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Jewish Basketball League Promotes Sportsmanship, Unity

Jewish Basketball League leader Jeff Kapelus uses sports to promote unity and dialogue between different religious sects.

By [Rich Monetti](#) | [Email the author](#) | January 24, 2011

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Thirteen years ago, the Jewish Basketball League was started to allow observant Jewish adolescents the chance to shoot some hoops on Sundays. The League occupied a small gym in New Rochelle, and only a narrow slice of the Jewish community was turning out to play.

Taking over the league in 2004, Jeff Kapelus knew that moving into the gym at Hartsdale-based Jewish day school Solomon Schechter would cast a wider membership net – and basketball would be the venue to help break down cultural and religious misconceptions among it participants.

“So coming in, a Reform Jew and an Orthodox Jew might see themselves very differently, but once the uniforms go on, turning off any outstanding stereotypes becomes easy. Everybody starts talking to each other, and they realize, ‘Wait a minute, we’re all in this together,’” Kapelus said.

“You can have two Jews who attend different schools, observe [their faiths] differently or look and dress very differently, but when they get together, it turns out they are basically the same kids,” Kapelus said. “They’re both going to watch the Jets game on Sunday like everybody else.”

Still, the Rex Ryan model, which works well in the Meadowlands Sports Complex, is not part of the League. Like most leagues, the Jewish Basketball League has a code of conduct policy. Kapelus, however, believes his League really goes out of its way to bring it home.

“Since the League is sportsmanship-orientated, it filters down from top to bottom – from the director and the coaches to the leading scorers and the beginners,” Kapelus said.

In turn, teaching the fundamentals go hand and hand with the League’s fabric as it did when Jewish dominated programs at CCNY and New York University ruled the day in the 1940’s and 50’s.

Beginning with several weeks of clinic, the League’s kids drill and scrimmage, which enables him and his coaches to come up with the fairest and most competitive teams.

Building on all this, parents as coaches are not part of the equation. That helps leave out the possibility that a coach’s mission will conflict with the League. Kapelus’s coaches are mostly comprised of high school players fulfilling community service, local college players or other adults who have coaching experience. Either way, regardless of their athletic acumen, coaches must first pull their weight in terms of teaching, relating to the kids and enhancing the atmosphere of cooperation and fair play.

Included is a directive on equal playing time. Each eight-minute quarter is split equally between starters and reserves, but he certainly understands that basketball is not hopscotch, so one of the ways competitiveness is kept in is by allowing the coaches to put the best team on the floor during the final four minutes of the game.

Nonetheless, spectators know not to overplay the importance of the action or the outcome. "Sometimes parents overreact a little bit, but it's few and far between," Kapelus said.

As for parenthood, Kapelus's two youngest children, a son and a daughter, aged out of the League a few years ago. Occasionally, Kapelus says he looks back to the words of Rabbi Jacob Rubenstein of Young Israel of Scarsdale for the reason he continues guiding the League. Rubenstein, who died two years ago in a fire, believed strongly in the idea that Jews of all denominations need to work together. "Rabbi Rubenstein took me into his office one day and said, 'Jeff you really get it,'" recalled Kapelus.

Whenever Sundays seem long, Kapelus recalls Rubenstein's life mission "I've got to carry on his legacy of getting everybody working together," said Kapelus.

No need to worry – thanks to Kapelus's efforts, it's a big slam dunk.

For more information on the Jewish Basketball League, visit [http:// www.jblhoops.org](http://www.jblhoops.org).

Editor's Note: In the originally published article, it was incorrectly stated that Kapelus has two sons. Kapelus has a son and a daughter, both who aged out of the League. A quote by Kapelus was clarified in the third paragraph to distinguish the differences between various League players and their varying beliefs, practices and lifestyles. Additionally, Rabbi Jake Rubenstein's name was incorrectly spelled as "Rubinstein," and it was stated that he belonged to Young Israel of Scarsdale, not Solomon Schechter. Finally, the Jewish Basketball League was once mistakenly referred to as "team."

Patch regrets the errors.

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