

## From the Daily News Los Angeles

THE WRITING ON (and off) THE WALL

### **WALL: Riding the Lightning**

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The weekend rain began to come down on cue Friday afternoon, pelting the streets and messing with the traffic outside the trendy Culver City restaurant.

Mark Harwell walked briskly across the slick sidewalk - without an umbrella - and made his way inside. A basketball was tucked under his left arm.

Considering he's the owner and general manager of the new Los Angeles Lightning, Harwell's entrance would have been more appropriate if it was accompanied by a few flashes of electrical charges breaking apart the gray skies, preceded by a few claps of thunder.

Those Hollywood effects will come in due time.

At this point, helped by some investor power from associates in the entertainment industry, Harwell storms forward with an idyllic plan to bring the Valley its very own fan-embraceable pro hoops franchise as the newest member of the fast-paced International Basketball League.

His first rule: If you must compare this to the Lakers or Clippers, don't dare call it a minor-league operation.

"This is a lot like producing a film," said the 44-year-old Woodland Hills resident, who actually does such things with his True Grit Entertainment company at Culver Studios, where he's involved in acquisitions and development of TV and movie projects.

"You can take a \$1 million film and put it up against a \$100 million film. The difference is in the quality. But with that \$1 million film, if you make some nice trailers for it, and then market it right, pretty soon, it looks like a \$100 million film. It comes down to being in the people business, and getting people to buy into your vision.

"For me - maybe it's my simple West Texas upbringing and maybe I'm still child-like in this - I'm a dreamer. Everyone has their own pursuit of happiness. So why not try it?"

For starters, maybe because too many starry-eyed entrepreneurs ended up with "Ishtar" stories when they tried to premiere entries in sub-NBA leagues around here.

The Hollywood Fame of the supposedly revived American Basketball Association was the latest crash and burn. The franchise touted an ownership group that included Nick Lachey, John Salley, Kyle Boller and Stacy Keibler, and even dressed Syrus Yarbrough from MTV's reality series "Real World: Boston" as a player. Former Clippers coach Don Casey signed on. But it went straight to DVD after a couple of months of public disinterest.

Other ABA teams have come and gone before even taking the court.

Only the Lakers-owned D-League Defenders seem to have no fear of being unplugged. Yet.

Harwell, who has marketing training with teams in the World Basketball League, Continental Basketball Association and U.S. Basketball League, is either smart enough to have learned from other's mistakes or naive enough to believe the IBL won't cannibalize itself.

"I don't want to be critical of other leagues, but a lot of them start with good intentions but the process doesn't come together," said Harwell, a former 6-foot-4 point guard who once played at Ventura College. "This league is only four years old, it has no black eyes like many others and it has a great business plan."

The first of more than a dozen Lightning home games is targeted for mid-April at Cal Lutheran's new 1,500-seat Lundring Events Center in Thousand Oaks. Harwell has tickets specifically set in the \$6-\$25 range with ample free parking - try finding that at Staples Center. Food and souvenirs are price-pointed to family budgets. But for those who demand (and can afford) the star treatment, courtside seats in the \$100-\$200 range, complete with a catered VIP area will be offered.

Harwell comes off a crash-course in IBL operations from helping out a friend on short notice run the Santa Barbara Breakers franchise last spring. The team - with former Lakers forward Samaki Walker, one-time Clippers first-round pick Lamond Murray and ex-UCLA star Toby Bailey - finished 17-6 and was a game short of making it to the IBL championship game in July. Hollywood types such as Rob Lowe, Michael Douglas, Christopher Lloyd and Kathy Ireland were recruited to support the cause.

The experience inspired Harwell to raise about \$1 million for his own franchise. He has got a couple of coaching candidates in mind, a few former NBA players who have interest in still competing, and roster tryouts planned at the end of March.

Although the team is geared more toward generating support from those in the West Valley, Harwell senses that the Los Angeles name brings more clout in a 22-team league that has seemed to thrive best in smaller markets.

"To me, this part of the Valley is more like the area I grew up in - very tight knit," said Harwell, a native of Abilene, Texas. "That appeals to me. But we don't have to sell it like a small-market venue. I don't believe in that. Everything we do will be first class. L.A. will always be talent-based and we'll bring in the right players. We want it to feel bigger than life by doing all the little things right."

OK, now cue the thunderbolts.