



Muslim Basketball: Taking over the court

By Habeeba Husain, posted August 6, 2013

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The most popular jerseys on the basketball court in Parsippany, New Jersey on Saturday mornings do not read “New York,” “Brooklyn,” or “Bulls.” Instead, the black or white jerseys with big bold red letters display the logo of “Muslim Basketball.”

Worn by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, the reversible jerseys are the uniforms for players in a league called Muslim Basketball. What began as ordinary outdoor pick-up games in 2005 has grown into a nonprofit organization with three divisions, 28 teams and roughly 220 players.

Of those 220 players, about 30 percent are non-Muslim. This figure was reported by Edriss Froogh, one of three commissioners for Muslim Basketball. Much like their Muslim teammates, the non-Muslim players found the organization and accommodation of Muslim Basketball attractive.

“I like that there are stats, really like that,” said Brandon Steward, who after playing for various leagues around New Jersey enjoys being part of Muslim Basketball as a point guard on the Kashgar team. Steward, who is not affiliated with the religion, averages 12.8 points, 5 rebounds and 3.7 assists per game since joining the league in the Spring 2012 season. Muslim Basketball began tracking player statistics, like point, rebound and assist averages, as well as three-pointer, field-goal and free-throw efficiency in the Summer 2008 season. The website, MuslimBasketball.org, has player profiles containing individual statistics by game and season, much like the official statistics NBA.com provides for its professional athletes.

The popularity of Muslim Basketball isn’t just about the numbers. News about the teams spreads quickly by word of mouth throughout New Jersey and New York. Sarajevo team captain, Ahmed Elfayoumi, said the jerseys initiate a lot of conversation. He often wears his when playing outside the league, and people always inquire.

“They’re skeptical at first when they see Muslim Basketball,” Elfayoumi said. “But they come here, and then they ask to join.”

A player since Winter 2009, Elfayoumi said he introduced many Muslims and non-Muslims to the league. Due to mainstream media portrayals, the impression many people have of Islam today is not always positive. However, what people see of the religion when they come to Muslim Basketball is very different, normal even, Elfayoumi said.

“They love it and it’s always great,” he said about his teammates of other faiths. “When they come see Muslims are regular people that can compete and be better than they are at basketball, then they get a realization of the normalcy of our religion.”

When Elfayoumi informs one person, that person tells two, and word continues to spread among the basketball-loving and playing community.

“It’s growing rapidly, much faster than I thought it could,” he said. “We’re three divisions in now, and I only foresee it getting bigger and better.”



Muslim Basketball’s three divisions are split up according to skill level. Steward plays for Division 1, while Elfayoumi plays for both Divisions 1 and 2. The first division contains the highest-skilled players; those who display the most competitiveness. These separations allow the leaders of Muslim Basketball to accommodate a wide range of talent levels. They can accommodate people who are interested in playing without turning anyone away. Abdul-Rahman Husain, one of four directors of the league and captain for the Division 2 team, Sana’a, said organizers noticed that the skilled players left because they found it uncompetitive, and less skilled players didn’t want to come back. Captains register their teams and indicate the division in which they’d like to compete. The Spring 2013 season is the first with Division 3.

“Now that we’ve split it out, we’ve killed two birds with one stone in being able to invite both of those kinds of people back to the league,” Husain said. “It’s very accommodating, and right now I feel like everybody is happy with the way the league is structured.”

Steward said his experience with Muslim Basketball has been a good one so far, and the competitiveness of players and teams is a factor.

“There’s really good players. There’s no really bad teams,” he said. “And there’s some players that actually played somewhere, like Marcus at Seton Hall, so that’s pretty cool.”

Marcus Toney-El is also a Division 1 player, averaging 14.2 points, 14.2 rebounds and 3.5 assists for his team, Cairo. Prior to joining Muslim Basketball, he played for Seton Hall University in the early 2000s. He is currently an associate head coach for the men’s basketball team at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Teaneck, NJ.



