

HOOP SCOOP

Japan IBL team set for 2009

By ED ODEVEN

Life is full of surprises, isn't it?

Yesterday's invention becomes tomorrow's latest must-talk-about-it, gotta-have-it item before fading into obscurity or maintaining a permanent place in our lives.

The sporting landscape is constantly twisting, turning and adding new layers of competition, tradition and potentially lucrative markets to the mix.



Japan, of course, is a part of this often-unpredictable process.

Basketball isn't a sport that everyone pays attention to in this crowded, industrious nation. It's not the hot topic of discussion on Yamanote Line trains day after day.

That's why the sport has room for growth and the potential to become much more than it is right now — a minor sport looking to raise its profile in smart, bold, steady steps.

Credit the International Basketball League, with teams already based in the United States, Canada and China, for embracing the opportunity to be a part of this growth.

IBL Commissioner Mikal Diulio will welcome a new team to the fold next season, a team calling itself the Nippon Tornadoes.

On March 22, the Tornadoes completed paying their startup fees to be a part of the league, which is based in Portland, Ore.

Katsuya Sasaki of the Japan Basketball Academy is the Tornadoes' owner. The JBA, showcased online at www.jbadreams.com/, has training facilities in Hiroshima, Kumamoto and Gifu, as well as Ehime Prefecture.

Clearly, the JBA's underlying mission is to teach basketball fundamentals, starting with school-age children. And now fielding a profession club becomes an extension of that.

The Japan Times

Tatsumi Nashida, one of the JBA's founding fathers and its secretary for external affairs, is slated to coordinate the Tornadoes' involvement in the JBA.

The new team has yet to announce its first head coach. Player tryouts are expected to take place in the coming months.

"Joining the IBL will not only be an exciting cultural experience," said Nashida in a statement released by the IBL, "(but) this affiliation will give Japanese players and coaches the opportunity to improve by competing against some of the best players in the world."

The 18-team IBL started its 2008 season in March. The league began play in 2005, featuring high-scoring games and an emphasis on free-flowing play, achieved by quickly getting the ball inbounds; it has a 22-second shot clock and teams get one timeout per quarter.

In an interview with The Japan Times in Tokyo in January 2007, Diulio said, "The IBL philosophy is that basketball should be an athletic game that ebbs and flows rather than tiptoes along in unnatural stops and starts."

That's one claim the NBA cannot make.

The IBL operates on a one-flight guarantee (one road trip per team involves flying there), building its foundation around teams playing a large number of games against others in the same geographical cluster.

Road trips are, well, road trips and cost of traveling is drastically reduced, enabling owners to use money for other purposes: marketing, promotions, etc.

Sdachika Yoshioka, an international businessman with a wide range of basketball contacts, met IBL Commissioner Mikal Diulio last January in Japan. The men conversed extensively after that meeting, forming a partnership to establish a Japanese team in the IBL.

It was a slow, tedious process. Diulio had originally hoped a Japanese team would join the IBL in 2008.

His patience paid off. And so did Yoshioka's hard work on the league's behalf.



IBL commissioner Mikal Diulio (left) and Japan Basketball Academy's Tatsumi Nashida finalized a deal last month in Portland, Ore., to bring the Nippon Tornadoes into the league in 2009 as an expansion team.
IBL PHOTO

The Japan Times

"I am so happy to have been able to coordinate their participation in the IBL," Yoshioka said by e-mail from London.

"What's more, I am excited to see that the new team will truly be Tornados, not only in the IBL, but for the future of basketball in Japan," added Yoshioka, who has become the IBL's director of Japanese relations.

The third-year bj-league, which expands to 12 teams from 10 next fall, is making inroads in the development of pro basketball in Japan, providing new opportunities for players and giving youngsters with pro aspirations something to shoot for.

The JBL, founded in the 1960s, is the established league, but without a clear-cut definition of what it is — pro, amateur, semi-pro, or a combination of all three.

Despite the financial challenges of playing in this far flung league, which will be examined more closely in future columns, the Tornados will give Japanese another opportunity to test their skills, but against international clubs.

The IBL is working to add teams from South Korea and the Philippines to the mix in 2010 and 2011, respectively.

This season, the China Basketball Association's Shanxi Kyllins will play 20 games against IBL foes.

The Tornados, meanwhile, have secured arrangements to be based at the United States Basketball Academy in Blue River, Ore., and will play many of their first-season games in the IBL's Pacific Northwest cluster. The Japanese portion of their schedule has not been announced yet.

But excitement is building within the league offices.

"Katsuya, Tatsumi and the Tornados are a tremendous addition to our league," Diulio said. "The fact that they choose 2009 over 2008 season as their entry point is one of the many examples of their solid decision-making that shows their commitment to excellence and their commitment to stability and sustainability.

"The team is continually, and concurrently, building the correct and appropriate long-term partnerships in Japan."

The Japan Times

That said, Yoshioka expressed the view that many have stated when the topic of Japanese basketball is mentioned: a lack of outdoor courts and indoor gyms is a problem here. But the determined, the disciplined, the focus-driven players, coaches and leaders will make a big difference in improving the sport in Japan, much like the J. League has done so successfully for soccer in the past two decades.

"Japan is one of the most advanced countries," Yoshioka said. "No question about it. Given my 18-year business experience in Japan, North America or Europe, I am all for it. However, whatever you want to start on your own, the system or a hidden rule seems to work to limit desires.

"Whenever you want to start playing basketball in Japan, for example, you have to find a club and need to follow patterned practices there. Go to the (United) States. Go to Canada. There are tons of street basketball courts (in those countries) where you can play with anyone whom you may not know despite your age.

"Turning your eyes to inside the facilities, there are countless open gyms to the public. It is you who makes a decision to start (playing on) your own. It is up to you how in depth you will immerse yourself."

To succeed in this endeavor, the Tornadoes aim to defy the odds.

But, hey, surprises make life more interesting.