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A Tale of Two (Knicks) Teams

By Madison Hartman

On a frigid Monday night in the middle of November, two basketball teams wore jerseys that looked like those of the New York Knicks and Cleveland Cavaliers. If you zoomed in for a close-up you might have thought you were in Madison Square Garden, but the two teams tipped off in White Plains, N.Y, not New York City, and there was no Carmelo vs. LeBron matchup to speak of.

On a freshly redone court nested in a building that looked more akin to a library than an arena, 11 young athletes wore white jerseys with orange lettering. Next to the court sat a stage that belonged in a high school theater and the rows of plush red seats, six deep, were raised above the action.

VIPs didn't sit in box seats, as there were none to speak of, but instead at round tables courtside. Red velvet curtains contained the court, blocking off views of doorways and auxiliary mystery rooms. Hanging above center court were rafters, not a JumboTron.

It was the inaugural game of the newest NBA-Development League team, the Westchester Knicks, taking on the Canton Charge.

There were no names on jerseys that a casual fan could recognize. Sure, a few last names may have rung a bell – Mayo, Antetokounmpo – but those were their brothers, much like the Westchester Knicks were the new kid brothers of the New York counterparts.

For their big debut, management pulled out all the stops – players ran out under a metal contraption with colored lights that spit out fog while the lights were dimmed. The Blue Man Group performed at opening night for the New York Knicks.

Save for the crowd donned in No. 7 Carmelo jerseys and throwback Knicks garb, it was hard to find many similarities between what was happening at the Westchester County Center and the basketball played at Madison Square Garden.

Well, there was one similarity: both teams lost.

Families with young children dressed in their own team uniforms bunched together and half-watched, half-roamed the arena. A few fans, already dedicated to the new team in their neck of the woods, bought T-shirts from a small stand located by the exit; but most were simply curious to see what semi-pro basketball in White Plains, N.Y. looked like.

It looked like the semi in semi-pro.

The closest thing the Westchester Knicks have to star power is Thanasis Antetokounmpo, the 22-year-old “Greek Freak” who was drafted at 51st by the parent club this year after a breakout rookie season in the D-League with the Delaware 87ers. The Knicks kept him around for their summer league before he was sent down to Westchester in early November.

The 6-foot-7 small forward with power has an older brother, Giannis, who plays for the Milwaukee Bucks. Antetokounmpo is one of a few players that Westchester’s head coach Kevin Whitted sees as being *this close* to the big leagues.

“We have guys like Darnell Jackson, Thanasis, Langston Galloway. Those guys, they’re really six inches away from really making that jump,” he said. “The key is just everyday what I can do to help them be prepared when they go that they won’t come back.”

Jackson isn’t just six inches away, he’s already been there. The 29-year-old, who played at Kansas and won an NCAA championship with the Jayhawks, was selected 52nd in the 2008 NBA draft and had several stints in the NBA as well as overseas before landing in Westchester. Now, he’s happy to be in the New York organization.

“The fans are great, I love it here. I love Westchester, I love New York. This whole organization has been a blessing for me, I’m happy to be here,” Jackson said.

Jackson’s career trajectory is not atypical of those in the D-League. Each season a handful of guys get called up for a short contract, much like a trial run with the team. Occasionally one of those guys get a full year contract.

Others like Langston Galloway are kids fresh from college who aren’t quite ready for the NBA or didn’t have enough exposure to get the attention of scouts.

Galloway, the 22-year-old point guard, dominated at Saint Joseph’s in the Atlantic 10 and left school as the Hawks’ second-highest scorer in school history.

The Development League gives guys like Galloway, Jackson and Antetokounmpo a place to land and one more shot at the NBA before they give up on the dream of making it big time and go overseas.

Although the New York Knicks have been involved with a few D-League teams in the past, they never had an affiliate team to call their own – until now.

In March, The Madison Square Garden Company, owner of the New York Knicks, became the seventh NBA organization to fully own a Development League affiliate. Thirty miles north of Manhattan, but just four miles from the Knicks practice facility in Purchase, White Plains was the perfect choice for a new home.

“The New York area has a rich basketball history and we’re excited to give some of the game’s best fans the opportunity to watch top NBA prospects up close and personal in an intimate, family-friendly and affordable environment,” NBA D-League president Dan Reed said when White Plains was awarded a team.

The NBA D-League was founded in 2001 and currently has 18 teams serving as the basketball equivalent of the minor leagues. Following the 2013-14 NBA season, 33 percent of NBA players had spent some amount of time in the D-League, which was up from 10 percent just three years earlier.

Within the Knicks organization, five played in the minors before earning a spot on the main squad. A handful of former D-League players have not just made it to the big leagues, but also found wide success, such as Jeremy Lin, Chris “Birdman” Andersen and Danny Green.

In the league’s 13-year history, more than 15 teams have folded and none of the original eight still remain in the cities they started in. Of those eight, five have ceased existing while the Asheville Attitude morphed into the Oklahoma City Blue, the Columbus Riverdragons into the Austin Spurs and the Huntsville Flight to the Canton Charge.

As the mobility of its members suggests, the league has yet to design the perfect system and money is tight. Each of the 18 teams has a salary cap of \$173,000. Players can earn one of three wages: \$25,000; \$19,000; or \$13,000 plus insurance and housing, [according to ESPN](#). Compare this with the starting salary of an NBA rookie at \$4.5 million.

Of course, some of the difference in cost makes sense. Tickets to watch the 5-20 Knicks at the Garden start at \$85 for the nosebleeds and cost as much as \$1,200 for courtside seats. At the Westchester County Center, ticket prices are as low as \$11.50 and the most expensive floor seats are \$126.50.

