

Amateur Sports Weekly

Haven for hoops buffs



The Muslim basketball league is all about bringing communities together, Mark Keast writes

IT IS quintessential Toronto, even more noteworthy in these troubled times — a Muslim basketball league called I-Slam for Muslims and non-Muslims. A title that should be an afterthought in a city that prides itself as a place where people of varying backgrounds and faiths blend together.

"That's why this has never been seen as a strange idea," said Kashif Taqiuddin, one of the co-founders of I-Slam. Indeed, when looking at Toronto, why even call it a Muslim basketball league? Why the need to announce it? Why not call it Kashif's Basketball League, call up a bunch of friends and get back to why you created it in the first place — out of a passion for basketball.

Promoting it as a Muslim

"People understand that if the call to prayer comes, that's our priority, just a few minutes to go and pray"

— Teepu Khawja, co-founder of I-Slam.

basketball league, says Teepu Khawja, the other co-founder of I-Slam, and Taqiuddin, speaks more to a concern about today's youth than anything else. Khawja and Taqiuddin are both 30, both established with families and careers —

Khawja is a policy analyst at the Insurance Bureau of Canada, Taqiuddin works as a technical analyst at First Associates, a brokerage firm — and both grew up in communities where friends and neighbours often were of different races or faiths.

Their fear is youth growing up at a time when Islam is being twisted and tarnished around the world. Through that grows misperception, ignorance about their religion, more subtle in a community as generally tolerant as Toronto. A media

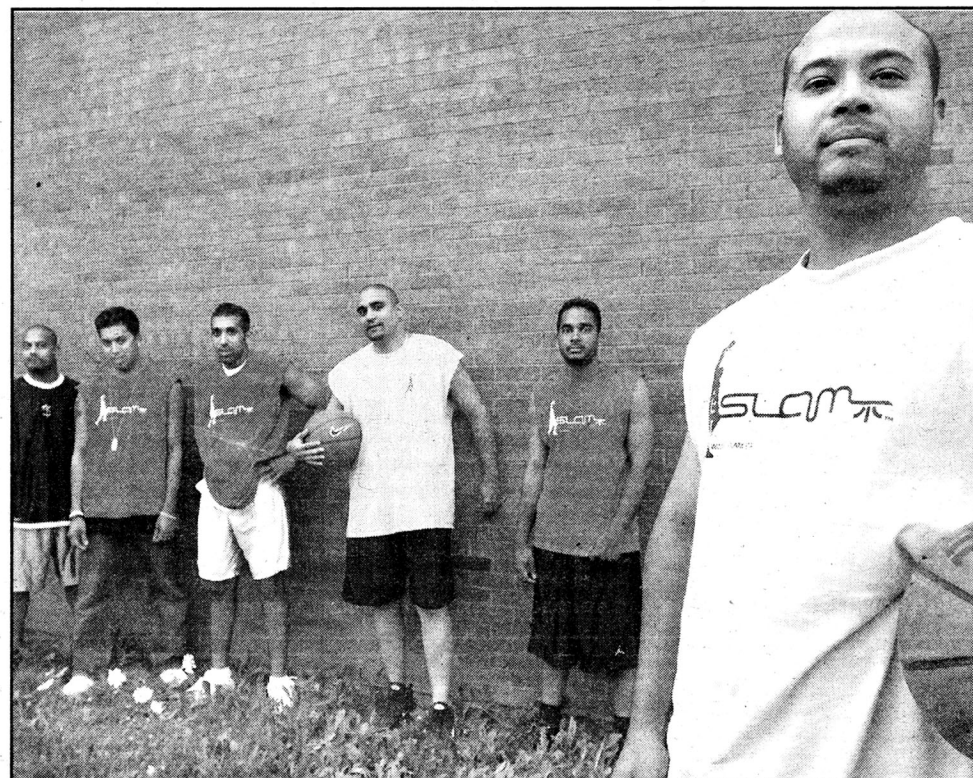
report gets talked about at home, then turns into an epithet hurled at a Muslim kid at a public school. From that brews resentment and anger.

"We found we wanted to bring Muslim youth together," said Taqiuddin. "We found they were becoming fragmented. We want to bring everyone together, start to do things, communicate with them, get them involved in their community. These are times of extremist views being portrayed in the media.

"We want to make sure youth are going in the right direction, contributing to their community and their country, not going astray."

Targeting youth

That's why bringing non-Muslims and non-practising Muslims into the league is another key. Lead by example. There was a subway delay in Toronto the other day revolving around an "incident" and immediately one's thoughts turn to Islamic extremism. So for non-Muslims who play, I-



— Erin Riley

■ PLAYERS IN THE Muslim basketball league, from left, Naz Rampartab, Josh Quirola, Mandeep Saini, Johnny Ramoutar, Lyden Budhoo, and Abu Doo.

Slam serves as large a purpose as it does for Muslims.

"Events happen in the world that are unfortunate," said Zuhair Fancy, who also works with I-Slam. "This way you get to have a personal relationship with Muslims, and see they're just like you, normal people. It shows that we can all relate on a simple level like basketball."

What's noteworthy about grassroots, community sports is how it equalizes everyone who takes part, telling even in a country as seemingly tolerant as Canada.

Taqiuddin says area mosques bring in speakers to address issues of concern to local Muslims, and that's appealing to a certain segment of the community. But if you want to really get at youth, they say — bring them to a basketball tournament like this one, and show them interaction by example.

In the first few years, playing out of a gym in the ISNA Mosque in Mississauga, often I-Slam games would be interrupted for a call to prayer. Muslims pray five times a day. The whistle would blow, and those who weren't Muslims were asked to sit and wait. Often that would happen when a game was close, even tied.

"We made it clear going

in, so non-Muslims were aware of it," Khawja said. "We didn't wait for the game to stop. People understand that if the call to prayer comes, that's our priority, just a few minutes to go and pray. It doesn't affect the game.

"If anything, people get a time out, a breather. And maybe it raises awareness of aspects of Muslim way of life that they may not have been aware of before. People might not realize the importance of prayers in a Muslim's life. They'll see it's a nice, quiet event in a Muslim's life."

Success breeds copycats. There's now a Muslim baseball league in the area. In August a Muslim ball hockey tournament is slated to go.

Khawja said one can't help but be concerned about the negative media and backlash. That's why an organization that's been around since 2002 geared at people between 16 and 30 wants to target younger folk.

I-Slam is a Sunday summer league that's grown into two separate leagues of nine teams and 80 players per league, as well as an annual tournament

in March with over 480 players.

The mosque, while ideal for practising Muslims, soon became too constrictive, and the league has moved to an athletic facility at the University of Toronto's Erindale campus. The league is now trying to schedule games around typical prayer times. Someday they may go back to the mosque to play.

When it comes to the quality of play, there are patches of

excellence, others aren't so great. But that's not the point. The educational importance of the league now has eclipsed playing just for the fun of playing, says Khawja.

He likes to call I-Slam a microcosm of something bigger, but it's programs like I-Slam that are

big, run by a small group of volunteers who also use the opportunity to raise money and awareness for area charities and causes, like raising money to buy clothing for the homeless. It is quintessential Toronto, so wonderfully Canadian.

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—Zuhair Fancy, I-Slam.