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Cocky and competitive: Basketball is Obama's sweaty platform

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He's confident and competitive. Superstitious and silly. Admits his mistakes. Shares credit. Always in control. That's Barack Obama on the basketball court, the hardwood hideaway that helped him adjust to a white world as a racially mixed teenager and now stands as a sweaty platform for his Democratic presidential campaign.

Hillary may have Bill. But Barack's got game.

For months, the Illinois senator kept his "first love" under wraps, but suddenly basketball is center court as a political strategy. It's no accident: Obama needs something anything to deflect attention from the re-emergence of Rev. Jeremiah Wright, his bombastic former pastor whose racially charged opinions threaten to widen the disconnect between the Illinois senator and white working-class voters.

More than that, Obama hopes his passion for basketball helps soften his image as cool and aloof.

"I do think you can tell something about people by the way they play basketball," he told HBO's "Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel" this month.

Hours before losing Pennsylvania's primary to Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton last week, Obama played a pickup game at a well-appointed YMCA in Pittsburgh with several aides, friends and two reporters, including one from The Associated Press. No cameras were allowed in that game part of a private voting day ritual but Obama hasn't been so shy since the campaign moved to Indiana and North Carolina, basketball-crazed states that hold Democratic primaries next week.

Last Friday, he scored four baskets including a nifty left-handed 3-pointer in a Kokomo, Ind., game tied to his voter registration drive. With cameras trained on his every 46-year-old move, Obama scrimmaged Tuesday with the North Carolina Tar Heels.

"These guys," Obama said, "are a lot better than me." He was absolutely right.

Still, the politics are smart.

"We're a very sports-loving country and it would be unusual if our president in one way or another was not sports connected," said Stephen Hess, a presidential scholar who served in the Eisenhower and Nixon administrations.

Dwight D. Eisenhower played golf, a sport as genteel and patrician as the president who played it. John Kennedy played touch football with the youthful "vigah" that defined his 1960 campaign. Richard Nixon bowled, badly, as he brought blue-collar voters into the GOP fold.

Hillary Clinton played softball in high school and recalls playing half-court basketball while growing up (only the boys could play full court), but she's not much of a jock now. Still, the New York senator who was born in Illinois knows the difference between a home run and a political foul. "Well," she said of her allegiances in a hypothetical World Series between the Chicago Cubs and the New York Yankees, "I would probably have to alternate sides."

The sports strategy has its limits. If not, former Sen. Bill Bradley would have been elected president in 2000. The Hall of Fame basketball player shot hoops on the campaign trail.

"Playing ball makes you accessible in a way that neither of them are Obama and Bradley," said Eric Hauser, a Democratic strategist who worked for Bradley. "They both deal with the reputation of being distant and cool, and basketball transcends race."

Growing up in Hawaii, Obama considered basketball as a way to find his racial identity in a diverse community.

"Here is a place," Obama told HBO, "where black was not a disadvantage."

Now, it's a place for a break from the campaign.

Dribbling a ball during warmups on the court in Pittsburgh, Obama said he and his pals played the day of the Iowa caucuses. "We won the caucuses then came New Hampshire and we didn't play. We were too busy," he said. "That won't happen again. I am superstitious."

Obama picked the teams in Pittsburgh, giving himself five of the best players and two of the worst (the reporters) and immediately took charge of the play, bringing the ball up court and dishing soft bounce passes.

He kept score and called fouls, including one on himself.

Obama is extremely confident with his game, for good reason. He glides more than runs, high and soft on the balls of his feet and with graceful strides that put enough space between himself and his opponents to launch a solid left-handed jump shot. Obama, who usually plays with younger men, says he's a step too fast for most his age.

"They're better off testing my jumper," he told HBO.

In the first of four games, Obama lost the ball out of bounds. "My bad," he told teammates. "I'm sorry."

Not everybody is so honest. When an opposing player dribbled the ball off his own leg and called a cheap foul, one of Obama's teammates said sarcastically, "Hey, man, nice move." Typical trash talk. But it struck Obama as funny. Over-the-top funny. Falling to his knees, the senator giggled uncontrollably, holding his head in his hands and writhing. He wiped tears from his eyes while getting up.

You don't realize how skinny Obama is until you're banging against him beneath the rim, his bony hips giving easily to brawnier competitors. But despite his size, Obama took every opportunity to career recklessly through the lane with his signature move:

Fake right and drive hard to the left.

A political statement? "Nah," he said with a wan and sweaty smile, "I just love to play this game."

EDITOR'S NOTE: Ron Fournier covers politics for The Associated Press. He played pickup with Obama and several others on April 22.

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