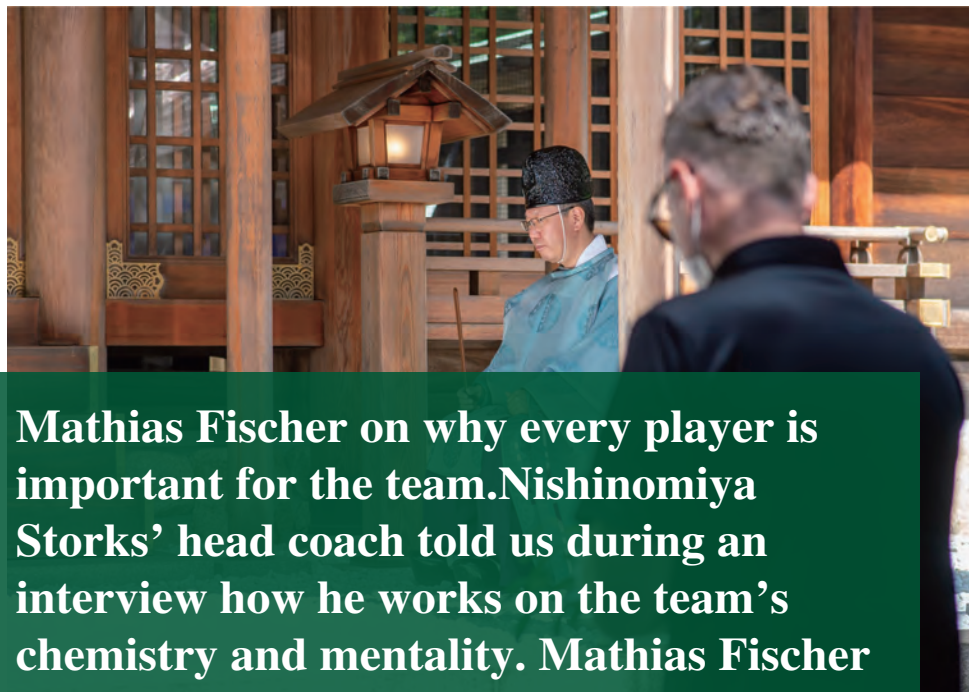




STORKS

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Mathias Fischer on why every player is important for the team. Nishinomiya Storks' head coach told us during an interview how he works on the team's chemistry and mentality. Mathias Fischer also talked about European and Northern American basketball styles.

Storks: Since you moved to Nishinomiya Storks, the team has been playing a rather offensively and creatively. Is it something you've been working on?

Mathias: Yes, it's a kind of development. When I arrived the Japanese players here were relatively shy. They didn't want to take responsibility, they were a bit hesitant, and they thought that the imports should do the job. For me a so-called "successful basketball" is one where everyone is involved, understanding his role and able to score. Everyone must defend and if a player is having a good day, you should share the ball and find him. It doesn't always have to be an American player. We have good players and we have great shots from outside. I have been trying to establish this culture that everyone is important for the team and that everyone can do something good for the team.

Storks: How did you change the players' mentality?

Mathias: I feel like it's a process. We have to practice a lot, and every game we take a step forward. You cannot change such a thing in 2 or 3 months. This has something to do with

mentality: some players have played for a long time with the mentality that the imports must score and we must give them the ball. To turn that around, we conduct special drills that our Japanese players must also score, and we have some systems for our Japanese players. The philosophy of the coach is: everyone must be involved, everyone must understand his role, and everyone is important for the team.

Storks: What brought you to Japan?

My first contact with Asia was with the German national team. I was coaching the A2 national team, and we were invited to China. We spent 14 days there and played 8 games in 8 different cities. It was very interesting, and I established some contacts with some managers and players. Then I got my first offer from the ASEAN league. I saw the potential in Asia: We played successful basketball and we had fun during the tour. And then there came my first offer from Nishinomiya Storks in Japan. I didn't hesitate as I knew the league in Japan has decent quality. I asked John Patrick, who coached Toyota Alvark, and he told me that if I had the chance to come to Japan, I should definitely come and experience Japanese culture and the league. My wife agreed, so we

came to Nishinomiya, and started working here.

