

## BASKETBALL IN WASHINGTON HEIGHTS

### Hoops in the Heights

Every March, the NCAA national tournament pushes basketball mania to a feverish pitch. The madness even reaches Washington Heights.

Although more popularly recognized as the former home to baseball stars like Manny Ramirez and Alex Rodriguez, Northern Manhattan is also an exciting hotbed for hoops.

Chris de la Rosa is not afraid to tell anyone that passion, talent, and heart flows in abundance here, from the legendary Holcombe Rucker Playground on W. 155th Street to Marble Hill. "It's competitive so you got to bring your A game everywhere you go in the Heights," said the freshman point guard at All Hallows High School in the Bronx.

Carmen Guzman, a former standout guard on last year's undefeated Murry Bergtraum girls squad who just wrapped up her freshman season at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, agrees. "Sky's the limit," says Guzman of the talent in her old hood. "Everyone can play up there. [The sport] is really big up there."

While Guzman and de la Rosa are both skilled local players, they know talent alone doesn't ensure success. What makes blacktop dreams come true for local b-ballers are several neighborhood programs. The Highbridge Recreational Center, the Police Athletic League at the Armory, the Children's Aid Society, New Heights Student-Athlete Program, Ivy League Uptown Women in Sports (Uptown WINS), Dyckman Youth Enterprises, and Fresh Youth Initiatives teach kids not only how to dribble with their left hand but also how to succeed in school and get to college.

Most of these programs came about in the 1990s as a response to a need for recreational outlets for neighborhood youth. They have similar after school components for younger students, providing a safe place for practice, homework, and tutoring.

At the Armory, PAL coach Dave Crenshaw sees himself more as a developmental instructor than a coach. He sees PAL as an incubator for volunteerism and future coaches, because after a certain age, court time is contingent on community service.

"Too many folks have people using their gyms but they don't give back and they don't respect the place," said Crenshaw. "We're trying to develop a culture where you play and give back. So it's your place and not just your place to play."

He chuckles when remembering how sullen Guzman was the first time she had to sweep the gym floor before playing. That same year she captured the city and state championships as a player and coached his under 10 and under 11-year-old girls' squads to tournament trophies.

Guzman was also a New Heights Student-Athlete. Founded in 2000 with the help of the Children's Aid Society, the program starts working with fifth graders. Over the last four years, Nick Blatchford and his co-ed staff have successfully placed players in selective academic and sports programs. Students like Manny Quezada, who attended prestigious St. Alban's School in Washington D.C. and will return to the metro area to play for Rutgers University this fall.

For those high school students who remain in the city, like de la Rosa, the program also fields "Warrior" boys' and girls' teams, as well as an elite traveling squad of the best players.

“Our mission is to train and develop young leaders through basketball, leadership, and service,” said Blatchford, a former coach and teacher at I.S. 90. “As long as you’re a leader and a champion and transforming your community, you will have a place in this family.”

Manhattan College senior guard Louis Flores is a legend. Not only does the 6’2 All-American Dominican average 24.1 points a game, but he is willing to work with younger players from his neighborhood.

“Lou is tremendous about coming back to the neighborhood – he’s always around the neighborhood, always around the gym,” said Blatchford. “Anytime we call, he’s there to work out with the kids or to talk to them or be with them. He is an example of what’s possible that we can point to and that kids can look up to.”

But as the standout readies for his second trip to the Big Dance (his Jaspers played Florida Thursday) and a possible future in the NBA, he’s quick to point out his appreciation for other neighborhood players who helped him, like Ricky and Jeff Greer who achieved success in the Big East conference at Rutgers and the University of Pittsburgh respectively. The advice of older players, especially those that share similar cultures, can help kids reach their potential.

“[We] try to stay in touch with Dominican ballers,” Flores said. “We always try to be an example to them, give them some kind of orientation. Talk to them. Explain to them how not to make the mistakes that we had made.”

Although organizational structures for boys have existed longer than for girls, Guzman says that peer mentoring can often cross gender lines because of similar circumstances growing up.

“They are going through the same thing that I am going through,” she said. “Basically, we’re both raised in the streets, trying to look for ways to play, ways to get out, ways to get better, so we kinda connect that way and build on that.”

The mentoring is contagious among the coaches, many of whom hold full-time jobs outside the game.

“We try to make sure that we are involved in the kid’s lives and that they feel comfortable. And if they are having problems, whether it’s academically or personally, that they can come to us with those problems,” said Daria Brooks, one of the New Heights Warriors head women’s coaches. “It’s very important that we form these relationships with their parents, the child, and even with their high school and recreational coaches as well so that there is that support system.”

This sense of selflessness seeps down from the coaches and into the players.

“One of the more special things about this neighborhood is that we don’t stress the one-on-one play as we do the passing,” said Crenshaw. “Here, we develop point guards, people who give up the ball. We’re not trying to build a squad. We’re trying to build teams, trying to build families.”

The sport is also having an effect on the neighborhood’s image citywide. Over the past 14 years, the eight-week summer basketball tournament sponsored by Dyckman Youth Enterprises (DYE) has grown from six to 56 teams. Crowds have grown to several hundred on a daily basis. In addition to employing close to 30 teenagers through the city’s Summer Youth Employment Program, the spirit of the tournament has cultivated cultural understanding off the court and helped to break stereotypes between African American and Latino players, parents, and volunteers.

For the coaches, at the end of the day, it’s about the kids.

“I honestly believe that in this part of the Heights and the neighborhood, the programs are working towards getting the kids to build together,” said Crenshaw. “We play in tournaments, we share players. Cause we don’t own any of these kids. We’re just blessed to deal with them.”

