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HOOP DREAMS



Liberty star Jonquel Jones visits
Grand Concourse gym

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Photo Robbie Sequeira

RESTAURANT WEEK
BARELY MOVES THE
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WITH MURDER,
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New York Liberty center Jonquel Jones is still acclimating to NYC. But she jumped at the chance to teach the next wave of girl hoopers in the Bronx on Wednesday, Feb. 1.

Photo | Robbie Sequeira

Presence of Liberty's Jonquel Jones at Bronx girls basketball clinic looms large for next generation of hoopers

BY ROBBIE SEQUEIRA

It was fitting that on National Girls & Women in Sports Day, much of the NYC basketball talk revolved around the New York Liberty and its emerging superteam after two-time WNBA champion Breanna Stewart announced her intentions to sign with the team on Wednesday, Feb. 1.

Stewart joins emerging star guard Sabrina Ionescu and former MVP Jonquel Jones in a star-studded Big Three that

will vie to bring the WNBA's original eight franchise its first championship in 26 years. On Feb. 1, Jones — acquired from the Connecticut Sun in a blockbuster trade just last month — got a chance to instruct and teach the ins and outs of the game to the next wave of WNBA hopefuls in a Grand Concourse gym at BronxWorks' Carolyn McLaughlin facility.

With Beyonce's "Run the World" blasting in the background, Bronx middle school-

ers were getting a crash course in ball-handling, rebounding and the subtle intricacies of the game from one of the WNBA's top stars.

One of those aspiring ballers, Bronx middle schooler Rhylee Espinal picked up the game at 7 years old, when she saw a group of boys playing and figured she could ball better than them. What was once a curiosity for Espinal, has now become a pursuit and a goal to make in the "W".

"My favorite thing about basketball is how it can bring a group of girls together, and how those girls work together not only for each other, but to prove that we deserve to play on the court, just like the boys do," said Espinal. "I plan on playing this as long as I can. I want to make it to the WNBA."

Espinal said more than anything, she wanted to pick the brain of the 6-foot-6 Jones, and learn some of the basketball IQ that made Jones a multi-time

All-Star, Most Improved Player of the Year and MVP in 2021.

But the journey for Espinal and others seeking a path to the pros, or even competitive basketball opportunities in college, comes with barriers.

Girls have 1.3 million fewer opportunities to play high school sports than boys have, according to the Women's Sports Foundation. By age 14, girls drop out of sports at twice the rate of their counterparts. Yet, a career in sports does pay



off, with 90% of women CEOs being former athletes.

However, the cost of youth sports has exceeded the pockets of many parents in low-income communities, and for parents of girl pursuing the collegiate ranks, it can be a journey finding those who will invest in their talent.

"The cost of AAU, finding the right team, finding an organization that will treat and instruct my girl the same they would any boy who wants to play in college or professionally, it's a challenge in itself," said Raquel Nieves, a South Bronx parent with two middle-school aged boys and a girl. "She wants it so bad, and as a parent I'm going to make sure every coach, every person sees that."

Dina Brown, director of

Middle School After-School Programs at the 50-year-old organization BronxWorks, said the collaboration between the Liberty and BronxWorks is a sign of meaningful investment for girls who seek a path into sports, as a player or otherwise.

"Growing up the Bronx, we experience a lot of trials and tribulations, so it's not often when you can have someone like Jonquel Jones and the New York Liberty take the time to invest in our girls from the Bronx and give (to) them," said Brown. "It means something to them. It means someone is willing to invest in their journey."

A spokesperson from the New York Liberty told the Bronx Times that they are looking to reach as many young ballers in the five boroughs as possible, hoping to develop a love for the game early so that it can lead them to a wide range of future opportunities and careers in the industry.

Jones, who was traded to New York on Jan. 15, is still acclimating to the Big Apple but said she was eager to be apart of the first-ever Liberty Clinic.

"When I'm out here with these girls, I see a lot of myself in them," said Jones. "I'm happy to be out here, because if I had an WNBA player around to teach me things when I was younger, I would've jumped at the opportunity."

And as girls and women in sports continue to break down barriers that have historically shut them out from a career in sport, the WNBA's top talents have long called for change in the U.S.'s longest-running women sports league.

In 1997, the WNBA was founded, and is half-owned, by the NBA. But as the league has grown in star power and fresh off raising \$75 million — the largest-ever capital raise for a women's sports entity — in 2022, the league's players continue to highlight disparities.

Even the superstars in the professional ranks — like Jones — are still fighting for their equitable pay, travel and investments in their product.

And what WNBA players have long-claimed for, is to receive the same share of its league revenue that their male counterparts in the NBA receive — 50%. WNBA players receive only 20% of WNBA league revenue.

Some progress has been made for the WNBA's top tier players, after the league and its players association struck a new collective bargaining agreement in 2020, which allows top talent to earn cash compensation in excess of \$500,000, triple of what it was prior.

"There's a lot of room for growth and we went in the right direction with the new



In Jonquel Jones, the New York Liberty are getting an MVP talent who provides length and versatility. Photo courtesy Brandon Todd/ New York Liberty

CBA, but there's still a lot more that can be done to make the players' experience better and equal to men's basketball," said Jones. "We want to be treated the same, but we understand the revenue is different ... so when we talk about equity, we're talking about percentages (of revenue) and a big topic is also travel and chartering flights."

During her free agency, Jones' new teammate Stewart made charter flights a major factor in her decision. WNBA teams only fly commercial, and the Liberty owner Joe Tsai in the past has offered unauthorized charter flights to his players, to the dismay and scolding of the league.

Hopefully by the time Espinal plays her first game for the hometown Liberty sometime in the next decade, those systemic challenges for women's professional sports will have been rectified.



Bronx middle schooler Rhylee Espinal's got next. She hopes to use her basketball skills as far as they will take her. Photo | Robbie Sequeira