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There's room in sports for fun — and headscarves

Girls' basketball and color guard teams respect Muslim culture

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Twenty girls hustled into the Salam School gym one recent afternoon, grabbed six basketballs and took shots.

The girls moved with remarkable speed, considering that they wore blue hijabs, or headscarves, long pants and long-sleeve T-shirts. No matter how sizzling the gym became, not one girl traded pants for shorts or rolled up her sleeves. Dark paper on windows prevented men from peering inside.

"We try to cover our bodies," said Jameela Asmar, 12, of Milwaukee. "If we are not covered . . . our legs . . . everybody is going to be looking. We have to cover our bodies from the men."

The Salam Stars were preparing for their first-ever basketball season of playing with area non-Muslim teams. Many of the girls will be on the court for the first time in mixed company and will be dressed from head-to-toe as their religion requires.

Advertisement "I don't want them to feel like they can't play basketball because they have the hijab," Coach Muneebah Abdullah said.

The challenge players face in adhering to traditional values while playing sports illustrates the larger reality for a growing number of Muslims in America, who are negotiating their way through the conflicting territory of an old faith and a new culture that is often at odds with that faith.

By wearing hijabs, shooting layups and taking time out to pray, the girls may well be carving out for their generation what it means to be an American Muslim.

"I love it," Yasmineen Alabbar, 11, of Milwaukee said of basketball. "It's my thing."

Muslim population growing

An estimated 2 million to 6 million Muslims live in America. The Pluralism Project at Harvard

University, which seeks to raise the awareness of religious diversity through research, lists 1,831 mosques and centers in the United States.

A handful of mosques exist in Wisconsin, but the Salam School is the only organized institution in Wisconsin that offers several sports programs for Muslim girls. The school has a color guard squad and is trying to set up a volleyball program. Men are never allowed in the school gym during practices or performances.

Many of the girls' parents are immigrants from countries where women don't play sports. Parents may support their daughters in athletics, but they said they become skittish with the idea of their daughters in body-baring uniforms or shorts and running or jumping in mixed company. Many girls forgo sports at high schools to avoid a possible conflict.

Doug Chickering, executive director of the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association in Stevens Point, said the organization receives several requests a year on behalf of Muslim, Mennonite and Native American athletes who need special accommodations because of religious beliefs.

Some waivers granted

As long as the integrity of the sport isn't compromised, the association grants waivers to those athletes, Chickering said. Around the country, efforts are being made to be more accommodating to religious beliefs, but experts say more needs to be done.

Rabiah Ahmed, of the Council on American-Islamic Relations in Washington, D.C., said more American Muslims are getting active in sports.

The organization, which seeks to enhance the public understanding of Islam, tracked sports programs in Texas, California and New York and said more communities are reaching out to young Muslim female athletes. A program in California was one of the first in the country to specifically offer sports training to Muslim girls interested in sports.

At the Salam School, about 50 girls from fifth- to eighth-grade signed up to play ball. The private school, 4707 S. 13th St. in Milwaukee, offers 4-year-old kindergarten through ninth grade.

"How are we doing on free throws?" Coach Abdullah asked during a practice.

"Good," girls said.

"Let me see one," Abdullah said.

First in family to play sports

Shahd Ibrahim, 10, of Milwaukee stepped up to the free-throw line, tossed the ball, and it rippled through the net.

Ibrahim said she is the first female in her family to play sports. She said her dad won't come to games but practices with her.

Color guard is another sport popular among girls. On a recent Friday, girls clad in black turtlenecks and large black sunglasses performed to the music of "One Thing Leads to Another" by The Fixx before an

audience of sisters, cousins and mothers. Some girls wore lip gloss and silver glitter. Nobody shook their hips.

"We don't do any of that jazz, booty kind of stuff," Coach Lorri Amin said.

The female athletes at the Salam School follow a different season from other schools. The basketball season, for example, started after Ramadan, a Muslim month of fasting from food or drink during daylight hours from October to November.

Customs may change

Members of the color guard said they learned to pace themselves.

"Oh, my God," said Lena Sarsour, 11, of Milwaukee. "So hungry. All the jumping up and down. We need water."

Abdullahi An-Na'im, a professor of Islamic law at Emory University in Atlanta, said social customs Muslims adhere to may change over time. Young Muslims are trying to balance being socially active and sensitive to the wishes of parents and families. He said their struggle is not unlike that of other waves of immigrants who settled in the U.S.

"These debates are going on across the board," he said. "The issues of sports and modesty are part of a broader debate about the meaning of Islam and being Muslim in different settings from African and Asian societies."

Time running out?

For some of the girls, this season might be their last competitive season.

Afreena Khan, 13, began playing basketball at a YMCA in Illinois when she was younger. When the family moved to Franklin two years ago, Khan enrolled in the Salam School and found a spot on the team. Dressed in pink sneakers, a blue hijab and gold jersey, Khan moved on the court with a natural grace.

Next year, she said, she'll be in high school but is hesitant to play in mixed company.

"I wouldn't play in that environment," Khan said.

At the end of one practice, some girls pulled on their hijabs and ended practice for that day. Ala Ismail, 14, of Milwaukee said having another team to play against on Feb. 14 makes her want to practice harder.

"I'm excited," she said. "It's going to be a competition."

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