

Planells confident expansion Golden Kings will blossom with time

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ONE-ON-ONE WITH ...

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By ED ODEVEN

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SENDAI — Hernando Planells, the head coach of the expansion Ryukyu Golden Kings, sat down after his team's 87-78 loss to the Sendai 89ers on Sunday and spoke at length about his players, the challenges of building a team from scratch and his overall impressions of the bj-league.

Planells, 31, has rapidly built an impressive resume as a young coach. He's worked as an assistant coach in the college ranks at UNLV, as well as gaining valuable experience as an ABA coach and as a scout working under NBA scouting guru Marty Blake.

Here are excerpts from the conversation.

Q: Nearing the midway point of the season, where are the Golden Kings in relation to where you thought you would be as a team at this point?

Planells: For every coach, in the beginning part of a season you definitely have high hopes of what you can do, especially when we went to Taiwan (in the preseason) and played well in that tournament . . .

I felt we would be a little better record-wise, but when that happens and things don't start going the way you would expect them to, you have to focus your energy and shift it to other things, such as: How are the individual players improving?

We are 4-16, but . . . we are still five games, six games out of the last playoff spot. That's the crazy part of it.

I would, of course, think we would be better. But when you take an honest look at us right now, and I look at the pieces that we have, I say to myself, 'We had some opportunities to win some games, but we are growing and learning.'

Why did Ryukyu sign former University of Michigan guard Herb Gibson last week?

Well, I think I've been saying all along we need someone to play the perimeter, an athletic guy who can match up against the (Rizing Fukuoka forward) Josh Peppers of the league or a (Bobby) St. Preux (Sendai 89ers forward) in the league.

We were able to get some video footage in and the team made a decision for Herb to come down.

I had seen him before maybe one time, and I'm familiar with him because in my other coaching stops I had gotten his resume before. But he got here earlier this month and we got him involved . . .

As you can see, he gives us someone who can attack the basket.

Naoto (Takushi) can attack, Shigeyuki (Kingo) can attack, but those guys are on a smaller side. Now we've got somebody with a little more power, a little more athleticism to get there.

"He absorbs contact very well when he's in the air and is able to finish because of that. He played well for me, so I am happy about that. It's definitely positive stuff for us. We need those positives. We are losing too many games.

How would you describe the Golden Kings' fan support to date?

I think the following is pretty good. The people of Okinawa are wonderful. Just like all of us, they would love to see their team win more, and we are not, but still more fans are learning about us. People in Okinawa are still learning that there's a professional basketball team there.

We are getting good support. After games, whether we are losing or winning, people still come up and they say good luck to you. Kings fans don't leave early; the fans are there all the way until the very end. I appreciate their patience.

In several of the team's defeats the final margin has been close. Is this an encouraging sign?

I always tell my team, 'We're not far. It may seem that we're far, it may seem that we're awful, but we really aren't. We are closer than what the scores indicate.' I really believe that.

Which bj-league players have especially impressed you so far this season?

I think one of the better players is Josh Peppers (who leads the league with 23.1 points per game). I think he's really consistent and is a very good shooter.

(Sendai's) Bobby St. Preux is a very talented player. I think he's fourth on the team in minutes, yet he's their second-leading scorer (actually fifth in minutes, third in scoring).

I would say those two are kind of more of the all-around type of guys. St. Preux really jab-steps, (takes) a jump shot, or jab-steps and drives. That's his game. He really knows how to play.

Peppers is almost the same type of way. They have that type of NBA game because they can read the cutters, they read the screens and things like that.

Of the big guys, I would say (Tokyo's) Nick Davis, even though he's been injured a little bit this year, and (Takamatsu's) Reggie Warren are strong.

I've seen Reggie for a while and he's really, really done a great job. He's got that NBA fadeaway and good footwork,

good athletic ability. I like him a lot.

Who has been Ryukyu's most consistent player?

It's tough to say, because I think all of us have had ups and downs. I think (forward) Danny Jones has given us good stability. We can always count on him.

When given the minutes Dae Han (South Korean forward Han Dae Kyun) has been really solid for us; Naoto has been solid for us.

I tell all the guys that we really don't have a star on this team. In order for us to win, all 12 players have to contribute. Whether they play or they don't play, we need that collective (effort). We don't have the one guy I can give the ball to and say, 'Just go.'

You've spoken highly of guard Kenya Tomori and his effort in the Kings-89ers series. In particular, what's he doing to impress you?

He's a big student of the game. He takes all my NBA DVDs and just watches them, and that's how he learns English. He listens to the commentary. He is the greatest example on our team in terms of hard work.

. . . Both of my assistants kept urging me to give Kenya an opportunity (to get more playing time at the point). And this was a great time because Naoto was hurt.

We said, 'You know what, what do we have to lose?' And in two games (last weekend against Sendai), he got 13 assists and one turnover.

And I think that shows the development that we are able to do with young players.

Compare your opinions about the bj-league before the season began with your assessment of the league now. In other words, how has your overall outlook changed about the teams, the way the league is run, the officials, the schedule, etc.?

Everything I said earlier about how it could be one of the top leagues in the world, I stand firmly behind that.

Every place we go to is a great place. The fan support is great. The organizations that I've seen are great as well. And the quality of the players is good — there's good Americans and there's very good Japanese players . . . I'm very impressed with the level of this league. I'm very impressed with the coaching.

Why do you believe it's important for this league that young Japanese coaches like Honoo Hamaguchi of the 89ers and Dai Oketani of the Oita HeatDevils have attained success early in their coaching careers?

I think what it shows is, that the league and the organizations are willing to trust young coaches to go out there with their team . . . What these organizations have done is they've allowed young coaches to come in, whether it's him (Hamaguchi) or the Oita head coach, to come in and have the opportunities that they may not have been able to get in another place, or even in other places in Japan, and they are flourishing.

I think it's great. I told the Sendai coach I think his team is really, really good. I love the way his guys play. I think he's a very good coach, and through time he's only going to get better, just like a lot of these other guys are.