

Hollywood exec ready to bring an entertaining atmosphere, style to T.O.

Courting the county

By Loren Ledin
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Photo by Dana Bowler

Deshion Inniss, former Hueneme High and Cal Lutheran standout, takes part in a tryout last weekend for the Los Angeles Lightning at Cal Lutheran. The Lightning, which plays in the International Basketball League, will play its home games at CLU.



Photo by Dana Bowler

Coach Ron Quarterman, center, talks to players during the Los Angeles Lightning tryouts last week at Cal Lutheran. Quarterman, who coached at Burbank High and Los Angeles Pierce College, will have a few players on his roster who have NBA experience.

Growing up in Abilene, Texas, as an avid sports fan, Mark Harwell was familiar with all things Dallas Cowboys.

That included a certain California city where the 'Boys would stage their late summer training camp in preparation for the NFL season.

"I knew about Thousand Oaks because that's where the Cowboys trained," he says. "Like everybody else in Texas, I'd watch all the television news reports and see the players working out in Thousand Oaks. To me, it was a very special place."

Funny that all these years later, Harwell, now 44, has chosen Thousand Oaks as the ideal locale to sow his personal-dream seeds.

The television/movie executive already is part of sports lore as the first white player to join the basketball team at Prairie View A&M University, a traditional all-black school in the traditionally all-black Southwestern Athletic Conference.

Now he is owner and general manager of the Los Angeles Lightning of the International Basketball League and a self-avowed dreamer hoping to build a steady following for a non-NBA basketball entity in Ventura County.

The first-year Lightning begins play Friday on its home court at the Gilbert Sports Arena at Cal Lutheran.

"It's exciting for me and I hope it will be exciting for this community," he said. "We're committed to playing high-level basketball and presenting a first-class experience for the entire family. I'm a dreamer.

"This area reminds me of West Texas, where I grew up. I think the community will embrace what we plan to do."

IBL shakeup

The IBL is undergoing a major revampment as it enters its fourth year of operation.

Ten teams, including the nearby Santa Barbara Breakers have exited the circuit, and a host of new franchises have signed up to form a 18-team league.

There are squads throughout the United States, including Battle Creek, Mich., Gary, Ind., Las Vegas, Portland, Ore., and Arizona.

The IBL is global, too, with the China Shanxi Kylins and the Holland Blast scheduled to visit the Gilbert Sports Arena in May.

Though the business model, at least partly, is based on successful minor league baseball operations, don't call the Lightning "minor league."

At least that's Harwell's contention.

"I don't think what we do is minor league at all," he said. "We're not the NBA, but we're playing basketball at a very high level. We'll have NBA veterans on our teams. We'll have players who have been very successful in college, or playing overseas."

Roster variety

Lamond Murray, who played for the Los Angeles Clippers and who averaged 11.3 points and 4.1 rebounds in 11 NBA seasons, was signed last week as the first player named to the roster.

Harwell said the final squad will feature at least "three NBA players."

The head coach will be Ron Quarterman, the former coach at Burbank High and Los Angeles Pierce College.

When the Lightning takes the floor for its first game against the Battle Creek Knights, the roster will include players with a full spectrum of aspirations.

Some have played in the NBA, some are seeking one more shot to play at the sport's highest level. Many just aren't willing to quit playing their favorite sport.

At a recent tryout staged at the Gilbert Sports Arena, the hopeful included former area stars Deshion Inniss and David Reichel.

The common quest? Opportunity.

"That's exactly what it's about," said Quarterman, who also coached in the minor league American Basketball Association. "Not everyone can play in the NBA, but there are a lot of guys who might be good enough to play in the NBA.

"For whatever reason, maybe they missed their chance. Maybe they got hurt, maybe they had a bad tryout. This is another shot for them."

Inniss, a 5-foot-10 point guard and graduate of Hueneme High, averaged 11.8 points as a senior last season at Cal Lutheran and led the Kingsmen in assists.

A chance to play for the Lightning presents opening doors on a number of levels.

"I'm confident that I can play at a high level, I'm just looking for a chance," he said.

"If I can make this team, I not only play in a very good league, but I'm also back on my home floor."

Reichel, a graduate of Camarillo High, played at Cal State San Bernardino and helped his team reach the NCAA Division II Final Four in 2007.

However, he suffered a thumb injury that virtually wrecked his senior year.

"It was very disappointing," said the 6-foot-8 forward. "When I heard about this opportunity, this was like getting a whole new chance. I'd love to play in this league, and I'd love to play close to home."

'White Lightning'

Harwell knows all about hurdling obstacles. He knows all about creating opportunities, too.

The actor/writer/producer began his own company, True Grit Entertainment, that has developed television and movie productions over the last four years. In that same span, he helped create basketball franchises in the Continental Basketball League and United States Basketball League, and was involved last season with the Santa Barbara Breakers in the IBL.

Harwell's own love for the game stems from his background as a player.

He has roots to the county, playing at Ventura College in the early 1980s. The 6-4 point guard then took on the challenge of becoming the first white basketball player to attend Prairie View A&M.

In averaging double-figure scoring and eight assists a game from 1983 to 1985, Harwell earned the nickname "White Lightning."

It's no surprise he has named his own team the Lightning.

"Basketball has been such a big part of my life," he said. "This is the next step for me. I love staying involved in basketball."

Harwell vows his franchise will be rich in entertainment value.

The game itself is fan-friendly, with the immediate inbound rule and a 22-second shot clock guaranteeing a fast pace. IBL teams have averaged 126 points per game in the first three seasons.

"It's a crazy game," said Quarterman. "That's why we're looking for great athletes. These guys can put on a show."

With his Hollywood background, Harwell promises the whole package, with American Idol-style entertainment and a red carpet welcoming fans at the entrance.

Ticket prices range from \$6 in the stands to \$250 at courtside. The 20-game schedule runs through June 21.

"I want everybody to come to our games for a good time," he said. "I want people to be able to forget about everything else when they come to our games. We're basing everything on good entertainment."