From left to right: Ahmed Naiem (MB player), Essad Malik (MB Director), Abdul-Rahman Husain (MB Director), Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, Sami Shaban (MB Director), Ibrahim Omar (MB Stats Manager), Edriss Froogh (MB Commissioner), Kamran Uddin (MB Commissioner). Saad Khurshid (MB Director) and Omar Abbassi (MB Commissioner) are not pictured.

Muslim Basketball players meet others who, like themselves, love the game and play hard. These introductions result in new friendships with former college players, those who want to improve their game and even retired N.B.A. players, like Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf. After playing against Michael Jordan in the 1990s on basketball’s biggest stage, the N.B.A. court, and in leagues around the world from Turkey to Japan, Abdul-Rauf was invited to play in an organized, full-court, five on five, Muslim Basketball game this spring in New Jersey.

“A lot of youth today, for whatever reason, feel stifled sometimes. They feel that we cant have fun,” Abdul-Rauf said. “Islam is about having fun, but within the right framework. We enjoy sports. We enjoy entertainment—the right type of entertainment, with the right type of attitude.”

While playing in the National Basketball Association, Abdul-Rauf said he isolated himself from his teammates when they went out to clubs. He maintained his fasts and prayers during the season, and eventually his teammates understood and accepted his values.

Valuable reminders of Allah that are present in the greetings of peace, intolerance of trash talk and foul language, and dedicated organizational efforts are what caught Abdul-Rauf's eye when he played as a guest against Elfayoumi's team during his visit. For players like Froogh, the Islamic values of the league, in addition to the sport, is what drove him to play in Muslim Basketball. He reminisced about his college days at Rutgers University, noting that was where he met many Muslims and learned more about his faith. "When I found out about this league, I knew that I could play basketball with my friends and be around new people that shared the same values as I did," he said.

MuslimBasketball.org's header displays the league's logo on the left—black and bold letters that spell "Muslim Basketball" with a player between the words ready to drive into the paint for two points. On the right, is a line of players in prayer with the words, "Building brotherhood through the game of basketball."

Even though there is an emphasis on faith, Muslim Basketball does not limit that brotherhood to any particular clique formed on a basis of skin color, cultural background or even religion.

"No matter what race you are, no matter what ethnicity you are, no matter even if you're Muslim or not Muslim, we just aim to invite these people to come play the game," Husain said.

The league schedules teams to play against each other within their divisions once a week. Spring 2013 games took place at the Parsippany Police Athletic League on Thursday nights for the largest Division 2 with 12 teams, and Saturday mornings for Divisions 1 and 3 with eight teams each. Teams are named after Muslim cities from around the world, like Mecca, Bukhara and Sarajevo. They are written in Arabic on the website in different colors and have their own web pages, which list the official roster, win-loss record, ranking, recent scores and picture.

Teams within each division play for the Muslim Basketball championship and trophy, said Froogh, whose Division 1 team won back to back titles in Spring 2012 and Winter 2013. Each division has its own trophy, and the winning team can keep it until the playoffs begin the following season, Froogh said.



Muslim Basketball is a sister company to the Jersey Association of Muslim Sports, which organizes softball, soccer and football leagues. Both are under parent-organization Muslim Youth Community Center, Froogh said.

The Islamic values the league is built upon subtly permeate past the Muslim community through the considerate accommodation of all players, careful organization of statistics and pictures, and enthusiastic sporting of the jerseys by the players, directors and commissioners.

"I think it has great potential, great potential," Abdul-Rauf said, wearing that very same Muslim Basketball jersey. "I'm really liking what I see."

Bio: Habeeba Husain will be a senior at Rutgers University in Fall 2013, studying Journalism & Media Studies and Religion. Her sports letters were published in SLAM Magazine and The Times of Trenton, and she contributes to MuslimGirl.net and One Voice, a Muslim youth newspaper. A huge fan of the Knicks and the N.B.A., Habeeba blogs about basketball on her website, H2Hoops.wordpress.com.