

Connecting The Community On The Court

Hoop dreams and Jewish values in the Jewish Basketball League.

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Third- and fourth-grade boys in action in a recent JBL game. Courtesy of Jewish Basketball League

Jeffrey Kapelus was on the verge of stepping away from his intense involvement with the Jewish Basketball League in Westchester about five years ago, when his twin son and daughter were about to age out of the program. That was his intention, until the then-rabbi of his [Young Israel of Scarsdale](#) synagogue, the late Rabbi Jacob Rubenstein, took him aside after services one day and said, “You get it. Don’t ever stop doing this.” What Kapelus, a resident of New Rochelle and executive recruiter, has developed during the past decade is a hoops league for young children that focuses as much on identity, good sportsmanship, learning the sport and developing friendships as on the games themselves. There aren’t too many leagues where a professional referee takes a timeout to tie a player’s shoelace, or gently turn around a youngster who’s heading towards the wrong basket.

“We’re one big community,” said Kapelus, who views his mission as much about building a countywide Jewish community as developing a love of basketball. “I want [the young players] to be good sports, and to have a positive social message. This is one of the only

places that bring everybody together. If you're a Jewish kid in Westchester, this is where you want to go. This is part of the fabric of Jewish life."

The program is open to children from kindergarten through fourth grade, for boys, and from kindergarten through sixth grade, for girls, before the synagogue league starts. The league plays at the Hartsdale Solomon Schechter school Sunday mornings from mid-November through mid-March, and includes students from [Schechter, SAR in Riverdale, Westchester Day School](#), Windward (an independent school for students with language-based learning disabilities) as well as local public schools.

Kapelus, whose older son had also participated in sports, wanted to offer a different experience from the usual youth sports program. Instead of having parents as coaches, he hired professional coaches who run instructional classes, as well as high school and college students as coaches. Children usually have two or three friends they already know on the team, for their comfort, said Kapelus. "I want to make the teams fair, so there's a competitive balance of weak and strong players, as well as a mix of kids from different schools."

Danielle Lerner, whose 6-year-old son attends Westchester Day School, enrolled him in the Jewish Basketball League when they moved from the city last year.

"He wasn't such an athletic boy," she said, adding that her 4-year-old daughter can't wait until she's old enough to participate. "This is teaching him the fundamentals. The social piece is great. Why should it just be Westchester Day School? There's no reason not to be social with other Jewish children."

Given the high-pressure environment of so many suburban sports leagues and travel teams, with intense and competitive parents, there's something distinctive about a league where "they're learning how to play basketball, and see parents cheering for the other team," said Leslie Levin of White Plains. Levin's elder son, Nathaniel, aged out of the Jewish Basketball League this year, but his second-grade son is involved in the program. "It's a really great environment. Parents know this is not going to be the training ground for the NBA. They want them to have fun, and to have Jewish values."

There were other specific benefits for Nathaniel, who had started at Schechter before switching to Windward. By being part of the Jewish Basketball League even after he left Schechter, "he could maintain his friendships with the Schechter kids," said Levin. "He got some of his Windward friends to join, and both were integrated on the basketball court. Playing with other Jewish kids is important. He could see that he didn't need to be at a Jewish school to have a Jewish identity."

Even more heart-warming was seeing Nathaniel shine as a basketball player. As Levin said, “He excelled on the basketball court. For him to have that role, his self-esteem shot through the roof.”

For Kapelus, developing positive values is a major mission. To a large degree, he’s continued his work with the JBL in honor of the late Rabbi Rubenstein and his wife, Debbie Rubenstein. Each year the JBL gives a Rubenstein Memorial Coaching Award to the coach in each division who exemplifies such core values as teamwork, character, patience, sportsmanship, integrity and inclusiveness, among others.

As Levin said, “Jeff comes at it from a menshlicheit point of view. I think it’s warm and nurturing and supports Jewish values. It brings together the whole Westchester Jewish community.”

For more information about the league, check out: www.jblhoops.org.

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