

Hoop dreams come true for 'Trotters

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going to fail, too. I'm not surprised about the bet."

The USBL, which was created in 1985, adopted the motto "League of Opportunity." The league allows college players to showcase their talents for the NBA, CBA, IBA and international clubs around the world. Its season runs from May 1 — the end of a player's college career — until the end of June — right before the NBA draft and the start of rookie and free agent camps. All games are played under NBA rules. But it also gives players the freedom to leave whenever they wish.

"Players are under contract, but it's not sealed in blood," said Cougars general manager Tom Phelps. "If a player gets an offer from the NBA or overseas, we release him with our blessing. Our job is to get them a job to the next level and some good public relations for us in the process."

"We have a player named Tyrone Hopkins who played for us last year. Tyrone got a call to play in the Philippines, went for about a month, didn't like it for whatever reason and asked to come back and play for us. He's an excellent player and it's just a matter of time before the NBA calls him."

Players sign a 10-week contract for approximately \$350 per week. An added attraction of the league is its territorial rights. Clubs recruit as many home grown products as possible. Last season's Cougars roster included N.C. State's Lorenzo Charles, Nate Higgs of Elizabeth City State University, Bernard Heard of St. Augustine's College and UNC-Pembroke's Leon Morgan.

With last year's success, the Cougars staff knows the pressure is on. And who better to lead the pack than one of the most famous ball players ever? After his career with the

Globetrotters ended in 1992, Sanders, a Johnson C. Smith University graduate, spent the next five years traveling the country as a motivational speaker. The former Wake County player of the year was the head basketball coach at Bonner Academy last year. Sanders says the team can't help but succeed.

"To have an owner who has played the game is very important," he said. "When Clyde puts his input in, he knows what's going on. Our president, Rodney Brown, was a point guard at Canisius. It's a marriage of like minds, a spiritual organization."

And others have taken note.

"We get calls from other teams' players wanting to come here," Sanders added. "Not because we're the best franchise, but because we treat our players right. We're fair, we pay on time. And as former players, we know how it feels."

We've been there, done that. Everybody wants to play for the Cougars."

Unfortunately, everybody can't. The roster is limited to 10 players because, as Phelps put it, "Players are here to play, not sit on the bench."

For those who want a chance at the brass ring, the first of two free-agent camps will be held April 11 at 9 a.m. at Southeast Raleigh High School. A second tryout date is set for April 18 at a site yet to be determined.

And while no one knows who will be left standing at the season opener on May 1, one thing is for certain: There will be no more office pools.

"In the beginning, you're going to have to become a total servant to the community," Austin said. "I call it the worm syndrome. You have to get humiliated, walked on and totally crushed. ...But the one who serves the most gains the rewards."

Reduce your debt load on credit purchases

Save on basics

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than men for a range of products and services. And it's not just the dollar or two difference on a dry-cleaning bill. Car dealers report that they make as much as thirty-seven percent higher profit on purchases by women. Of course, every car seller is looking to make the maximum profit, but preparation can help protect you from being overcharged.

No matter what your gender, you'll probably end up paying less

if the salesperson realizes you're familiar with the car and have a firm price in mind. So check the sticker price and the estimated dealer's cost. Then start negotiations at about \$300 above the dealer's cost. If the best offer you hear seems too high, say that you plan to shop around. A dealer who wants the sale will drop the price. So stand firm on your price.

Clothing and health care

Have you ever noticed that similar garments cost more if they're

found in the women's department than if they're in the men's department? It's true, even on simple items like running shorts or T-shirts. For unisex clothing like these items, women can save money by stepping across the aisle into the men's section.

For strictly women's items, like dresses or suits, shop around for the best price, then ask the store clerk to match the lowest price you found. You'll often get the price reduction, especially in large malls where two large department stores compete. So

Speak up!

This applies to health care prices, too. Studies show that women undergo more lab tests, get more prescriptions and have more repeat office visits than men. So always inquire about the need for a test or medication. Your best overall strategy: be assertive!

CHARLES ROSS is host of the nationally syndicated radio program, "Your Personal Finance," and author of "Your CommonSense Guide to Personal Financial Planning."

Exemptions for tax preparation

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spouse. However, you may claim an exemption for a dependent who is not required to file a return, but files one solely to claim a refund of tax withheld.

Phase-out rules

You lose all or part of the \$2,650 exemption is your adjusted gross income exceeds the thresholds set for 1997. For single taxpayers, the deductible for personal exemptions is phased out when AGI is between \$121,200 and \$243,700. Taxpayers who are married filing jointly with AGIs between \$181,800 and \$304,300 also will be subject to the exemption phase-out. The threshold amounts are adjusted annually.

Tax strategies

If your contribution to another person's support is closely tied to that person's own support spending, a simple shift in who pays for what can help tip the support scales in your favor. You may be able to secure the dependency exemption by spending a little extra or by suggesting that the person save some of his or her money or give it away in the form of gifts. Money that a dependent saves, or gives away, does not count toward self-support.

Sometimes a group of people, such as the adult children of a parent, join together to provide support. If these individuals together provide more than half the person's support, they can file a Multiple Support Agreement. Then, any one individual who provides more than 10 percent of the person's support may take an exemption for the person. The individual involved may agree to give the personal exemption to the person who would benefit the most, or may alternate years for claiming the exemption.

In the case of divorced or separated parents, generally, the parent who has custody is allowed to claim the child as a dependent. However, if the non-custodial parent is in a higher bracket and would benefit more from the exemption, and two parents agree, the custodial parent may transfer the

exemption in writing.

CPAs remind you that you must list the Social Security number of each dependent you

claim. This rule includes parents and other adults you claim as dependents, as well as children.

BUSINESS BRIEFS

The Charlotte Mecklenburg Development Corporation is seeking input in their strategic Planning process for future development in Charlotte's business corridors.

Representatives from the Chamber of Commerce will present a forum for Northwest Charlotte residents and business owners, April 2, beginning at 6 p.m. in Friendship Missionary Baptist Church's Enrichment Center.

The Northwest Community

Development Corporation and the Northwest Enterprise Center are sponsoring the meeting.

Wilkinson Boulevard is the first development project for the CMDC and meeting are being held to ensure that residents and business owners can review and comment on the initiative's preliminary recommendations for future plans in other business corridors.

For information, call 378-1269.

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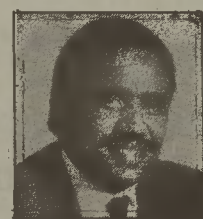
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