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Seat belts needed to follow the IBL

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In our business, we see professional sports leagues and teams have their grand opening one day and then board up their offices the next.

So when someone named Mikal Duilio from Portland welcomes the Gary Steelheads into his International Basketball League, entering its fourth season this spring, forgive Region fans for being a bit skeptical.

Remember the fly-by-night USBL and ABA? All together now: s-h-u-d-d-e-r.

I must admit Duilio's 22-team, four-division league sounds like the perfect family outing. The last two seasons, IBL teams averaged 127 points per game. From start to finish with only one timeout per quarter, games were played in just under two hours.

As for individual talent, Duilio claims the IBL places more players overseas than any other basketball league. Among its top attractions is the world's tallest athlete, 7-foot-9 Sun Ming Ming of the Grand Rapids Flight. You might've seen him in "Rush Hour 3" with Chris Tucker and Jackie Chan.

And Ming Ming is coming to Gary this season, once the Genesis Convention Center doorways are raised.

Think Steelheads CEO Jewell Harris Jr. and Showtime Sports and Entertainment LLC aren't giving each other high-fives? Their franchise may finally have found a home.

"I am an experienced businessman with 13 years of profitability and 13 years of revenue increases in my previous business," Duilio said. "If you're a basketball league and you're looking for direction in a commissioner, you want someone with that amount of history behind them that's positive. That's what I bring to the table.

"The big difference between my league and the other leagues is the leadership."

It won't be difficult for Gary to develop natural rivalries against Holland (Mich.), Grand Rapids, Battle Creek, Elkhart, Kankakee and Elgin. As for the players, these aren't YMCA washouts. Many had their shot at the NBA or are working to get back.

"We have great teams. I mean, great teams right next to Gary -- all within a drive and back," Duilio said. "Gary is going to be able to save their money from having to run around and travel. They'll have a very efficient schedule, save that money and go market with it. They might do better; might even have bigger crowds."

Each IBL team is guaranteed one flight per season, often to a "pod" featuring cities within close proximity. For example, there are eight teams in the Washington-Oregon area.

"Our league is so thick and so protected, we could lose half and still have enough," said Duilio, simply emphasizing his point about stability. For the record, there has been no turnover in the first three seasons.

Each quarter is 12 minutes, there is a 22-second shot clock, and a high-school/college 3-point line.

"We basically take away all the dead time. The game moves quicker, faster, and is more fun," Duilio said. "You bring a 2-year-old, a 5-year-old, a noninterested spouse and those people actually love it.

"Another thing is, players and coaches don't argue in our league because you just don't have time to. Seriously, if you start to argue, the other team's down the floor and there's three possessions by the time you finally get the ref's attention."

IBL players average \$125 to \$200 a game, with a range of between \$50 and \$600 depending on experience and reputation. The Web site www.iblhoops.com is thorough and informative, with press releases sent out almost on a daily basis.

I want to believe Duilio, for Gary's sake, when he says his league crawled at first, then walked, and is now off and running.

A news conference will be scheduled soon and the public will have a chance to catch up.