

Free basketball tournament for underprivileged East Harlem kids kicks off

Tournament gives students the chance to compete on hardwood

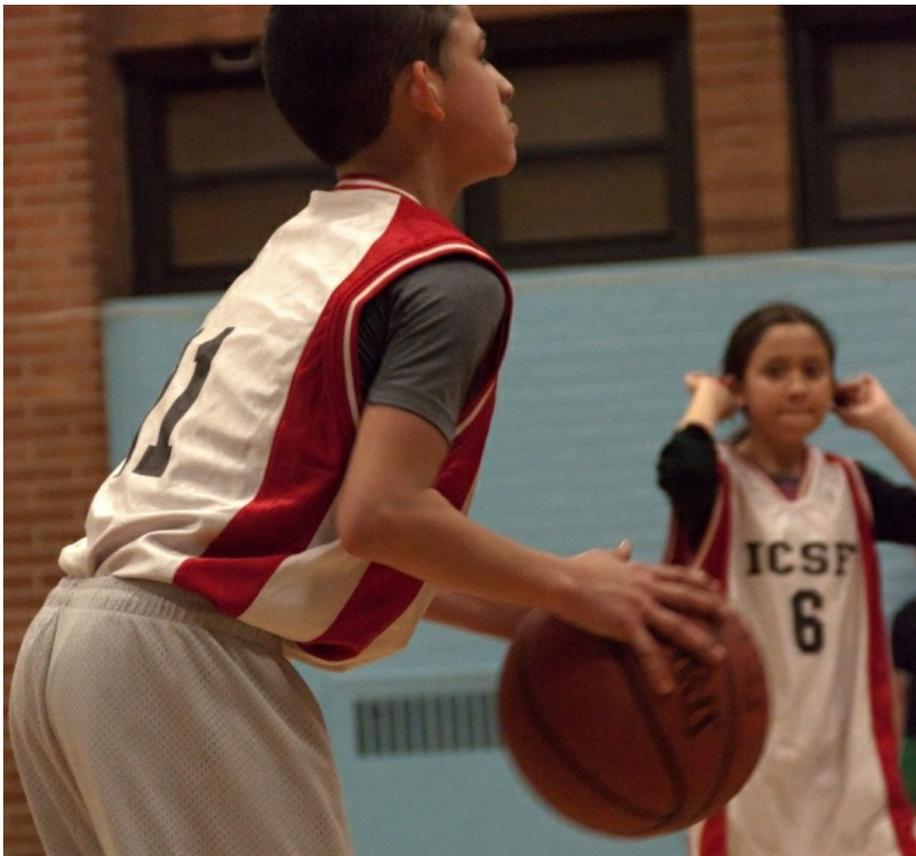
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BY JOSEPH TEPPER / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

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KRISTIN BOYD

Marcos (l.) and Ismaila (r.) take charge of a game during free basketball tournament for underprivileged East Harlem middle schoolers.

Harlem is having its own bout of "March Madness."

A free basketball tournament for underprivileged East Harlem middle schoolers tipped off earlier this month, giving dozens of students the chance to compete on the hardwood.

The month-long tournament is sponsored by the Inner-City Scholarship Fund's (ICSF) Junior Committee and is the culmination of free clinics and scrimmages that began in the fall.

"It's really outstanding how they learn basketball skills and to make new friends," said ICSF Junior Committee Basketball League co-chair

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Josh Elmore. "The kids are always excited to participate."

The tournament's four teams are made up of a mix of more than 50 boys and girls, ages 10-13, who attend one of the neighborhood's ICSF-sponsored elementary schools.

"The program has really helped them learn social skills," said Elmore, who also works as a coach in the league. "It's difficult to tell what schools they go to by the end because they're such good friends."

The league is a true community effort: 35 volunteers pitch in every month to coach, and the non-profit group Sports Angels even supplies full uniforms.

"When they're practicing in jerseys and not T-shirts, it's a better sports experience," Elmore said.

For many of the students whose schools lack organized basketball programs, the league is a chance to practice and compete regardless of athletic ability.

"It's a lot of fun and it gives you a chance to play even if you're not the best," said eighth-grader Issaka Goita, 13, who lives in the Bronx but attends Mount Carmel-Holy Rosary School in East Harlem.

When Issaka joined the program three years ago, he admits he wasn't the star player he is today. He said the league has taught him not only to sharpen his skills on the court, but learn how to be a good teammate and make new friends.

"At first you are sort of hesitant, and then you realize that you're on the same team," said Issaka about his teammates who come from several different schools in the area. "To win you have to play as one team."

Next year, Issaka hopes to make the basketball team at Xavier High School. But for now, he is focused on taking home the championship trophy at the end of the month.

"We have a pretty solid chance of winning," he said. "I really, really want to win."

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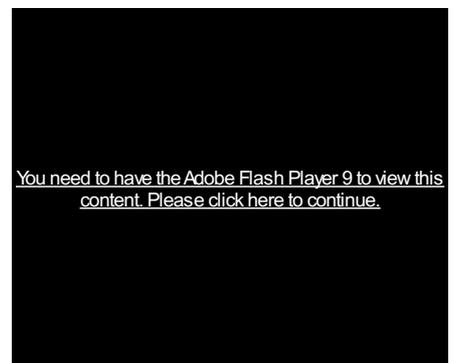
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