



US Muslims Find 'Love and Camaraderie' on Court



Ibrahim Jaaber goes up for a dunk in a Muslim tournament game. Jaaber was a two-time player of the year in the Ivy League, but finds time for a pick-up game here and there.



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There are basketball players here - lots of them. For them, playing hoops is fun, but it's also a way to build brotherhood; a way to grow closer with others who share their Muslim faith, and get to know some who don't.

They are high-school students, representatives of the Washington, D.C., region of the Muslim Inter-Scholastic Tournament, informally known as MIST. Many of them are planning to play in a basketball tournament, but they are also poets, actors, artists, filmmakers and web designers. They are waiting on Union Drive for buses that will take them to Toronto to compete in MIST's national tournament.

Adam Kareem is an island of authority in the middle of this teenage storm. Dressed in black jeans and a pale yellow button-down shirt, the director of DC MIST sports a beard that would make James Harden sit up and take notice. He carries a thick cardboard tube filled with participant projects over his shoulder that acts as a sort of

lightning rod, attracting a flurry of questions that he easily channels into directed energy. His charges are truly scholars and athletes, he explains.

"[MIST] started off as a purely inter-scholastic competition, but the organizers saw that basketball was huge with the male population," he says. "So they added basketball, but put in the stipulation that in order to register for basketball, you also had to register for one of the other competitions. If you don't, you can't compete. It very naturally develops a more rounded approach and lets competitors develop other talents."

MIST started at the University of Houston in 2002, the brainchild of then-freshman Shazia Sadiki. She wanted a way to connect with her Muslim brothers and sisters, so she leaned on her experience with debate and academic bowl competitions, forming a grass-roots organization for young competitors. A visitor to Houston took the idea home with him, starting the D.C. chapter one year later, and MIST grew from there, taking root in Atlanta, Chicago, California, New York and Toronto, amongst other areas. The movement is driven by volunteer organizers such as Adam Kareem, who somehow finds time to run D.C. MIST while carrying on research as a UMD graduate student studying Mechanical Engineering. It's not a small undertaking.

"We started out with 53 competitors, and it was held in the basement of a nearby public school," he remembers. "In 2011 we grew to 550 after we redesigned the website and started a Facebook fan page. This past year, we hosted 636 competitors. Thanks to God, it's growing each year."

Kareem introduces me to 17-year-old Naim Baig, a point guard from Team Dar-us-Salaam. Baig is one of MIST's stars, and he's going to Toronto even though his basketball team didn't qualify for nationals. He'll compete in Tajweed (recitation of the Qu'ran), improv ("It's kind of like " 'Whose Line is it Anyway?' " he says) and website design.

"When I first started in MIST, I didn't even know that I could do spoken word," he says. "You have to get out there and express your emotions. I tried other things, experienced some small success, and it just grew. It's built my confidence."

Baig, wearing long robes, is a serene presence. Behind him, in shorts and t-shirts, are 16-year-old brothers Amine and Kiko Younsi. Bubbling over with cocky enthusiasm, the Algerian-born siblings talk fast and finish one another's sentences. Both aspire to play college ball in the ACC, and will play in AAU tournaments throughout the summer. Still, they make time for MIST.

Amine: "It's a great way to learn about other cultures. If a Christian or a Catholic came here."

Kiko: ".we're all human beings."

Both: "It doesn't matter."

All are welcome

Almin Hodzic, who emigrated to the U.S. as a teen, hears the ugliness. "There's the stereotype of the middle-eastern look," he says, speaking via phone from his home in New Jersey. "I'm from Bosnia. I don't have that look, so people don't associate me with that when they say things about Muslims. But they're talking about me, too. So then I have to come out and say 'Hey, c'mon' and they get shocked."

Hodzic, a 6-10 center, earned a scholarship to Dominican College in Newark, after starring for New Jersey's Mount Olive High School. He is one of several former college players - some from nearby DI schools like UConn and NJIT - who found a post-collegiate hoops home in the Muslim Basketball league.

