

District Chronicles

Monday, February 19, 2007

Where are the Muslim athletes of today?

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Issue date: 2/19/07 **Section:** Divine Intervention

Farrukh Saleem acknowledges he has a problem. "I'm beyond a sports fanatic. I need help," said Saleem, who hunkered down in his Potomac, Md., home last Super Bowl Sunday with his six-year-old son and rooted for his beloved Chicago Bears.

Saleem, 36, attributes some of his sports fever to a youth spent watching Muslim superstars like Muhammad Ali and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who became heroes to countless Muslim-American children.

"It can be a struggle growing up Muslim in America," said Saleem, whose family emigrated from Pakistan shortly before his birth. "So when you see other Muslims succeeding at the sports you love, that can't help but give you a lift."

In their primes, Ali and Abdul-Jabbar gave the small population of Muslim Americans, comprising mostly immigrants and their children, figures who validated their identities and proved Muslims could succeed in America.

Today, there are more Muslims in U.S. sports than ever. But despite calls for better understanding between the Islamic and Western worlds, few Muslim athletes have emerged as ambassadors of the faith like Ali and Abdul-Jabbar. That leaves Saleem wondering about his children: "Who are going to be the role models for them?"

But a few Muslim-American athletes today are willing to act as bridge-builders between Muslims and non-Muslims. "I feel I have to portray my religion as well as I can because a lot of times I am the first contact that people have with a Muslim," said Hamza Abdullah, who plays in the National Football League for the Denver Broncos.

When the team travels to games, Abdullah dons a dress suit and a kufi, or Muslim prayer cap, hoping the image of a poised NFL pro will counter television shows like Fox Television's "24," in which Muslims are depicted as terrorists.

While teammates have asked him about being Muslim, no schools, churches or other institutions have invited him to talk about Islam. "People feel like it's a sensitive topic," Abdullah said. "I think they think I'm going to get upset. But it's the total opposite. I want people to ask me."