

# The Truth - Local Sports

## Overtime takeoff

Flight's 7-9 Ming not enough to overcome Express

Published: Saturday, March 31, 2007 -- The Truth, B1

By [Anthony Anderson](#)

Truth Assistant Sports Editor

ELKHART -- Tim Pledger had come all the way from Mexico in the last 24 hours.

Going another 84 feet in five seconds presented little challenge.

The 5-foot-9 Pledger took an inbound pass with five ticks left and sped the length of the court for a high-flying, game-tying layup as time expired, propelling the Elkhart Express into overtime and an eventual 111-106 victory over Grand Rapids in their International Basketball League season opener Friday night.

A record-shattering crowd announced at 5,541 reveled in both the victory and a chance to watch the man billed as the tallest professional basketball player ever, 7-foot-9 Sun Ming Ming of Grand Rapids. Elkhart's top crowd last season was 3,897.

"I thought we had the win," Pledger said of his layup, admitting that he had lost track of the score and thought his team was down one point rather than two before his basket that made the count 95-95. "I never would've taken that long to get back in the huddle."

Instead, Pledger strutted like a peacock and waved his arms toward delirious fans as he walked the length of the court to their exaltation. Meanwhile, Express coaches were screaming in vain for him to return to the bench.

"I guess I'm just tired, man," Pledger said.

Pledger -- whose layup was his only field goal in 11 attempts on the night -- had flown into the area earlier in the day after finishing a Mexican league season. His hotel room wasn't ready and he wound up getting just an hour of sleep before the game.

"I didn't have a doubt about me scoring," Pledger said of the drive, which came with Ming out of the game. "I just wanted to get as close as possible, have the best look possible."

"Reminded me of Tyus Edny and UCLA," teammate Harold Swanagan said, referring to the diminutive Edny going coast-to-coast for a game-winning layup in an NCAA Tournament game during the Bruins' 1995 national title season.

It was Swanagan who had the task of guarding Ming most of the evening, and it was the burly, 6-8 Swanagan who for once in his life looked about as small as Edny.

Swanagan finished with 11 points, nine rebounds and a pair of knock-away steals on Ming, while Ming scored 14 points, grabbed eight rebounds and blocked four shots.



7'9" Center Sun Ming Ming

Photo: Jennifer Shephard / The Truth

"Now I know how it feels for the kids when I play with them in camps," Swanagan said. "That dude is big. I've never seen anything like that. I played in the Big East against 7-footers, and it's nothing like it."

"You just can't feel how big he really is until you see him in person," 6-7 Elkhart coach Daimon Beathea said. "It's unbelievable. I do think if he gets some stamina, he's got a chance to advance to the NBA level. He has some skills."

Express sharpshooter Coleco Buie scored a game-high 29 points, including two free throws with 11 seconds left in overtime to create the final count. He also hauled in a team-high 13 rebounds.

"I think if we had just stuck with the offense, this was a night I could've had 50," said Buie, who continually curled off down screens on his way to 15 first-quarter points. "It's cool, though. We won a tough game."

Correy Childs added 15 of his 24 points over the fourth quarter and OT as Elkhart rallied for the victory.

The Express trailed most of the night, including by a high of 69-57 midway through the third quarter.

Back-to-back steals and baskets by Elkhart Memorial product Kyle Sears capped a 10-0 run that got the Express within two at 69-67.

The hosts took an 83-78 lead midway through the fourth period, but the Flight (0-4) answered with a 9-0 run of their own before Pledger ultimately forced the OT. Childs (nine) and Buie (five) combined for 14 of Elkhart's 16 points in the extra session.

"They were physical on the ball," Grand Rapids coach David Fox said of the Express, "and there weren't a lot of on-the-ball fouls called. I thought it was a well-officiated game, though, hard-fought by both teams."

"I let it be known to the guys that this isn't Express basketball," Beathea said of his team's inconsistent play over the first three quarters. "We're going to make sure we don't go through that kind of lull again."