The Register-Guard

New season, new look for Chargers

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An entirely new starting lineup is only the end of adjustments the Eugene Chargers have made since they last played.

Gone are the previous owners. Gone is the coach with the familiar name. Gone is almost the entire 2006 roster.

Gone, too, are some of the doubts about the sustainability of minor-league basketball in Eugene.

As they prepare for their season-opening homestand this weekend, the Chargers are hopeful a fresh approach will translate into a greater buzz about their second season in the International Basketball League, which begins tonight against the Salem Stampede.

The Chargers host the Tacoma Jazz on Saturday. Both games are set for a 7:15 p.m. tipoff at the Morse Event Center.

"We hope the people in Eugene enjoy it," said new owner Ron Ingalls, a retired businessman from Solvang, Calif. "This is a great town, and we're glad to be here."

In the last month, Ingalls has hired team president Kara Linse and coach Scott Jones - both of whom, like Ingalls, have no experience running a professional sports team.

They're all learning on the job.

"You know, sometimes that's not all bad," Ingalls said. "We face up to where we're at in terms of our experience. I look at it from the business side of it, and Kara is doing an outstanding job. ... We can all only improve."

Optimism is perhaps their biggest asset at this point. Despite low turnouts during a successful first season - the team tied for third in the West Division at 13-7 under former coach Kenya Wilkins - front-office personnel believe that the Chargers can thrive here.

General manager Carl Berman envisions a sold-out arena, much like the expansion Everett Explosion, which drew an announced crowd of 3,777 in its debut Tuesday.

"It depends on the community support, but it can be viable," Berman said. "If they don't (support the team), it could be a problem."

Linse, 21, a December graduate of Oregon's Warsaw Sports Marketing Center, is charged with expanding the Chargers' appeal. She hopes better promotions and a stronger community outreach will translate into greater turnout.

The organization is set up as a nonprofit, and Linse is trying to establish free clinics for underprivileged kids.

Ultimately, she said, the team's popularity will depend on its performance.

"We're hoping the team sells itself on its talent and excitement," Linse said. "And it's affordable for families."

Ticket prices were raised from \$6 to \$10 for adults. Admission is \$5 for youth and seniors, and children under 8 are admitted free.

Berman is the main holdover in the front office from the Chargers' inaugural season. He assembled the roster for this season.

"I'm already here, so I don't have to make a soundbite, but I think Carl did a good job of bringing in different elements we would need - guards, shooters and big men," point guard Tryian Ridges said. "It's a good balance, and I believe it's a good team."

Forward Antwon Mills is the lone returning player currently on the roster, though former Oregon forward Jay Anderson - an IBL All-Star with the Chargers last year - is scheduled to return later this month.

Other Chargers will local ties are Adam Zahn, a 6-8 forward who just completed his eligibility with the Ducks, and Thurston High School product Eric Orton, a 6-5 guard/forward who is expected to provide outside shooting.

Ridges is expected to start at point guard tonight along with Rodrick Stevenson and Charles Easterling in the backcourt, and Lamar Harris and Aaron Eneas up front.

Jones likes his team's talent, but he's even more impressed by their cohesiveness so far.

"That's what surprises me most, how well these guys are all getting along," Jones said. "That's pretty rare after only a week together. So I'm thrilled. I'm like a kid in the candy store. This is my dream to be out here."

The Chargers will play in the new Southwest Division, along with Salem, Tri Valley, Chico, Santa Barbara and Central Oregon.

Half of Eugene's 20 games are at home, including the two this weekend and another against Chico on Thursday.

The Chargers will play five consecutive games on the road beginning May 31, with four games in four nights in California.

That trip includes a June 2 game against the Santa Barbara Breakers, who have reportedly signed former NBA players Bryon Russell and Samaki Walker, as well as ex-Pac-10 players Jerry Dupree (USC) and Toby Bailey (UCLA).

Former Oregon guard Andre Joseph has joined the IBL's Portland Chinooks, and former Oregon State standouts David Lucas (Portland) and Nick DeWitz (Salem) are also in their first seasons in the IBL. After four games, Lucas leads the league in scoring at 38.3 points.

"We have a better team than we did last year," Berman said, "but the league itself is much better."