



Inaugural season at CLU gives Lightning optimism

By Jeffrey Dransfeldt
Thursday, July 10, 2008

Keith Closs stood surrounded by young basketball fans all looking up at the 7-foot-3 center.

Nearby, fans and members of the Los Angeles Lightning signed autographs, took photos and chatted with basketball enthusiasts in the lobby after the team's final game of the season.

Lightning owner Mark Harwell watched the scene and smiled.

"No one left," he said. "Everyone stayed in that lobby for about an hour. Then it kind of soaks in on you, Wow,' because usually people file out of there and they're gone in 10 minutes."

It's the type of interaction between the team and the community the passionate Harwell wants to continue to cultivate as the Lightning goes into its second season next spring.

The Lightning brought together a collection of retro-Los Angeles stars.

Closs, Lamond Murray, Billy Knight and Toby Bailey had all enjoyed their moments in the Southern California spotlight with the Clippers and UCLA.

The four teamed up to usher in the first season of International Basketball League play in Ventura County with the Lightning.

The high-flying, up-tempo form of basketball found in the IBL filled up stat sheets and brought basketball fans to home games held at Cal Lutheran's Gilbert Center.

The Lightning's season came to an end June 21 with a 140-124 win over the visiting Arizona Flame and may have left a lasting memory for fans with a 57-point outing by guard Phil Givens.

Los Angeles had an opportunity to participate in the postseason in Monroe, Wash., but passed when several of the team's top players had other commitments.

Coach Ron Quarterman is looking forward to the team's second season.

"It was a first-class operation for a minor league team," said Quarterman, who formerly coached at L.A. Pierce College and has had experience with the American Basketball Association. "It was great."

Harwell, the former Ventura College basketball player who spearheaded the team's arrival in Thousand Oaks, will be at the forefront of increasing the team's ties to the community, whether it's through

fundraisers, player clinics or even going door to door.

"It was a great foundation," he said of the first year. "A lot of hard work went into it. A lot of people put a lot of effort into it. We were completely new in the community and we're kind of learning our way through it."

The Lightning finished the season at 9-11. They recovered from an 0-6 start — all home losses — but came together to win seven of its last eight at CLU.

The team had talent. It was a matter of having the entire team together consistently," Quarterman said.

"They didn't play every game. That's the thing. Again, when you don't have your full team there, we come up short. It's nothing negative to say about the other guys, but when you're missing 50 points and 30 rebounds, it's going to hurt you."

Of the team's 20 games, Murray appeared in 11, Knight 11, Closs five and Bailey four.

Harwell expects continuity going into next season, with much of the roster expressing an interest in coming back.

Murray, who enjoyed a five-year stint with the Clippers to start his 11-year NBA career, was the team's high scorer with 26.6 points a game. He ranked first in the IBL in rebounding (11.6), while teammate Kamran Sufi held the top assists spot (12.6) a game.

Sufi's arrival on May 17 coincided with the team's second straight win after a season opening six-game losing streak. The point guard passed out 21 assists in his Lightning debut, a 146-121 over the Holland (Mich.) Blast.

Bailey played just four games due to a sprained ankle, but still was second on the team in scoring at 24.3 points a game.

A couple of many highlights:

n Knight earned first place in the IBL 3-point Shootout at the All-Star Game on June 12 in Gary, Ind.

n Greg Minor, a Cal State Northridge graduate, played his first professional basketball in two years and averaged 9.3 points a game, but found his groove in the team's final five games when he put in 16 a game and shot 52.6 percent shooting from long distance.

The Lightning went on one lengthy road trip this season in June that took the team through Kankakee, Ill., Gary, Ind., Elkhart, Ind. and Battle Creek, Mich. It was four games in five nights, but technically five games for those who also played in the IBL All-Star Game on June 12.

Quarterman sees the IBL as a launching pad for athletes to move up, and in some cases, pursue NBA dreams. With Murray, Quarterman believes the experienced small forward can still contribute to an NBA roster, pointing to the veteran-laden San Antonio Spurs.

"Lamond Murray is only 35 years old and I really think he's still capable of playing in the league," Quarterman said.