Storks: Different country, different language, how did you communicate with the players in the beginning?

Mathias: Yes, definitely. It was a problem. I already knew from China that most Asian players aren't fluent in English. Most of the players understand English very well but the problem is always with the speaking part. Here at Nishinomiya we have two interpreters, Ikeno and Asako. They both speak fluent English and Japanese. But the other problem was that the players didn't want to share their knowledge. Their mentality was to listen, never to speak. I can remember very well at the beginning when we had meetings, during which we watched videos of our opponents, I asked them how they would defend in this situation but no one answered. It was a long long process until the players finally started communicating with each other. Because it's not only the coach--the coach has only two eyes and sometimes doesn't see everything, and



sometimes players think differently about different situations. Hence everyone must know what others are having in their mind.

That was the biggest challenge at the beginning: how to get the thoughts out of them to share, to discuss, and to solve the problems. Coaches don't play in the game. It's very simple. We stay outside, my timeouts are limited. I can help them, I can yell at them

STORKS Monthly Magazine

sometimes, but in the end it is those players who play in the court. They must play the game. And I must prepare them to solve problems. If you communicate, it's way easier. This is the biggest topic of professional basketball. Players must communicate with and respect each other. I would say you'll get 20% better if you communicate loud and early. If they have the chance to react, something good will happen.

Storks: When you hire a new player, do you look at his education background, family or things like that?

Mathias: Yes, I think these things are very important. You have to know who you sign. I have a very good network in Europe so I can call many coaches and agents. My main style of game is European, but of course now it's somewhat modified as Japanese basketball is different--It's a mixture of NBA and European basketball, like something in between. You need decent imports who can play this game. I am always looking for ones with good athletic levels as well as high basketball IQ that will allow them to make some extra passes, read the situations, and be able to play as a team. Every extra pass that we create is important for the team. We are one of the best teams (that I think) in assists. This is my philosophy: I want players to share the ball, and if we do, resulting in 5 or 6 players scoring double figures, then I am very happy as it means the entire team is involved.

I simply don't believe that in European basketball, one solo player can win the whole game for you and score over 40 points. In this season or last season, I don't remember anyone in Euro League scoring over 40 points. The defense is so intensive and the rotations are so good, that you nearly don't get open shots. You only get open shots when the team works together and moves the ball very well. In NBA it's a little bit different though, because they focus more on the one-and-one situations. The situations of rotations are a little bit different.

Storks: Now in NBA we can see more 3-point shots than before?

Mathias: Yes, more and more. Overall, the game has evolved so much that everyone can get more 3-point shots. In the 80/90s when I played, centers couldn't shoot. Their only position was under the basket. Nowadays all the big guards are amazing shooters: quick, with good foot work, and very athletic. You can switch everything without a problem. In Japan it's a bit different, because Japanese players are a bit smaller, and if you have a player who is 1m80 and must defend against let's say Cheikh, who is 2m08/120kg, there'll be a problem. But in Europe these guards are 1m96, 1m90. they are strong, so the switch doesn't produce so much stress like it does here. Hence it's a little bit different in strategies, the defenses in Japan.

Storks: European basketball is getting stronger and stronger. Do you think that European basketball will surpass Northern American basketball at some point?

Mathias: I don't think so, but I think the reason why we have so many good players in Europe is because the education of basketball is really good. The clubs are doing a great job, and we have good coaches.

