



They'll put fight in Steelheads Al Hamnik's column

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GARY -- They are as different as cuff links and cucumbers, Terrence Shannon and Ray Yagelski. One looks like a basketball player, smooth, sleek and explosive. The other looks like Ron, the local health club manager who gives rubdowns after racquetball.

Shannon and Yagelski, like most 20-somethings with size, strength and a jump shot, want desperately to play in the NBA. That's why they plucked down their \$150 at this weekend's CBA tryouts for the new Gary Steelheads. Heck, Yagelski says he'd play for free. Keep the money. Just let him do what he loves most.

One is from the south side of Chicago, a 6-foot-8, 190-pounder who attended Thornwood High School and has a proclaimed 45-inch vertical leap. The other, as fundamentally sound as a young Larry Bird, is a team guy who starred at Chesterton, gladly plays defense and doesn't treat the pass like a winning lottery ticket -- something to be coveted.

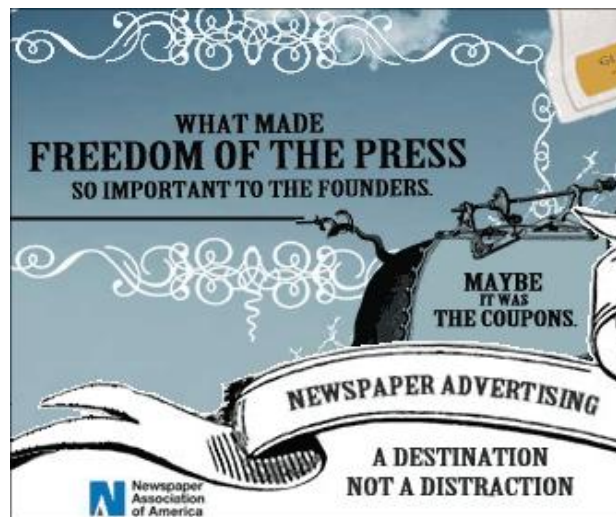
Coach Frank Kendrick and assistant Winston Garland, who must find ways to draw fans to the downtown Gary Genesis Center, should consider Shannon and Yagelski as their list of 80 CBA hopefuls is reduced to a workable number for the Nov. 30 training camp.

The 6-5, 215-pound Yagelski has seen more of the country than Amtrak, having attended three different colleges and more free-agent camps than he cares to remember.

"I've been in the last group every time and it winds up they never take anyone from the free-agent camps," said Yagelski, who owns Midwest Construction. "I came out here, not figuring they were gonna take anybody, but to come play basketball for three days. I'd play for this team for free.

"Other guys think shooting every time is gonna get 'em on the team. I just play and have fun. Whenever I do anything, I like to do it the best I can. I'm not trying to show that I can get eight points in 10 minutes," Yagelski added after Saturday's early workout at Indiana University Northwest, witnessed by about 300 fans.

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Steelheads' general manager Earl Smith III expected 50 players to show for Friday night's first session. Instead, more than 80 came. Smith even got a call from some guy in Brazil, inquiring about his chances.

"I had quite a few people tell me last night that I got the most cheers from fans. I had about three dunks," said Yagelski, constantly active at both ends of the floor.

In the case of Shannon, you've got a raw talent whose entire game is played above the rim. But he's trying to develop a style that can hurt you in many ways. He's been to the Steve Bardo Shooting Camp. And this summer, the Englewood resident worked out with NBA stars Antoine Walker, Michael Finley, Juwan Howard and Brad Miller at a Chicago-area gym.

If Shannon is to be discovered, the Steelheads are his personal spotlight. He played two seasons at Elgin Community College, where he earned All-American honors, then fell victim to the party life and became academically ineligible. And when he signed with an agent, his remaining eligibility was gone.

"My goal is not to play professional basketball," Shannon said. "My goal is to play in the NBA. If I wanted to play professional basketball, I could go overseas, stay in the CBA or go to South America.

"I'm going to use the CBA as my stepping stone."

Shannon says he's grown, matured, and has his eyes on the prize. He hired a personal trainer to help him beef up. No more partying. It's all business now. He became a dad in July, so there are two mouths to feed.

Spend a few minutes with both young men and you quickly find yourself cheering for them, hoping they can achieve and live their dream. The Steelheads, of course, would also benefit greatly.

Both have local ties. Shannon's mother and two younger brothers live in Hammond.

"I make sure I make my presence felt," Shannon said. "I'm 6-8, I'm paper thin, but it's all about your heart. It would be great for me to play here in Gary. I'm a crowd-pleaser. Even if there isn't a crowd, I'm still gonna play to let people know I'm here."

If you need a reason to attend Steelheads games, I'll give you two.

C'mon Frank, Winston, Earl. Do it.

I can hear the turnstiles clicking now.

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