"We started out seeing if we could get 10 guys together to play pickup," says Essad Malik, one of the amateur league's co-founders. "By the end of the summer, we filled up three courts, just by word of mouth. We were at a friend's wedding joking about how quickly it had grown from nothing, and wondered if we could catch lightning in a bottle."

Malik's friends floated the idea - again by word of mouth - when they went back to school at Rutgers.

"We started organizing it in March and by May we had a league with eight teams and 60-70 people. It really kind of came from nowhere."

The history and scope of Islam are suggested by Muslim Basketball's team names. Mecca, Medina and Cairo are name-checked. So are Sarajevo, Delhi, Timbuktu and Jerusalem.

After laying out the welcome mat to the international Muslim community, the organizers opened doors for everyone else. The league's stats page lauds top individual performers. Ahmed Aldekki is the league's top passing threat, Ali Alsaïdi the leading scorer, and Omar Abbassi dominates the boards. Alongside them are Anthony Ligouri, the league's top long-range gunner, and Joseph Brennan, who blocks an amazing 4.7 shots per game.

"Building Brotherhood is our main motto," says Malik. "The fact that non-Muslims are willing to wear the name Muslim Basketball on their jerseys, and that we can show them that they don't need to be afraid of the word Muslim is a key thing for us."

Kerry Foderingham, a youth basketball coach and one of the league's non-muslim competitors, says league rules make for good, clean fun for all.

"I think of it as character," he says. "No swearing, no fighting. Those are things you shouldn't do anyway. It holds everybody in the league to a high standard."

Players also participate in non-profit projects sponsored by the local Muslim Youth Community Center. The MYCC, and Muslim Basketball, have fed the homeless and started an educational lecture series. One 17-year-old member started his own youth league, in hopes of keeping his classmates off the streets and out of trouble.

"If we can come together for this one thing - for basketball - we can do other things together, too," says Malik.

Sisters

Back at UMD, the time for evening prayers approaches. Eighteen-year-old Marwa Soliman suggests to Adam Kareem that the female contingent should congregate on the blue carpet of the musallah - a small prayer space tucked into the Union Drive side of the former Cole Fieldhouse. The boys will have to pray outside. "You don't want people of different genders accidentally touching," she mock-chastises him.

Soliman is a point guard and small forward for Team Blair, representing Montgomery Blair High School. She also competes in Nasheed - an a capella singing competition, and Tajweed, which showcases her ability to recite the words of the Qur'an. MIST offers her an opportunity to literally let her hair down.

"I did play basketball at school," she says. "My freshman year, I got a lot of . `stuff' from people, so playing at MIST is so comfortable. Going in, scarves off, we get to wear shorts, t-shirts and basketball shoes. It feels amazing to get the opportunity to play normally and not have to worry about being all covered up and having people staring at you like you're an outcast."

In public, Soliman dresses conservatively, with arms and legs covered and her hair tucked beneath a hijab scarf. She believes that what's in her heart matters more than what's on her head.

"What I've learned from MIST is to treat all brothers and sisters - and all people - with love and respect. It's so much easier to let other people know that it's not some crazy religion."

Building bridges

Even in an Olympic year, political realities can overshadow the simple joys of athletic competition. MIST and Muslim Basketball work hard to avoid the fear and arrogance that can divide Americans from differing backgrounds.

"We haven't made an overt effort to reach out to people in a way that sounds like `Hey, look how great Muslims are,'" says Essad Malik. "People choose to stick with us because we treat them as brothers no matter where they come from. They're going to be part of our brotherhood as long as they buy into the ideal of treating each other with respect."

Adam Kareem concurs.

"The most effective way to build bridges and facilitate interfaith dialogue is not to sit around and say `hey, we're different, but let's love each other' but to have people working mutually on a goal. Because it's in living and playing together that people really develop love and camaraderie with each other."

Basketball doesn't provide all the answers. But playing the right way may render a few of the questions moot.