

Tim Ahrens: Seeing Soldiers succeed would make me smile

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As a rule, we in the sports-writing profession shouldn't cheer for the teams we cover. That is the job of the fan; ours is to cover the game with no bias.

But I can't help rooting for the **Windy City Soldiers**, the area's new International Basketball League team that will begin playing its home games at the Kankakee Resource Center in March.

Last year, under the name of the Chicago Heights **Soldiers**, the team had no home floor and unfortunately, had little success on an opponent's floor, finishing with an 0-18 mark.

This upcoming season, with a new name and a home, the **Soldiers** will battle in a league that is only in its fourth season.

It will be an uphill climb for the **Soldiers**, just as it is for any team in a fledgling league. Most folks discount these guys because they are not household names.

My hope is that you give them a chance; go out and support them when their season begins in March.

Why, you ask? Because in a way, they are supporting you and your community already.

While basketball is their main reason for being here, the team has adopted the community's children as their own, starting a mentorship program at King Middle School and conducting various camps, all with the idea of helping children.

The **Soldiers** are also helping renovate the Resource Center to make it playable by their league standards. But the changes will also help improve the facility for other uses.

Many youth groups will benefit in that regard. For example, Trinity Academy uses it for its home games each winter. There are others, as well.

For some local flavor, the **Soldiers** have two former Olivet players on their roster, ex-Tigers' Zach Birkey and Stan Chismark.

Another player, Barry Bradford, was an IBL All-Star last

season.

Bradford also serves as the team's spokesman and I first met him in August when he walked into our office to introduce himself and to talk about the league. The first thing I noticed was that he was smiling.

We made small talk for a few minutes and I told him my wife was expecting a baby any day. With another, broader smile, Bradford quickly turned our conversation from basketball to family and children in general. He had me from that point on.

Bradford spoke of helping the children of Kankakee with this team's arrival. It would be more than just 10 basketball games a year.

"We want to make this our home," he said, again with that smile. "We want to help as many children as we can, in any way we can."

So far, the man has delivered. The team had an assembly at King last Friday, with the belief that you need to start delivering the right message to kids of that age.

Like it or not, Charles Barkley, kids listen to athletes and if the right message is presented, they will listen.

It's refreshing to hear a man speak with the only ulterior motive that children might hear the right message.

Many times, people want to use the press to get their agenda across and better their own financial gain.

Bradford is not that way; the smile, I am happy to say, is genuine.

The **Windy City Soldiers** deserve a chance to become a part of this community. I wish them the best of luck.

Maybe the team can taste victory for the first time this season, but as far as I am concerned, they have already tasted success and Bradford is a big reason why.

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