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Hoop dreams sprout again for middle schoolers in the reborn Penn-West Philly league

A current NBA coach helped launch the program during his undergrad days at Penn. The league shut down for a while, but now it has been rebooted.



Quader Brown-Wilson (5) is surrounded by happy teammates after his free throws at the end of a game gave his team a victory in the Penn-West Philadelphia Basketball League at Lea Elementary School. Read more Elizabeth Robertson / Staff Photographer

by Matthew Frank

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The Penn-West Philadelphia Basketball League, a program for middle-schoolers that consisted of eight teams run by Penn students, began its operation nearly 20 years ago with a link to a current NBA coach.

The league shut down for a while, but now it has been rebooted, although it remains in the early stages.

“To paint a picture, one of our gyms — I wouldn’t call it a gym, it’s more like a ‘cafnasium,’” said student coordinator Andrew Lopez. “There’s six baskets, which is nice, but we have to move all the tables. It’s a lot more like a cafeteria.”

The reboot has been active for more than a year, and one key has been Marquese Johnson, who participated as an eighth-grader during the league’s original run and was one of the program’s alumni who went on to play college basketball.

Johnson graduated from Lehman College, part of the City University of New York, in 2023 and now serves as the Young Quakers Community Athletics coordinator at Penn’s Netter Center for Community Partnerships, where he helps facilitate the school’s programs for kindergarten through eighth-grade students in Philadelphia.

The center’s director of sports, fitness, and health is Sarah Kelly.



Sarah Kelly of Penn’s Netter Center for Community Partnerships keeps the game clock and scorebook at a Penn-West Philly Basketball League game. Elizabeth Robertson / Staff Photographer

“Last spring was when I graduated, and when I came to Netter, it was really great seeing a bunch of people that I worked with as children, and a lot of my mentors are still at Netter,” Johnson said. “And then one day, Sarah was like, ‘Hey, what about PWPBL? We should bring that back.’”

The reborn league held its first games a little over a year ago, with the spring matchups acting as a trial run for the program. Kelly was focused on trying to get the league going again in the fall, but she said, “it wasn’t until Marquese walked in the door that we had the talent we needed to make it happen.”

» **READ MORE:** [Taylor Jenkins got his start as a Penn student trying to help kids in West Philly. Now he’s one of the NBA’s top coaches.](#)

Kelly calls Johnson the best coach she’s ever seen in getting children excited to play. He acts as head coach of sorts for the league — bringing balls, driving Penn students back and forth, and teaching and chatting with the players, among other tasks.

The experience has been a meaningful one for Johnson, who said the league gave him a big push to play basketball as a middle-schooler.

“It means everything,” he said. “I used to always tell myself, ‘I wish I had me when I was growing up.’ So now it’s a great opportunity to be that to a lot of our kids. ... Just to be able to introduce them to basketball, which is the sport I love.”



Memphis Grizzlies coach Taylor Jenkins is a Penn alumnus. Marta Lavandier / AP

An NBA coach's start

Until this past season, Taylor Jenkins of the Memphis Grizzlies was the only current NBA head coach not to play college basketball.

So what was Jenkins doing during his four years at Penn in the mid-2000s? He founded and managed the PWPBL.

“That was probably the highlight of my college career,” Jenkins said on a Wharton Zoom event in March.

Penn funded the scoreboards and other aspects of the operation, allowing the program to be free for the children, while Jenkins and his friends operated the league, acting as coaches, referees, scorekeepers, and van drivers.

The league also expanded past basketball. Jenkins and the other Penn students helped tutor the kids, talked with them about what was going on in their lives, and hosted the children on campus to give them an idea of what was beyond West Philadelphia.

“The relationships that we formed with those kids was phenomenal,” Jenkins said. “[I’ve] got news clippings of some of the kids that we coached that ended up going and playing high-level basketball within the Philadelphia community. Some went on to play college basketball. But it’s cool to try to get this reboot up and running.”

Two years ago, Jenkins spoke to a group of Penn students and talked about his experience with the league. Lopez, the student coordinator, was then a sophomore and was inspired by what Jenkins said. He put out a feeler to the Netter Center, which had already been planning the league’s return.

Jenkins, along with fellow alumnus Jason Rodriguez, has been involved in getting the PWPBL up and running again. Although most of their work comes behind the scenes, according to Lopez, Jenkins has given Kelly and the Netter Center some key pointers.

Because of the league’s partnership with Penn Athletics, Kelly was predisposed to thinking about how to involve Quakers athletes, but Jenkins emphasized that the program should include non-athletes. Kelly called it “a very useful catalyst to me to think about the structure of the program.”

Jenkins and Rodriguez also stressed the importance of nice jerseys.

“That was something that Taylor and Jason were very insistent on, is to invest the money in the jerseys because they found when they were running the program that the kids really did buy in,” Kelly said. “The swag mattered, in short.”



Marquese Johnson (right), the Young Quakers Community Athletics coordinator at Penn's Netter Center, runs warmups at Lea Elementary School. Elizabeth Robertson / Staff Photographer

An opportunity to play

Since many of the schools in that area don't have basketball teams, the PWPBL offers an opportunity for children who otherwise wouldn't have a chance to compete in the sport.

The same as when Jenkins was in charge, the program serves not only as a basketball league but a way to help middle-schoolers with their academics and to offer someone to talk to about whatever's going on in their lives.

"They've all reached out to me in multiple ways, whether it's an issue going on in school, going on at home, or whatever," Johnson said. "They could just be having a bad day, and they're more than willing to reach out and talk to me. And we just do all the problem solving through basketball. It works, it really does."

The league is still looking to grow past the "cafnasium" stage, but so far it has been able to retain much of what made Jenkins' original PWPBL so special.

"I think the best part about Penn students there, and having our game days specifically, is win, lose, or draw, everybody leaves happy," Johnson said.