Madison Square Garden holds 18,200– though it’s likely not at capacity this season – while Westchester can seat 2,100. A hot dog 30 miles north of Manhattan costs \$3.50, half the price of a Garden dog. The list goes on and on.

The cost difference is a big pull for some local fans and one way Westchester wins out over the New York squad.

Michael Zadjelovich, a 35-year-old attorney from White Plains who still plays rec league basketball was thrilled when he found out his hometown was getting a team. So when the season finally started, he was there to see it for himself, and he liked what he saw.

“I love the effort and fight that they show,” he said. “You can really tell these guys are fighting for jobs and put out a lot of energy.”

Zadjelovich was also happy to see the prices, remarking on how happy he was to get a ticket and a beer for \$15 and is ready to jump on their bandwagon.

“It's really great to have a hometown team and I'm sure I'll be at some more games throughout the season,” he said.

But that doesn't change the fact that going to a Knicks game at the Garden is a rite of passage for New Yorkers. It's assumed that right next to that millionaire and her kid, Olivia Wilde will be sitting quietly, adorned with a baseball cap and sunglasses. Photographers capture rows of celebrities looking disinterested and red carpet ready on the sidelines.

Although the only carpet in Westchester was the outdated green grey that coated the back hallways full of vacant rooms, Westchester did have one celebrity for opening night, NBA Commissioner Adam Silver. Fans crowded the commissioner, and at times, seemed more interested in getting an autograph from Silver than watching the game.

“It's fantastic to be here, my mom was a public high school teacher here in White Plains, so it is especially gratifying to be back here,” Silver said. “I came to events here in the '70s when I was in high school, so it is special.”

It's hard to imagine the Art Deco building built in 1930 looks much different than it did then. The lack of ambiance is a real hurdle for the new Knicks to jump in order to get a true fan base, unlike the New York Knicks whose diehard fans cannot be deterred by their record.

No matter how many games the New York Knicks lose, regardless of how sloppy their triangle offense looks, their fans will come for the theatrics of the Garden, to buy new team memorabilia in the pro shop and post a photo of the court on Instagram. They come for the experience.

It is this experience that the NY Knicks & MSG have created that fans crave – and are willing to shell out for. In a sport with 82 regular season games the 5-20 Knicks can still fill most of the Garden's 18,200 seats.

But in the Westchester County Center, it's unlikely that many games after opening night will ever sell out the 2,100 seats.

After all, one hour on Metro North is a lot more to ask of your fans than hopping off any train at Penn Station.

While there is no comparison of the level of basketball being played on the two courts, Westchester has a chance to bring something new to an area of New York with sparse offerings of sporting events.

The Westchester Knicks also have an opportunity to usher in a new era of the Development League, giving players a better chance of not just getting called up, but staying there. That's what coach Whitted is working towards.

"My goal is to see guys go, I don't want them to come back. I want them to go up and actually get that secure contract and stay the rest of the year," Whitted said before their opening game against the Canton Charge, the Cavalier's affiliate.

Whitted played at University of Tennessee alongside Westchester GM Allan Houston. His resume includes coaching a handful of ABA teams as well as assisting two D-League teams and even the Memphis Grizzlies summer squad. He even attended the same high school as Michael Jordan – and passed his scoring record – so he knows what it's like to be one step away from mega-success.

The physical location of the team gives the new-Knicks a better chance to grow along with their parent squad who practice just before them at the same facility. Whitted talks to Knicks coach Derek Fischer every day and attends meetings with the rest of the coaches.

"It's easier for us because we're in house and it gives us a birds eye view of what they're doing." Whitted said. "Another thing about it is that we're right there with them in terms of learning the terms and how they execute. The key is if the language is the same when players move back and forth you have a better product and they can come in and join your club and it's just like being with the main club."

Whitted believes that if and when his players move between the two teams, they'll be ready to jump in thanks to their close relationship. He has even taken to running the same offense as the Knicks, the Phil Jackson-inspired triangle, which is difficult for even the most advanced professional team to execute.

Most importantly, Whitted is fostering an environment for his young players that enriches their lives off the court – something the D-League could provide that is lacking in the NBA.

"It's just another way of parenting. You have to groom players. We're grooming players on and off the court, making sure that guys understand how to present themselves everyday, how to handle themselves off the court in every endeavor," he said. "I think those things are important for the D-League, so those are things that I emphasize everyday. I try to give life skills at the same time we teach basketball."

That hands-on approach is working for one of his star players, Darnell Jackson.

"The biggest thing with coach is he's always talking to me, he's always in my ear so having that just helps me a lot," Jackson said.

Westchester may still be working out the kinks, but with a 6-6 record they're faring better than their parent ball club – what they need most is a crowd behind them. Save for the first few minutes and when their cheerleaders tossed free t-shirts into the crowd, the fans were less than enthusiastic – until the two-minute mark.

As the final minutes of game one ticked away and the new home team was down by a pair, a sleepy crowd suddenly sounded like they belonged at the Garden. They roared as the Charge took to the charity stripe and stood silently when it was their team's turn. With 51 seconds left the Knicks were down by two and a "defense" cheer broke out.

It wasn't enough.

Suddenly the lead was five and any spark of momentum deflated. The crowd was ready to go home. Coats were zipped, gloves pulled on. The buzzer rang as half the crowd exited in an orderly fashion.

If all goes as the Westchester Knicks planned, they'll come back next week to see if Antetokounmpo can swat a few out of the sky and how many sick dunks Langston Galloway can throw down. It is cheaper than seeing a movie, after all – and for some local fans, more fun.