

Planells envisions bj-league becoming one of best in the world

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By ED ODEVEN - Japan Times Editors Note: This article was originally printed in the June 3rd edition of the Japan Times <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/sp20070603eo.html> When you've worked as a head varsity coach at high schools in Arizona and California, served as a collegiate assistant at a community college and a major Division I university, earned a paycheck as a basketball choreographer for major motion pictures, toiled as a head coach in something known as the All-American Professional Basketball League, as well as the American Basketball Association, and become an NBA scout before your 31st birthday, you've earned the right to speak if the topic is basketball. Who is this guy? Hernando Planells Jr.

His voice is a new one in Japan, but his respect for the game is nothing new. It will take him from his native California to Okinawa this summer when he begins putting the pieces together as the first-ever coach of the Ryukyu Golden Kings, one of two bj-league expansion franchises for the 2007-08 season. Planells, 30, understands the profound impact the NBA has had on the game around the globe. "Foreign players have given the NBA a global 'face' that could be recognized from China, to South Africa, to Brazil," Planells told The Japan Times. "The globalization of the sport has been a key component to the popularity of the NBA, and Commissioner (David) Stern's vision to expand the league has done wonders for marketing and merchandising. "You are also seeing that the (Euroleague) is becoming a sort of proving ground for many of the players." The Toronto Raptors have pieced some of their roster (together) this year with guys who have European experience, most notably American Anthony Parker and Spaniard Rudy Calderon. These opportunities have opened the door for players from all over the world to have a goal of making it to the NBA, which for many is the ultimate accomplishment. "Ten or 15 years ago, a 10-year-old kid in Spain may have looked up to Michael Jordan as their hero, but now a 10-year-old kid in Spain may now look up to Pau Gasol or Rudy Fernandez, who may be in the NBA next year. Being able to relate and have a local hero is important in the development of basketball." That is why Yuta Tabuse is an important role model in his home country. As the first Japanese-born player to appear in an NBA game, Tabuse is a household name; his name is one non-sports fans recognize, too. In 2006, Planells, while working for Radiant Pictures, met Tabuse. Here's how the new Golden Kings coach described his impression of the point guard: "The journey that he is partaking is one that demands hard work, patience and determination. His journey is what makes him a hero. He left the comfortable confines of Japan, where he could be a superstar, to come here and virtually start from scratch. "He is someone that Japan can look up to and he may be opening the doors for other Japanese players to come to the U.S. and play at a high level. He is definitely a pioneer that Japanese and other Asian youths can look up to." What makes him unique and more of a hero than other players from Asia is the fact that he is 179 cm and not (228 cm) like Yao Ming, or (212 cm) like Yi Jianlian, who is entering the NBA draft this year. The NBA has put a premium on size — you see this by the good amount of foreign big men who are in the NBA — so getting an NBA shot is much tougher for Tabuse than the big guys coming from Asia." Furthermore, Planells believes Tabuse would benefit by playing for the Japan National Team in upcoming international competitions, citing the exposure he would get, if he and the squad excel, would enhance his reputation as an NBA-caliber player. "Sometimes you need that little push to get over the hump," Planells said. ". . . And being in situations that can break that perception will only be positive." * * * * In the wide-ranging interview, Planells was also asked what can be done from a developmental standpoint to make Japan a better basketball national for males and females with aspirations to play college ball at Division I universities in the United States. He responded by saying, "Exposure would be the starting point when it comes to enabling more Japanese players to receive U.S. college scholarships. It would be good to have an exposure camp where some of the top players high school players in Japan can come together and put them through a combine setting — measuring vertical leap, timing their speed on sprints and then having them all play against each other. ". . . By doing this, we would create a 'top 50' list or some sort of rankings that would help U.S. colleges learn about the prospects. We must then combine a team of the top players from the combine and travel to the U.S. to play in two exposure camps." What this does is create a 'buzz' about the players. Now after this trip you may have (only) one player get a Division I scholarship, but you may get three to four players who get offers from Division II or NAIA schools. "If this is done year after year, you will see more players from Japan coming to the U.S. and playing college basketball, and as the years go by Japan will gain more respect in the basketball world and the national team will reap the benefits of those players coming back and playing for their country." And how can the NBA be a catalyst for basketball's growth in Japan, starting at the grade-school level? I asked. "Any support from the NBA would be a positive step," Planells said candidly. "If you look at China and their relationship with the NBA, it has only made their league, the CBA, much stronger and their development programs better." Having ties with the NBA will only help Japan in their development of players and coaches. "Being involved with the NBA will improve strategy and training methods, but in terms of the development factor Japan needs people who are more familiar with that area and are interested in developing the country as a whole." In order to improve the level of play, starting at the grade-school level, basketball schools/academies must be developed — training facilities where players come and get coaching and teachings very similar to someone taking karate. "By going to these facilities, athletes will learn proper techniques and training methods that will enhance their basketball development. As the players get older they will go into weight and core training that strengthens basketball-related body parts. It all depends on the seriousness that Japan has in making basketball better." For example, in Korea they have a 'basketball guru,' or master, who for years taught his players how to shoot one specific way; every time you saw the Korean National Team you thought that you were playing against robots — they all moved and shot the exact same way. "Now Japan doesn't need to do that, (but) it has to realize the importance of having these training facilities, bring in coaches and trainers who want to be a

part of it and grow it into a national program."You will see that in as little as one to three years there will be such an improvement that in five to 10 years the country will have a plethora of young and talented players who are all vying to play for their country."* * * *Looking ahead to the future, I wanted to know Planells' impression of what the bj-league's reputation will be in five or 10 years. So I asked him.He offered this optimistic picture:"The bj-league should end up growing to be one of the top one or two leagues in all of Asia and a top-eight league around the world. Besides, basketball in Japan has so much to offer the foreign players that it will be a much more attractive place to play than other countries."With the development of the programs I've mentioned and the overall improvement of play, there is no reason why the bj-league couldn't be one of the top leagues in the world. "Now it will take hard work, determination and an open vision but it is extremely possible that it can be considered one of the top leagues in the world. China is considered the top league in Asia, but behind them Korea, the Philippines and others compete for the next slot."The bj-league has to follow the NBA model in that it puts a premium on entertainment. . . . The NBA commercials are fantastic: (they show) the up-and-down excitement of the game, the athletes flying up and down finishing with dunks or sweet shooting. If the bj-league can replicate that and think more of a global market than just a Japan market, then the bj-league will rise to the top under the NBA."The Philippines Basketball Association has marketed itself wisely in the Internet age, creating an English-language Web site. That's a decision, Planells said, the bj-league should immediately replicate.Why?"You have thousands of Filipinos in the U.S. and around the world who follow that league very closely," Planells said. "Even Filipinos who don't speak the language can follow teams that they would have never known existed. "There is something to say about pride in one's own culture. There can be a Japanese teenager who has grown up in the U.S. all his life and only knows the NBA."What better way to expose him to his own culture (than) with the bj-league Web site?"Now he will learn about basketball in Japan, but he can also generate some more pride about Japan and basketball. Think international and not national when building the brand of the bj-league."