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# Brotherhood Through Basketball

*A local league impresses talent and faith of all kinds through its organized, competitive hoops and an unshakeable brotherly bond.*

by Habeeba Husain

When former and current NBA players stand on the sidelines of your basketball game—and even join in themselves—it’s clear you’ve got something special on your hands.

Muslim Basketball, a men’s league that began in New Jersey fifteen years ago, not only left a spectacular impression on its 1,400-plus unique players over the years, but the pros too.

“I think it has great potential, great potential,” said former NBA player Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf when he visited the league in 2013. “I’m really liking what I see.”

In addition to Abdul-Rauf, many other Muslim and non-Muslim talents graced the league’s courts. Former Seton Hall University starter and current head coach at Farleigh Dickinson University Marcus Toney-El as well as former University of Pennsylvania two-time Ivy League Player of the Year and retired professional player overseas Ibrahim Jaaber had a connection with Muslim Basketball.

But it wasn’t always bright lights and big names.

The humble beginnings of Muslim Basketball date back to the summer of 2005, when a group of friends gathered to play pickup games outdoors. As interest grew, they formalized the competition, and the first season was the following year.

By 2007, these friends established Muslim Basketball as a non-profit organization. Today the league is held in two states: the original New Jersey and in Whitehall, Pennsylvania. A player in the league can expect competitive indoor games at their respective facility, electronic scoreboards, certified referees, jerseys, highlights, and detailed individual and team statistics (all of which can be found on [MuslimBasketball.org](http://MuslimBasketball.org)).

But perhaps the most enticing thing Muslim Basketball has to offer is its brotherhood.

“One [player] was telling me...how Muslim Basketball actually changed his life,” Omar says. “He wasn’t very close to the Muslim community. He didn’t have a connection to the masjid or anything like that, but when he started playing—that was his opportunity to have Muslim friends and a real community.”

Muslim Basketball welcomes both Muslims and non-Muslims into its league. In its most recent season, New Jersey hosted 70 percent of Muslim and 30 percent of non-Muslim players, while Pennsylvania was split 50-50.

Due to this diverse makeup of players, the league has two unique responsibilities.

“How well are we able to serve our community directly, first and foremost,” Omar explains. “And from there, how can we also capitalize on some opportunities to spread a good positive message of Islam, which we’ve realized has been more organic than anything—dawah by interaction.”

For a college-aged Froogh, Muslim Basketball provided an atmosphere in which he could play competitively and still be surrounded by those who shared his Islamic values.

“I was asked to come in as a sub,” Froogh says about his initial interaction with Muslim Basketball in 2008. “Honestly, the first time I watched them even play, I fell in love with the league—everything about it.”

Froogh isn’t the only one who felt that way. Among the registrants each season, Muslim Basketball sees roughly 80 percent of players return as opposed to new faces. Due to gym availability, the league needs to limit the number of teams and unfortunately, sometimes turn players away.

“We have very, very loyal players,” says Omar. “The kids who play in our league love it.”

But due to the ongoing pandemic, the gyms look more like ghost towns. Muslim Basketball canceled their Winterball 2020 season right before their playoff games a year ago, following the example of the NBA.

A year into lockdown, things are still a little uncertain. Omar explains Muslim Basketball took three main points into consideration: 1) government protocols, 2) level of risk from a moral standpoint, and 3) comfort of players.

Although at the time of writing the state resumed most indoor sports, Muslim Basketball remains at that second point.

“We’re still not comfortable as a league coming back yet and bringing that large level of measured risk to our players and their families,” Omar says.

Froogh and Omar are monitoring the vaccination distribution and hope to reassess closer to fall with the rest of the league’s Board of Directors and commissioners.

For now, the men get their basketball fix by watching the NBA pros on the screen. As for their brotherhood fix, that comes through social media, phone calls, and FaceTime.

“[The brotherhood] shows now during Covid so much,” Froogh says. “Every time I chat with a player...it’s like, ‘Bro I miss playing, but I miss being with the guys.’ No one just came for their own game. You came and you stayed for the two, three hours that everybody was playing.”

Once it’s deemed completely safe, players can look forward to donning the Muslim Basketball jersey once again.

It’s certain that at that time, they’ll come for the competitive play, sure, but they’ll stay for that special brotherhood bond.