

# Grade A D-League

NBA hopes to boost farming system with new NBA Development League

BY DAVE BROOKS

**M**ost sports fans hadn't heard much about the National Basketball Association's Development League until earlier this year when UCLA ball player Jordan Farmar was drafted by the Los Angeles Lakers during the first round of picks.

Farmar took his Bruins to the NCAA championship and was called one of the most elite rookies in the league by Laker's General Manager Mitch Kupchak, but he wouldn't spend much time on the floor with the Lakers.

Instead Farmar would be sent to star in the NBA's newest experiment — the NBA D-League, a revamped farming system for developing young players. The D-League has been around since 2001, but the 2006-2007 marks a new era for the program as NBA officials attempt to mold the program into a two-part sports marketing tool.

"From a marketing standpoint, we have successfully used the D-League as a tertiary sport in cities that don't have an NBA team, but are proven sports markets from their support of minor league and single-market teams," said NBA D-League president Philip Evans. "But now we're expanding that focus. For some of our most popular clubs, the D-League is becoming a value-add, a secondary sports package to complement a sports club."

So far, the only example of that approach is the Los Angeles D-Fenders, the new D-League team owned by the Los Angeles Lakers and headed by rookie Farmar. The D-Fenders have a less rigorous schedule than their pro-counterparts, but will play all their home games before Lakers games.

"Entrance into a D-Fenders game will be included with each ticket to a Lakers game," said Lee Zeidman of the AEG-owned

Staples Center in Los Angeles where both teams play. "We can usually fit everyone at the D-League game into the lower bowl. After the game is over, we clear everyone out and match them up with their correct seat."

Zeidman said the D-League team requires a fraction of the staffing the NBA requires, but since most employees are already on site for Lakers games, it's not difficult getting hired help for match-ups. He said the Staples Center typically operates two or three concession areas in the lower bowl during an NBA D-league game and limited merchandising stations. The Lakers team store also remains open.

"It just adds more life to the building and extends the concession areas," he said. "We found that the building was fairly busy with pre-game activity, so this is a way to move some additional business. It's also a good game warm-up for when the big event happens."

Other D-League teams are watching closely to see if creating a new D-League expansion team in their facility makes financial sense. Created last year, the D-Fenders are the only D-League team with exclusive team sponsorship. It's also the third team to be created for the league this year and Evans said several other NBA teams have their eye on the program to see if it's successful.

In the meantime, the remaining D-League teams will continue to operate under independent ownership and sell their own tickets to games. Fort Worth Flyers spokesperson Courtney Cay said his team was moving about 2,400 tickets per game at \$8 to \$100 depending on seats.

"We're actually really pushing the courtside component for these games," said Cay. "Where else can someone sit on the court for \$100 per person? We're also offering discounted bulk packages for corporate groups."

Evans said the D-League will also continue to play a major role in player development — since 2001, more than 100 coaches, referees and athletic trainers have moved to NBA teams or the league office. D-League teams play a 50-game regular season schedule that officially began Nov. 24 and ends April 14. Unlike the NBA where players sign contracts with the team, D-League players sign contracts with the league. Vt

Interviewed for this story: **Phillip Evans**, (864) 248-1108; **Lee Zeidman**, (213) 742-7255; **Courtney Cay**, (817)698-8333

## THE NBA D-LEAGUE TEAMS

### ANAHEIM ARSENAL

**FOUNDED:** 2006  
**HOME:** Anaheim (Calif.) Convention Center  
**NBA AFFILIATIONS:** Los Angeles Clippers, Orlando Magic, Portland Trail Blazers

### ARKANSAS RIMROCKERS

**FOUNDED:** 2004  
**HOME:** Alltel Arena, North Little Rock, Ark.  
**NBA AFFILIATIONS:** Atlanta Hawks, Memphis Grizzlies and Miami Heat

### AUSTIN TOROS

**FOUNDED:** 2001  
**HOME:** Austin (Texas) Convention Center  
**NBA AFFILIATIONS:** Boston Celtics, Houston Rockets and San Antonio Spurs

### BAKERSFIELD JAM

**FOUNDED:** 2003 (Formerly the Long Beach Jam)  
**HOME:** Rabobank Arena Theater, Bakersfield, Calif.  
**NBA AFFILIATIONS:** Golden State Warriors, Sacramento Kings

### COLORADO 14ERS

**FOUNDED:** 2006  
**HOME:** Broomfield (Colo.) Event Center  
**NBA AFFILIATIONS:** Denver Nuggets, New Jersey Nets and Toronto Raptors

### DAKOTA WIZARDS

**FOUNDED:** 1994  
**HOME:** Bismarck (N.D.) Civic Center  
**NBA AFFILIATIONS:** Chicago Bulls and Washington Wizards

### FORT WORTH FLYERS

**FOUNDED:** 2005  
**HOME:** Fort Worth (Texas) Convention Center  
**NBA AFFILIATIONS:** Charlotte Bobcats, Dallas Mavericks and Philadelphia 76ers

### IDAHO STAMPEDE

**FOUNDED:** 2001  
**HOME:** Qwest Arena, Boise Idaho  
**NBA AFFILIATIONS:** Seattle Sonics and Utah Jazz

### LOS ANGELES D-FENDERS

**FOUNDED:** 2006  
**HOME:** Staples Center, Los Angeles  
**NBA AFFILIATIONS:** Los Angeles Lakers

### SIOUX FALLS SKYFORCE

**FOUNDED:** 1989  
**HOME:** Sioux Falls (S.D.) Arena  
**NBA AFFILIATIONS:** Detroit Pistons and Minnesota Timberwolves

### TULSA 66ERS

**FOUNDED:** 2001  
**HOME:** Expo Square Pavilion, Tulsa, Okla.  
**NBA AFFILIATIONS:** Milwaukee Bucks, New Orleans/Oklahoma City Hornets, New York Knicks