Individually, from very early, the players have the time and chance to get playing with professionals. In the US, college players play against each other in NCAA. In Europe, if you are highly potential, at the age of 18 you can already play maybe in 3 teams or are already in the Euro League, against grownup men. So you are getting a lot of experience. Look at Doncic, a very good example, the Spanish point guard (correction: Slovenian who used to play for Real Madrid youth and is now playing for Dallas Mavericks, NBA). When he was 16 he was already at a very high level. He was so ready for the NBA because in Europe with this talent, if they can, they get the playing time. But the college players in the US, of course they can leave earlier for the NBA draft, but it doesn't guarantee them to get drafted or to immediately play. It's a little bit different aspect between teaching basketball and having the chance to play at the high level.

So many players from Europe are now in the NBA. French, German, Spanish...nearly 3 quarters of the national teams are playing in the NBA. The level is growing and growing.

Storks: What is the difference between the fans in Europe and in Japan? In Europe if a player has a bad game, the situation with the fans might be a little bit difficult. But in Japan, even if you lose the game, the fans will still be very happy, smile at you, encourage you, and avoid giving you too much pressure. But at the same time, the players don't get any pressure. Does this difference change the game results or not?

Mathias: I think that's definitely a cultural difference, between the fans' behaviors in Japan and in Europe. In some European cities, Belgrade for example, you have 10,000 very aggressive fans who sing, dance and, come to the game already drunk, the atmosphere boils, and every basket you make, they shout and sometimes throw things into the court, which isn't very nice. But they simply want to do everything that is possible and legal to help their team win.

I experienced once back in Germany, with





Telekom Baskets Bonn. We played against Cologne in front of 18,000 spectators. That gave me goosebumps when I entered the gym. You know...the atmosphere was completely different. Also with the national team once, when we played in Georgia, we had 10,000 spectators. And Zaza Pachulia, an ex NBA pro, played for them like a national hero. That was amazing. Every time he got the ball everyone would shout and applaud.... In Europe, to win an away game is extremely hard.

So the pressure on the players is definitely way higher in Europe. They must be productive, they must fight for their countries or home clubs. I feel that in Japan, it's more of a supporting atmosphere, from home or from away team. It's very nice, because the players receive support and it's less stressful for the players.

But now in Japan, the fans are also getting louder and louder, a bit like the situation in Europe sometimes.

Storks: Do you try to educate or tell your imports about the things to do and not to do in Japan?

Mathias: Yes, I think this is happening already from my side. Every time I interview a player...because you know, in the off season I have to sign new imports. For each position, I have a list of the players I would like to sign. And of course sometimes I don't get number 1, number 2, or even number 3. There can be different reasons--wanting more money, different clubs, or he just simply doesn't want to relocate to Japan.

If a player is willing to come, I'll call him, and we will speak a little about the cultural differences and what he has to expect when he comes here: How the life and weather is, how the practice is conducted, and how the games are. There is nowhere else in the world that you play two games in a row--not in Europe, not in the NBA. In Europe we even have a rule that says you have to have an at least 48-hour break between games just to protect the players and to have a decent quality of the game.

So the rule is very special in Japan. You play on Saturdays and Sundays, with less than 24 hours of regeneration time. It's stressful for the body and mind. Those European players must understand this situation and accept the fact that this is how they work here. And of course, they must produce. The practice time is a little bit different. And the amount of the games--60 games plus playoff--is a lot. In Europe, you only have this amount of games



when you play in international leagues. If you play in normal leagues, you play 36 games and maybe playoffs and that's it--let's say 48 games and you're through. The season is over. In Japan the season is long and intensive, so players have to prepare their bodies and minds for this.

Storks: Last season we finished champions of the regular season but then lost to Sendai in the playoffs, how do you bounce back from such a heart-breaker?

Mathias: Yes, it was very hard, I even saw people crying at the gym because the emotional level was really high. The circumstances weren't easy: DJ got disqualified and couldn't play the end of the first and the second game, our free throw percentage was under 50%, and that in the end cost us the win. Everything is a lesson for the future. We must learn from it. It cannot take too much of your downtime. The first moment of course can drag you down, but what's more important is what we can learn from it, how we can get better, and how I can prepare the team better. There are indeed a few lessons that coaches and players have learned from.

