

Monday night lights: a weekly hoops club keeps a gang of Hillers healthy and happy



The Monday night basketball club. Front Row (from left): Michael Cohen, Tom Wuenschel, Charlie Overholser, Steve Fillebrown, Michael Beer, Josh Barash, Don Perelman, Victor Abreu, David Axelrod and Luke Prendergast. Standing (from left): Kevin Feeley, Jack Walsh, Dan Werther, Bob Kaufman, Tom Flynn, Wayne Sachs, Bob Previdi, Danny Silverman, Fred Berman and Mark Wilson. Not Pictured: Carl Dean, Luke Wilson, Graham Robb and Chris Zimmerman.

Monday night always means basketball at Plymouth Meeting Friends School gym. But Monday night hoops in the gym of the Quaker elementary school is not for students. The weekly games are for a group of guys from Chestnut Hill and Mt. Airy, several of whom helped finance the gym's construction when their kids were students at the school. It's the site of a sort of long-running social club — a loose band of friends and acquaintances who bond over basketball.

On a recent Monday in March, it was game on. Most of the guys in the Monday night basketball gang were there and ready to play by 7 p.m., the official start time. The gym was opened by the “commissioner,” Michael Beer, a Chestnut Hill resident and a principal with a private real estate investment company, who maintains The List, an e-mail contact sheet that keeps all 23 members of the group informed of schedule changes, game results and the proceedings of the “executive

committee,” the group of regulars who follow the weekly game with a late-night session at McMenemy’s in Mt. Airy

“There are only a few exceptions,” Beer says about the Monday night schedule. “First is the annual school play, second is the school carnival and, once a year, there’s a Jewish holiday that falls on a Monday. Though that’s when we have what’s called our gentile’s game.”

The game is fast-paced for a four-on-four of 40-some-year-olds. They don’t run plays but there’s plenty of passing, rebounding, fast-break action, a block or two and outside shooting. It’s competitive ball. There are not too many (effective) pump fakes, between the legs dribbling, and – of course – no dunking. But this isn’t street ball. It’s hoops in a gym. And the players aren’t teenagers or 20-somethings. Nearly everyone is in his 40s or 50s.

Former director Bob Previdi, the former director of the Chestnut Hill Business Improvement District and now a transportation consultant, is one of the regulars. The game’s speed, he says, is helped by the small size of the court, which is approximately 20 feet shorter and 8 feet thinner than it would be in the NBA

“It’s brilliant when you get older,” he said of the short court.

But despite the short court and the easy jokes, the Monday night games are serious

No one plays to lose. Bad moves and missed shots are followed closely by loud curse words. There are a few elbows and a bit of pushing. There’s no ref to call a foul, but play stops occasionally when contact is extraordinary. And there’s lots of trash talking.

The Monday night basketball gang is a group of 23 regular players, middle-aged men from Mt. Airy and Chestnut Hill who have now been part of the game for seven years. Some (if not all) are well-known local figures: there’s Previdi, Charlie Overholser of McCoubrey/Overholser general contractors; Steve Fillebrown, former CHCA treasurer; Kevin Feeley, who was former Mayor Ed Rendell’s spokesman; Developer Bob Kaufman, of PhillyOfficeRetail.com, which is managing the Weavers Way Coop Chestnut Hill construction project, and attorney Mark Wilson, the public defender of Colleen LaRose, aka “Jihad Jane.”

Two members of the gang, Jack Walsh and Carl Dean are Hill mainstays who attended Kindergarten together at Our Mother of Consolation. Several of the

players on this particular night spoke of both Dean and Walsh – the oldest of the group – as the best players.

The regular group that now plays at Plymouth Meeting Friends coalesced seven years ago as a regular pickup game at a court on the campus of Crefeld School. After Beer and others who had kids at Plymouth Meeting Friends had helped finance the new gym, they thought it might be a nice place for the Crefeld games. Those games were great, but it was an outdoor court, putting the weekly game at the mercy of the elements.

“[This] started because of Wayne [Sachs], Carl [Dean], myself and Graham Robb,” Beer said. “We funded the gym. It was a five-year pledge. But when the gym was finished, our kids had all graduated.”

With the new gym, it occurred to Beer and the others that the regular Crefeld game could be moved indoors.

