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**Title: Too Hot To Be Halal**

**A Muslim intramural college basketball team offers members--and their devoted fans--more than one reason to cheer**

Four basketball players in black team T-shirts attempt to charge down the rubber court, but one lags behind at a slow jog. One player scores. His teammates slap hands and a celebratory roar rises from the stands. But seconds later, someone else misses an easy shot. A varsity basketball player refereeing the game, who towers over the players he is watching, muffles a laugh.

The team calls itself Too Hot to be Halal, and for these Muslim players who came together at the campus Islamic Center, it's more than just a game. In a school where it's often hard fitting in, they've found their community, in a gym where the air is thick with sweat, Intramural basketball also offers these religious young people other advantages. They can socialize with the opposite sex in a group, under bright lights, without the temptations of alcohol or the intimacy their faith forbids before marriage. The players can show off their prowess but--unlike the charged atmosphere at the dance clubs or dorm rooms where students spend downtime--here there's nothing but good, clean fun.

This year, the five-year-old team is more popular than ever before. It had to hold try-outs for the first time and its fan base is larger than those that follow many NYU varsity sports. At one recent game, a female fan who had to rush to the library to write a paper dropped off shoe boxes of homemade chocolate cupcakes.

For Muslim students who face negative stereotypes in the media every day, the Islamic Center can be a haven for forming friendships. The team, a direct offshoot, “is a community within the NYU community,” says Too Hot’s co-captain Rizvan Moosvi, a 21-year-old Indian-American senior from Brielle, New Jersey after the game, as he shoves a mass of curly hair away from his eyes. While many of the players would insist they’re only semi-religious since they don’t follow every rule, few can manage to stray far from Islamic life, and that deepens their team spirit. “I think that gives them an edge, it’s easier to be united. I think it makes them a better team,” says Muneeba Raza, 19, a sophomore fan in the stands majoring in Spanish and French from Kinnelon, New Jersey.

Religious ties also cement the fans’ devotion. For them, as for the team, the games foster a special separateness and at the same time, announce that they’re also Americans. Says Francis E. Peters, NYU Professor of Religion and Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, “It’s part of the assimilation process, mixed with the process of self-identification.”

One of the players hurls a beat-the-buzzer pass the length of the court as the last seconds of the first period dwindle away on the portable electronic scoreboard. A female fan screams as two players lunge toward the ball, about to collide. Generally though, they keep their screaming to a minimum. Two stony-faced students, one wearing a turban, watch from the top bleacher in silence. Another, off to one side, claps politely.

The girls who come to watch have to be content to be spectators. Female members of the Islamic Center have tried without success to start a women's basketball team. "There's just not the same enthusiasm," Raza says. Still, it doesn't stop them from ardently supporting the men.

This year, co-captain Ameer Ahmed, a 21-year-old Pakistani senior from Dix Hills, New York majoring in Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies has been a diligent publicist. He sends e-mail updates about schedules and scores and moderates a Too Hot group on the social-networking Website Facebook. It boasts 71 members, triple the size of the average Facebook group for an intramural team.

"We're a diverse group of people," Ahmad said, citing players from Pakistan, India, Afghanistan and the United States, "but this really brings us all together." Like the woman bringing cup cakes, he's gone beyond the call of duty for the cause. He'd spent all day before the game with his sick mother two hours away. He had come in just to play, and would turn around as soon as it was over. "I'm going right back after the game but I wouldn't miss it," he said.

The final buzzer proclaims Too Hot to be Halal the winner, and while Ahmed's teammates head to the water fountain, he jogs, beads of sweat trickling down his forehead, to the bleachers to high-five his fans. "My only complaint is they don't make enough noise," he jokes. "For the playoffs, I'm gonna try to get these guys to paint their chests."

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