We always tell players how important free throws are, how important to take extra free throws, and to be mentally sharp, like how to go into the game, how to be aggressive...etc. Everything counts for the end of the season. It's a process--you don't have to play the best basketball in the first three months of the season. You must steadily play a decent level, and in the end of the season, you are ready for the playoffs, you must play (as a team) the best basketball. This is the process we want to achieve with our team step by step. If we develop in the right direction, with good defense, offense, and great team chemistry, plus understanding our goal, we sure can reach our best achievement.

Storks: There are so many very talented players who never made it to the best level or who couldn't last long due to too much

distraction from the outside world. How do you keep your players' feet on the ground?

Mathias: In my experience, the biggest pressure is always on the high potentials. From a very early age, they start speaking about NBA or big money. This is actually counter-productive for a talent. A talent is a talent, meaning the potential is there. But of course they must show that they are worth the money, that they can earn this, that they can get the playing time.

Some players just simply stop working hard, since they think that they are talents and are playing in the NBA, they can definitely reach it--but they can never succeed without hard work. What I often saw back in Europe, was that players with the highest potential weren't able to reach their goal. It was those in the second rows, who people don't put too much attention to and don't have too much pressure held on the shoulders, that fulfilled their dreams. They had the peace to work hard and they knew they must work harder to get into the rotation. And through all these efforts, they achieved their goals. They actually perform much better than those with the highest potential. It's not always like this, but in countless cases, situations are easier for these players. The high potentials need good coaches, good communications, and extremely strong programmes to help them achieve. Step by step. You talk about the next goal only after achieving your first. This state of mind is critical for these young talents to be successful.

Our team have some older players with family, so their "parties" focus more on family gatherings. As for young players, they have the right to have parties so my suggestion is always about the "right timing" --that you don't go partying on a Friday night when you have a big game on Saturday. This doesn't make sense. But after the game, having a drink and relaxing themselves a bit is totally fine. When they come back, they are refreshed and have new motivation.

Our new power forward Shaquille Hines on Nishinomiya Storks' "team basketball".

The Chicago native spoke about the difference between Storks and the first few teams he played against. Just as our head coach mentioned in his interview, Storks play a very European basketball style and that's something Shaquille enjoys very much.



Storks: You had the chance to play in different countries like the US, Sweden or Greece, so what brought you to Japan?

Shaquille: I just felt it was the best timing for me in my career to come here.

Storks: Was it a difficult choice to make?

Shaquille: Yes, it was, especially since how strict it is here now because of the covid-19. It was pretty tough to deal with the situation in Europe last year: we were by ourselves with no visitors. The coach told me that it was gonna be the same here in Japan, so that was difficult especially being so far away from home. But I think it is the best thing for my career to move forward. When I'll be done with my career, hopefully I'll have made enough money to do things I want to do outside the basketball.

Storks: You do have to make a living for a life time within such a short time right!?

Shaquille: Exactly, that's so true. I'll be blessed to play 10 years. Imagine if I play basketball till 34 years old. That's so young. I still have many things to do after that so I am just trying to play good basketball, see the world but also make some money.

Storks: Is travelling around the world something you enjoy?

Shaquille: Most definitely! Greece is pretty nice, Germany and Hungary too and now Japan. I've definitely been taking an advantage learning different cultures.

Storks: Most of the players aren't from Nishinomiya, you're all pretty far away from your family, so how do you build a team spirit within such a short time?

Shaquille: You know it definitely takes time but during the pre-season we've been practising a lot and that's how you build a team spirit. It definitely takes time but you're taking the steps in the right direction.

Storks: Which part of the game do you think you could still progress in?

Shaquille: Honestly, me being more aggressive on defence, offence and rebound, just small things like that. I am still learning about the style of play here, the referees, different players and my team mates. I think I am doing pretty well and I am learning game by game and day by day. The first week was kind of tough, not in terms of basketball but in terms of figuring things out. I was a bit confused.