At the time, the Crefeld games were loose and not as well organized. Many of the other players were from the regular soccer pickup games for coaches of the Chestnut Hill Youth Sports Club, formerly the Chestnut Hill Fathers Club. But the soccer games were getting tough for some of the older guys in their 40s and late 30s, and the weekly basketball games became the focus.

“The soccer game was basically Father’s Club coaches,” Fillebrown said. “That group turns over, so you had younger guys coming in all the time, and as you get older, it’s tougher to hang in there. But we’re basically aging together so that’s why it works.”

At the team’s executive committee session at McMenemy’s, a group of about 10 of the players from the night’s game get a table in back and recap the game, but mostly talk sports and reminisce a bit for the sake of a reporter.

There’s a story about the time they had to break into the gym when no one remembered to bring the keys. And there was the time that someone hit an uncovered fire alarm with the ball and a group of very unhappy firefighters showed up at the gym and found nothing burning.

All are “devoted soccer fans,” according to Beer, but none were big basketball players. Most said they’d never played in school. Some said they had never played organized basketball in their lives.

“If you did play, it would probably disqualify you,” Beer said.

The Monday night games are governed by a system called “The List” (“It has more amendments than the Constitution,” Beer said). The list is a complicated set of rules that dictate how teams are formed, based on a player’s arrival at the gym. The first eight players compose the first two teams. After that, there’s a rotation in which team players change and others rotate in and out of the games. 16 players is optimum. More than that and players begin to sit out longer than they’d like.

“Numbers (designation based on arrival) are important,” Previdi explained. “You want to be in the first eight because you’re in the first game. But if you’re 17, oh, you’re sitting down twice. Your teammates change from game to game. Sometimes you have a great team and then you have a terrible team. Every game the team changes.”

The other important rule is the scoring. Games are decided by the first team to reach 17. Three-point shots are part of the game, too. It was a necessity, Beer said, and opened up the game

The games are serious and competitive. There is talk after the game about good shots and rough spots. Everyone enjoys the sport, and for some it’s the central event of their fitness routine.

“Before I played basketball, I was really out of shape,” said Charlie Overholser, the general contractor. “This has really helped me get in shape. You start playing, and you start trying to stay in shape so you can play basketball.”

For Don Perelman, Monday night is his fitness routine.

“I went to see my cardiologist and he said, ‘What are you doing for exercise.’ I said ‘I do nothing for six days a week, and then one day a week I go and play basketball for three hours.’ He said, ‘that’s not a good idea.’”

One of the most important aspects of the game, though, is not fitness. It’s the executive committee meeting afterwards at McMenam’s where teammates become friends over a pint of beer and wings or a burger. The executive committee is always different. It’s composed of whoever can make it out after the games finishes up — often around 10 p.m.

No wives are invited, though Fillebrown’s wife, Laura Oliver, is exempted. (Another amendment to the list – she is “The First Lady of the Executive

Committee.”) But the guys at the executive committee meeting the night a reporter joined them said their wives are mostly happy not to have their husbands around at least one night a week.

The next day, Beer sends an e-mail to The List reprising the night’s game and the talk of the executive committee, including, he says, a list of what everyone ate.

“These guys always want to know what everyone had to eat,” he said.

The only mandatory executive session is the Holiday Party, which takes place at one of the guys’ homes. At the holiday party, awards are given and everyone gets a refrigerator sticker with a group photo of all the players. Last year, an award was given to Victor Abreu for being the MVP of executive committee.

After seven years of pickup basketball, many of the guys on the list have become good friends off the court. And, if need be, they have each other’s backs. Even when they decide to pick a contest with another group of amateur hoops enthusiasts.

Recently, the guys in the group started to think a little too much of their skills. Bob Kaufman of Philly OfficeRetail.com recalled the story:

“One time, we thought we were getting good, and we challenged a group of guys who were also here at McMenamin’s. Then they stood up, and we realized we had a severe rebounding disadvantage. But we really thought we could play them.”

In the rearview mirror, the story is another good one — a highlight of seven years sharing a weekly basketball game in which the unexpected is always possible, and often a good time. It’s unsaid, but it’s part of what keeps the games vital. The games are more than just good games — for the guys involved, they’re culture.

Kaufman continued to talk about the poor matchup:

“We played and it was ugly, we couldn’t run plays, couldn’t shoot. It was bad. But the best line about the whole thing afterwards was from Tom Flynn who said, “They didn’t look that tall sitting down at the bar.”

by Pete Mazzaccaro