

High Flyers earn franchise's first win in home debut

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By Tyler Morrill



While the Yamhill High Flyers and Nippon Tornadoes battled it out on the Patton Middle School court Thursday, a group of young spectators watched the action from the VIP section behind the visiting team's bench.

Marcus Larson/News-Register

Yamhill's Garrett Schmidt goes up for a jumper during the team's home debut Thursday against an IBL team from Japan.

Marcus Larson/News-Register

It took more than a year, but Eric Bailey saw his vision of bringing Yamhill County its first professional sporting franchise come true Thursday night.

The Yamhill High Flyers of the International Basketball League played their first home game at Patton Middle School, hosting Japan's Nippon Tornadoes. Fittingly, the High Flyers earned the first win in franchise history in front of a strong crowd, beating the Tornadoes 140-121 behind a strong inside presence led by Jason Hartford. He finished with 38 points and 16 rebounds, while Chris Hunt had 31 points and 19 boards.

Bailey, the High Flyers general manager, saw McMinnville as a great town to bring a professional sports franchise and the growing IBL showed mutual interest. The High Flyers are Oregon's fourth franchise to join the league.

"I've always loved Yamhill County," Bailey said. "When I was looking into the IBL, I was trying to think of the best place to start a team and McMinnville was the first that came to mind. It's the perfect-sized community for a team like this."

The IBL started in 2004 and now has 18 teams in four countries. The league focuses on fast-paced play and high scoring and has rules to keep the teams playing up-tempo basketball. A shorter shot clock also forces more shots.

Bailey saw the importance of using local players to bring in crowds early in the franchise's development. Former Linfield player Andy Baldwin joined the High Flyers along with Jerrhon Jordan from Portland State University and Sherrard Watson the from University of Portland. Bailey emphasized that each player has major experience. Hartford returned from playing professionally in Finland to join the High Flyers. He played his college ball at Cornell University where he played in the NCAA Tournament.

"It's great to have players from the area who people may have heard of before and have that connection," Bailey said. "But what complements it really well is that we have Jason Hartford who played at Cornell and Quentin Demeritte from the Bahaman National Team. It's a nice blend that can make this team successful."

The team was assembled through tryouts facilitated by the IBL, but many prospective players have contacted Bailey directly to further their careers.

Bailey said he has three or four people contact him a week inquiring about roster spots.

Certainly, the IBL doesn't carry the same weight as the NBA and many people may not know of its existence, but the crowd was captivated by the level of competition. Many fans were able to talk with players after the game and get autographs.

"It provides a style of basketball that's much more exciting than the NBA game," Bailey said. "There's much higher scoring and the action is closer. If you like scoring and great athletes, this is the league for you."

The High Flyers had a tough start to their inaugural season, losing their first two games against the Central Oregon Hotshots. But in hosting their first game, the High Flyers led the whole way. Nine of the 10 players on the team scored, including two players with more than 30 points. The Tornadoes were fundamentally sound and often the quicker players on the floor. The visitors often showed off their 3-point shooting ability, but eventually the High Flyers' size began to take its toll and create separation.

The crowd was eager to see its local team for the first time. Although many didn't know what exactly they were in store for.

"I don't know what I was expecting coming in, but it certainly exceeded anything I anticipated," Aaron Hiatt said. Hiatt brought six kids with him to take in the experience.

"My family loves basketball, and being that it's right here in the community, it's easy to want to back something like that. It was exciting. Everyone likes high-scoring games."

The victory left the crowd and the High Flyers excited for the future and many fans left with smiles on their faces.

There will be just one more home game for the High Flyers in their abbreviated first season. That's scheduled for June 26th.

"I'm definitely coming to the next game," Hiatt said. "And I'm bringing as many kids as I can."