Storks: Was it difficult in terms of communication and culture compare to what you experienced before?

Shaquille: Everything is extremely different here, from the food, the travels and communication. But I feel like I can adjust. It



was challenging at first but I adjusted pretty well. I am not picky or anything like that so it's all cool.

Storks: How do you like it here in Nishinomiya?

Shaquille: I had a little bit of time to go to some grocery stores and restaurants but we don't



STORKS Monthly Magazine

have cars. We have bikes so we just go biking around. But when we have days off, we want to rest and prepare for the next day honestly. But I have been to Osaka before, in pre-season I had two days off so I went there sightseeing and it's pretty nice. It's cool there.

Storks: How about the food, did you adjust yourself to it?

Shaquille: You know it's so funny because going to Europe I was like "oh my god this food is so crazy", there are no Americanized restaurants or very few, then I came here and it was crazy, it's even harder. Every day I am so confused, I don't know what I am eating. I try to keep it simple and I also cook sometimes, but when I feel a bit lazy I order it on-line.

Storks: You've seen how passionate fans can be in Europe, especially Greece, where you played, it's totally different from here. What do you think about the atmosphere here in Japan?

Shaquille: It's definitely different, like you said in Europe and mostly in Greece, the fans put pressure on you, the coach and the organization, so sometimes if you're not mentally tough enough it's gonna get difficult for you. Here fans are so nice--you just want to win for them. It's a good thing in my career because I feel like I know the game of basketball pretty well and I know the player I

am and what I am capable of. The fans trust us. Believe it or not, every player wants to do well, and of course to win every game. It's not like you're out there and don't care, so it's cool that the fans understand that and are nice. I love it.

Storks: All players sometimes get harsh comments on social media, is it something you have to deal with by yourself?

Shaquille: Yes, exactly, you have to deal with it by yourself, but I think it is all about you being mature enough. I just let it be and move on because they are gonna love you, and then hate you, and then love you again. That's the process.

Storks: Can you tell us a bit about the basketball style you're playing now at Storks?

Shaquille: We're very different from the teams we've been playing against. We mostly play together--the imports also have the freedom. But the other teams we've played against rely on their imports and it's all about them. Here, it's team basketball, which is what I am used to play with. You can tell he (Mathias) is a coach from Europe, because he plays that way. It's definitely fun to play together. That's the basketball I am used to: playing together and also having freedom.

Storks: What are the differences between European and American basketball?

Shaquille: It's funny because I have played in Europe a lot and I am kind of a European basketball player now. In Europe every position counts: Every position matters so they practise very hard and play as a team. It's all about winning. In America guys can get a little selfish I think. In terms of level, guys in America are definitely a bit more talented so they tend to be a bit more selfish, while in Europe they teach you to play together and play the right way.

Storks: What goal did you set for this season?

Shaquille: I expect us to continue playing better every game. We are a good team. My opinion is that we are the best in the league, and we have to continue to play the right way and to play together. But there are definitely goals like reaching the final and moving to B1.

Storks: Did you have any friends here before moving to the B. League?

Shaquille: I have a friend who played in B2 and is now in B3, so I talked to him a lot before moving here. I also have a friend in B1. I got to play one of them in pre-season which is cool.

Home Game Schedule 2021 @Nishinomiya-City Central Gym



Nov.13sat 5pm
Nov.14sun 2pm
vs FUKUSHIMA



Nov.27sat 5pm
Nov.28sun 2pm
vs KOSHIGAYA



Dec.4sat 5pm
Dec.5sun 2pm
vs YAMAGATA



Dec.18sat 5pm
Dec.19sun 2pm
vs EHIME



Dec.29wed 7pm
vs TOKYO Z



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Creative

Lionel Piguet / Writing & Photo
Jennifer M. Uy Piguet / Writing
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