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Orient Express ready to depart

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ELKHART -- The stage for the highly-acclaimed act known as the Elkhart Express is about to get even bigger.

The International Basketball League franchise, which has played to rave reviews in its first two years, is going global.

Express coach and president Daimon Beathea announced Thursday that he has forged a partnership with the Shanghai Sharks of the Chinese Basketball Association.

Beathea, who took his Express team to China in August, leaves Monday for a stint as Guest Coach of the CBA team which produced Yao Ming.

"This is a partnership like no other," Beathea said. "This fits what we're trying to do in becoming more international." "This puts us on a World stage. It will open the door for our players to be able to play in China and for their players to come play for us."

Beathea, a former standout player at Elkhart Memorial and Michigan State, has guided the Express to back-to-back IBL titles in its first two years. He expects to be in Shanghai for 1-3 months as the Sharks open their season Oct. 28. Due to the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, the Sharks will play a shortened 27-game regular season this year, which will end in early January. The Express are scheduled to open their season March 28.

"My role will be to help in player, coach and team development," said Beathea of his newest venture. "I have a lot of respect for their coach (Liu Qiuping). We share a lot of the same thoughts on the game.

"My time in China will fluctuate, but this is a multi-year deal. I'm looking at the next 4-6 years with this."

Beathea became familiar with the Sharks on the August tour. His team, comprised of Express and other IBL players, beat Shanghai in an exhibition game on the goodwill tour which came about in large part due to Beathea's relationship with local businessman Aaron Zou. The Express, who became the first minor league hoops team to tour China, have agreed to return to China for the next five years. The team is slated to play five games there next April and also take a youth basketball team to China.

"The CBA wants more foreign coaches and they want to improve the level of their play," said Beathea, who has coached the Express to a 46-6 mark in its first two seasons. "The Sharks have seen what we've built here. This will also help our coaching staff be more in tune with the international game."

Plans also call for the Express roster to carry three Sharks players starting in 2008. Two will be on the active roster of the squad and the other will practice with the team. Beathea also said that a 10-team international tourney is planned starting in 2009, which would alternate between Elkhart and China.

"This is a decision that will only enhance and boost the Express," Beathea said. "It will definitely only help us in the long run."