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The New York Times

At Baruch, a New York Rental to the Stars, the Wood Floors Tend to Squeak



The Marquette men's basketball team practiced this week at Baruch College. "They make it as easy as possible for us," a Marquette athletic official said. Credit Kirsten Luce for *The New York Times*

By SETH BERKMAN MARCH 12, 2015

As the N.C.A.A. tournament approaches, the best basketball scene in the country is not Rupp Arena, home of the undefeated Kentucky Wildcats, or even Cameron Indoor Stadium, the Duke Blue Devils' noisy home. Rather, it is a nondescript gym in Manhattan, home of the commuter school [Baruch College](#).

Over the past decade, Baruch has established itself as host to the basketball stars, lending its courts to more than 60 N.B.A. and N.C.A.A. Division I teams passing through New York City.

On any day, its 18,000 students can peek through a door in the William and Anita Newman Vertical Campus building on Lexington Avenue and see the likes of Louisville Coach [Rick Pitino](#), San Antonio Spurs Coach Gregg Popovich or any number of star players.

“I think it’s incredible,” said Hamza Karb, a Baruch student who met Phoenix Suns forward Markieff Morris last week. “I’ve always made the joke that they should put this in the pamphlet or brochure for kids coming to Baruch.”

As deputy director of athletics at Baruch, Machli Joseph keeps track of student locker renewals, guides deliveries into the athletics complex and juggles requests from the most prominent coaches in basketball. The gym provides a secluded location for athletes, while the money raised from renting out its courts has enabled Baruch to upgrade its athletic facilities and expand its sports teams’ recognition beyond the Flatiron district.



The DePaul basketball team practicing at Baruch College on Tuesday in preparation for the Big East tournament in New York. Credit Kirsten Luce for *The New York Times*

“You walk in here, you feel like you’re a part of something,” Joseph said of the walls covered with blue Bearcats logos and collages of past sports accomplishments. “When I first came, it looked like a hospital in here. Plain brick walls.”

This week, hundreds of students swiped their IDs to enter the building. Unbeknown to most of those headed to business statistics class or eating at the cafeteria, DePaul and Marquette were practicing for the Big East tournament two floors below street level.

Players usually enter through side doors and walk down seldom-used stairwells to the basketball courts, mostly shielded from the majority of the campus community.

Joseph said teams generally did not care when the occasional student looked through the locked gym doors during a practice. Once, when the Spurs were at Baruch, Joseph was watching from the bleachers when, he said, Popovich asked him to step in on a drill.

“He said, ‘Tell your team to come down and watch,’ ” Joseph said. “All the kids were in class, but I sat down; the coaches sat down. He appreciated Division III because he’s been there.”

Scott Kuykendall, Marquette’s associate athletic director who helps coordinate practice sites on the road, said privacy was often a big factor in choosing a gym.

“They know what we’re looking for and what we need,” Kuykendall said. “They make it as easy as possible for us. You’d rather come play at some place like this than an athletic club where there’s people around.”

When the ARC gym opened in 2002, Baruch began by renting its courts to corporate leagues. The caliber of its clients has improved over the years, notably the Nike Pro City, which held its summer league games at Baruch and brought All-Stars like Kevin Durant. Dirk Nowitzki, Dwyane Wade and others have held individual workouts there.

This week, with the Atlantic 10 and Big East tournaments in New York, teams began calling Baruch weeks in advance to secure their practice times. A few years ago, when Louisville was a member of the Big East, Joseph said, he received an angry call from Pitino when the Cardinals’ desired time was unavailable.

“There’s like 10 schools, all of them want the same slot,” Joseph said. “We ended up working it out. I ended up sliding a team down an hour.”

Teams occasionally practice beyond their scheduled appointments, leading to encounters between one rival college and another.

On Tuesday, Marquette players and staff sat on bleachers in the complex’s lobby, waiting for DePaul to finish practice. Also nearby were Baruch students who were hoping to play pickup games, but students from the Ecole Internationale De New York School, having a physical education class, occupied the adjacent auxiliary gym.

As DePaul’s practice ended, the elementary school students exited, looking up at the towering athletes, while the less athletically inclined Baruch students warmed up, throwing awkward chest passes or occasionally dribbling off their feet.

Karb, the Baruch student, said that aside from the college’s basketball team and those who use the gym recreationally, few students knew of Baruch’s basketball legacy. Joseph and the athletic department do not advertise practices to the campus community but have used appearances to their advantage.

Joseph, who formerly coached Baruch's women's basketball team, said he would mention the N.B.A. practices in recruiting pitches. When a team like the Miami Heat [posts](#) photos on social media at Baruch, it also spreads the college's name.

"I'm like, this is what puts Baruch on the map nationally," Joseph said. "I try to show the administrators how we're trying to brand athletics. You could be in Miami and hear Baruch College. Before I arrived I never heard of it.

"To get those kind of opportunities, you're not going to get it in the middle of Pennsylvania."

Oluwatosin Onabanjo, a sophomore who played basketball last season but sat out this year because of academic ineligibility, watched Big East team practices this week from the athletic offices, through a window looking down to the court.

He has met the N.B.A. players Mo Williams, LaMarcus Aldridge, Eric Bledsoe and Gerald Green while at Baruch, and he saw the rare opportunity of watching pros and Division I college players up close as a chance to improve his game.

Onabanjo said the Big East teams practiced with more intensity and volume than Baruch, something he hopes to bring when he rejoins the basketball team next fall.

At Baruch, aside from paying for new wall murals championing school spirit, the money raised from gym rentals has allowed the athletic department to purchase better training equipment and bypass some of the bureaucracy that comes with being a city university.

"We get the floors done when we need them done," Joseph said. "Sometimes at a city school, you have to wait for a while to get things done."

Baruch is not the only city university that offers such services. New York University and St. Francis College have lent their courts to other colleges, and in recent years, John Jay College of Criminal Justice has increased its visibility as a practice option, hosting about 20 N.B.A. and N.C.A.A. teams.

Even with competition in the area, there will be continued opportunities for growth with the Big Ten and the Atlantic Coast Conference tournaments destined for New York in coming years.

"In this region we've become a name," Joseph said. "I have so many more plans on how to grow this place."

NOTE: A version of this article appears in print on March 13, 2015, on page B10 of the New York edition with the headline: At a New York Rental to the Stars, the Wood Floors Tend to Squeak. [Order Reprints](#)/[Today's Paper](#)/[Subscribe](#)