

Playing sports a challenge at Islamic schools

By: Rebecca Kaufman / The Arab American News

2007-06-16

NEW YORK — Mohammad Rimawi, 17, a lanky six-foot three-inch senior, stands in one of the two outdoor basketball courts outside the Al Noor School in Brooklyn. The hoops on this playground don't have nets, the rims are bent, but for years, it's been Rimawi's home court. He is the captain of his basketball team at Al Noor, a private Islamic school, but his team isn't like most high school teams in the city: there's no mascot, no uniform, no gym, and perhaps most importantly, no regularly scheduled competition with other schools.

"I see kids in Fort Hamilton, my friends, who I play with, they got organized games, they got this, they got that, we don't got nothing," Rimawi said. When his school wants to compete he says this is the process: "We'll call up any Islamic school and will tell them 'hey, would you like to get a game on?'"

At private Islamic schools in New York and New Jersey, organized athletic competition is in its earliest stages. Compared with the structured league schedules at most high schools, public and private, team competition between Islamic schools is loosely organized. The boy's basketball team or the girl's volleyball team may compete two or three times a year against teams from other schools, or in place of outside competition, the gym teacher or the coach may organize games between different grades.

For serious athletes like Rimawi, that's not enough. "I get jealous and sad sometimes. I wish I was at another high school," said Rimawi, who wanted to transfer to Midwood High School in Brooklyn after eighth grade so he could play basketball, but said his dad wouldn't let him go to the public school.

On Al Noor's second court, a few hundred feet away from Rimawi, a group of girls casually shoot baskets during a free period. They are dressed in Al Noor's uniform, the jilbab, the long black dress that covers their arms and legs, and the hijab, a white headscarf, wrapped securely around their hair. Basketball is part of the girl's gym class—they are separated from boys all parts of the day—but there is not a true team.

Faria Imtaiz, 15, a sophomore, is "addicted to basketball," but the most organized competition she has seen has been games against her classmates. "I think it would be

nice if we had teams so we could go challenge other schools," she said, as she showed off her wounds from a recent pick-up game at the school.

For girls at Islamic schools, not having a gym presents other problems. High school aged females are required to be covered in public, so when they play on their outdoor court at school, they must wear their full dress. If they had a gym inside, closed to boys and men, the girls would be permitted to remove their dress and possibly their headscarf.

"You get irritated, you start feeling really hot," said Zonia Iqbal, 15, a basketball player at Al Noor. The girls demonstrate the challenges of running in the jilbab. "It'd be very nice without it but we have to. It's our uniform."

Jannah Abutayeb, the basketball coach for the burgeoning girl's team at Al Huda School in Patterson, N.J., said because of these rules, it's easier to schedule games with other Islamic schools that understand the restrictions. "It's not like you can go to the regular court and just compete and play," Abutayeb said. "They have to be with themselves, or friends."

Louis Cristillo, a professor at Teachers College at Columbia University, who studies Muslim children and education in New York City, said that clothing aside, there is no inherent conflict between Islamic teaching and athletic development. He says the main issue is that Islamic schools, like many private religious schools, are strapped for cash, so developing the infrastructure, like gyms, is too costly right now. Cristillo says he thinks administrators are trying to address the issue with the resources they have. For example, Razi School in Queens has the luxury of being one of the only Islamic schools in New York or New Jersey to have a gym.

Cristillo said, "I was in Razi School a month ago talking with the principal and literally one of the teachers walked into the office and said 'we need to verify the schedule for the tournament coming up with Al Noor,' so it's happening. How formal it is, how institutionalized it is, I don't know."

Last Saturday, at the Crossroads South Middle School in Monmouth Junction, N.J. the region's first ever "Islamic Games" were held as a way to encourage greater organized competition for Muslim children and young adults. Over 600 girls and boys ranging in ages from eight into their twenties and thirties, came to play soccer, basketball, and cricket, and run track and field.

Salaudeen Nausrudeen, 39, a former athlete and public relations consultant, organized the event. He said there's been a demand for an event like this in the Muslim community for many years. "The Muslim schools, because they are all new, are trying to feel their way," Nausrudeen said. "The athletic part of their development is kind of stymied. They've focused more on the academics and the religious side."

The Islamic Games sought to strike a balance between sports and religion. One team's

t-shirts read "Be Humble, Be Nice, Have Brotherhood, But Win." And one of the game's mottos was, "If you can pray in it, you can play it." For boys, this meant the standard athletic shorts and shirts. For girls, it was sweatpants, long sleeved shirts, and the headscarf. They also played in a gym, separated from the boys, by a partition.

Throughout the day, the participants did pray, as well as play. At two in the afternoon, competition paused and everyone gathered outside, in the 90 degree heat, on two blue tarps spread out over the soccer field. They removed their athletic shoes — some of the boys decided not to take off their shin guards — placed their soccer balls and basketballs next to the tarp, and lined up in rows facing east, toward Mecca, for salaah, the prayer that Muslims do five times a day. They went through the several step ritual of standing, bowing, prostrating, and kneeling, reciting their praise to Allah. About 10 minutes later, they put their shoes back on, grabbed their equipment and headed back to the fields.

A group of young men representing the Noor ul Iman School in Monmouth Junction gathered off to the side of the field, drinking water under the intense sun. Their boy's basketball team is one of the only Islamic schools to have regularly scheduled competition. They play most of their games against non-Islamic schools in the Greater Middlesex Conference, but because they don't have a gym, they are not officially part of the league.

Muhammed Turan, a freshman at Rutgers and a former student and basketball player at Noor ul Iman, says the team has struggled to find talented players. "The program has only existed for a handful of years and the pool of high school students is no more than 20," Turan said.

Turan says the Noor ul Iman School has plans to expand. With that growth, he's hoping for more skilled players, and even a gym.

Mohammed Rimawi, from Al Noor, is attending St. Francis College in Brooklyn next fall, where he hopes to play basketball. He says he teaches the younger students at Al Noor skills and gives them the coaching he never had as a young player. Rimawi says he hopes these children have a chance to win athletic scholarships, or even play their sport of choice professionally.

He also hopes they have the chance to experience what most high school students take for granted.

"I wish one day we'll have an indoor gym and we'll have a game with crowds."

Sources: