The last word

Washington's new power game

Congressmen are practicing their jumpers, and bureaucrats are hunting pickup games. A president who hoops, says ESPN.com's Wright Thompson, can do that to a town.

Baron Hill is in training, working on his jumper, pumping iron, doing rep after tedious rep on the weight machines to strengthen his bum knee. He swore 15 years ago that he'd never play competitive basketball again, but here he is at his health club, 55 years old, shooting baskets alone. Once, he was an Indiana high school legend, a member of the state's hall of fame. Those pictures, though, are in black and white.

Just your typical bourgeois midlife crisis, right? Not exactly. Consider who Hill is—an influential member of the U.S. House of Representatives, co-chairman of the Blue Dog Democrats. Consider too that the court he's on isn't at a local Y. He's in Room SB-322 of the Rayburn House Office Building: the famous House gym.

Outside D.C., Hill's new regimen would seem absurd. In D.C., it's just doing business. Getting his basketball game up to speed isn't about him. Well, that's not entirely true. It's somewhat about him, about his own political future. But it's also for the 675,000 citizens of his Indiana district, the people he has been sent here to serve. The reason he's playing basketball isn't because he wants to be, but because the president of the United States plays basketball.

"It's because of him," the five-term Democrat admits. "If I ever have an opportunity to play with him, I want to be able to halfway get around that court well enough."

At the end of his workout, just like when he was a kid, Hill won't allow himself to leave until he has made 10 straight free throws.

A clarification: Washington actually is two cities. In one Washington, regular people do things like eat at a restaurant because they like the food. In the other, citizenship isn't defined by street address but by connections.

Live next to a powerful senator? It means nothing. Know a powerful senator? You're in.

The latter D.C. is a lot like junior high: The student body waits to see what the cool kids do, and the president—who is the coolest kid. People eat where he eats; Obama went to a local burger joint, and now you can't get a table there. People scheme for the opportunity of a chance encounter. Parents push their own children to befriend his kids.

They adopt his mannerisms, his catchphrases, even his sports. Especially his sports. Clinton played golf, so everyone in D.C. played golf, working angles to share a tee time with him.

Obama, of course, loves all things hoops. By executive fiat, the White House tennis court is being retrofitted for basketball. He mentions the game every other speech, including his controversial commencement address at Notre Dame. There's a blog devoted to his on-court exploits called Baller-in-Chief. His brother-in-law is the coach at Oregon State University. His friends hoop. His personal aide, Reggie Love, hooped his way to a college national title at Duke and is the gatekeeper for the presidential game. The senior staff hoops. The junior staff hoops. Four members of the Cabinet hoop. Wanna guess what comes next? There's a new prize to be won. "What's the hottest invite in Washington?" former Clinton press secretary Dee Dee Myers asks. "Yeah, it's great to go to White House state dinners or Stevie Wonder kinds of events. But what's the sine qua non? It's a pickup game with Obama. That's the inner, inner, inner sanctum. Proximity is everything in this town. How close are you to the epicenter?"

No one ever feels close enough, so all over town, people are playing hoops, in newly started leagues, in pickup games at private schools, even in Congress.

For people who don't spend much time in Washington, the line that most of us would draw between networking and hanging out can be confusing. The city doesn't really make sense until you understand that a moment there almost always exists on two levels. There is the moment itself, not unlike a moment anywhere else in the world. Then there is its political shadow, which is far more significant.

Here's an example.

This is the moment: A spring Sunday on the leafy campus of Sidwell Friends School. In the school's gym, a group of middle-aged men—most of whom have been friends for decades—get ready to play basketball. It's Mother's Day, so a few regulars are missing, and some guys brought the kids to give Mom a chance to sleep in. One boy spreads out Legos in the corner. It's a chance for everyone to unwind away from work.

"Nobody ever talks about what they do," Julius Genachowski says.

Who is Julius? Exactly.

Julius plays with his son Jake, who'll be a senior in high school, and there's chemistry between father and son. On a fast break with the two Genachowskis out in front, Julius passes the ball to Jake, who, being the best player on the floor, easily lays it in.

This is the same moment's political shadow: At the main campus of the exclusive Sidwell Friends School, where Malia Obama is a fifth-grader, a group of Washington's political elite gathers. Some of the usual suspects are missing, including the chairman of the Federal Trade Commission and the vice president for research at the National Defense University, but the game is still overbooked. Since the election, so many more people want to play with them that they've added a second weekly game.

In addition to running fast breaks, Julius Genachowski is the nominee to head the Federal Communications Commission. He clerked for two Supreme Court justices and has been friends with the president since they both were students at Harvard Law School.

Off to the side, reading a children's book to a small girl to occupy her while her father is in the game, is Richard Danzig, a former secretary of the Navy who some thought would be Obama's secretary of defense.

Some think he still will be.

Ken Salazar is secretary of the interior, which means he's in charge of a whole bunch of cool stuff, like Yellowstone Park's Old Faithful, Lincoln's birthplace in Illinois, and the indoor basketball court closest to the White House. It's Tuesday night, and the pickup run is in full swing when he finally gets to the basement of his building. He has been to three or four states today, so there's a bit of stress to burn off.

These games happen twice a week, and
The last word

because the gym is just four blocks from the White House, folks from there play here too. In late February, Obama came over one Saturday morning for a game, taking on Shuler. He didn’t know who he was, but we won. “We’ve been asking for a rematch for months,” says Ray Rivera, head of external and intergovernmental affairs for Interior.

The games are fluid. There’s a good energy on the court. People talk on defense. When Salazar finally gets in, it’s obvious he is actually pretty athletic. He’s not easy to cover. Someone yells, “Who got Secretary?” Other than being addressed by his title, Salazar is treated like everyone else. Look around at the court right now. Don Gips, the director of personnel at the White House, is in the game, too, setting devastating picks. Then another regular, Sen. Bob Casey, D-Pa., joins in. So now, on the court at the same time, are a Cabinet secretary, the guy in charge of administration hiring, a U.S. senator … and a bunch of staff members, some of them very junior. This is the dramatic difference between basketball and golf. Nobody’s taking an intern to play golf at Congressional Country Club. Basketball is much more democratic. During a break, Casey is talking to scheduler Courtney Lewis, explaining that she should treat him like anyone else.

“I fouled you, and you didn’t call it on me,” he says.

“Well …”

“You should have,” he says.

Everybody in D.C. has got the fever. Last December, there wasn’t a regular pickup game in the House gym. By February, lots of congressmen had rediscovered their love for the sport. Former NFL quarterback Heath Shuler, D-N.C., is the game’s “commish,” or organizer, and he gets the game rolling almost every morning at 6:30. “Everybody wants to get in on the first administration versus Congress basketball game,” says Rep. Rick Larsen, D-Wash. Not long ago, Shuler was at the White House. The first words out on who runs hoops at a swanky D.C. health club. “It’s gotta be.”

Arthur Jackson, president of a company that runs local youth training camps, is the commish of the Lab School run. On Thursdays, he sends out an e-mail to a tightly controlled group that includes NFL wide receiver Antwaan Randle El and John Rice, brother of Susan Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. The first 15 to reply are in.

Recently, Jackson was approached by the CEO of a nonprofit company, a man who does work on the Hill. “I have a business idea,” he said.

Then the acquaintance laid it all out: The president and his confidants play hoops, which put people you could never get on the phone in regular games, which made others play hoops, which made the ability to play basketball a legitimate club in the bag of Washington power. Would Jackson be interested in giving basketball lessons on Capitol Hill?

“I think there’s a big market,” Jackson now says. “The law firms, the lobbyists are gonna want to be able to get into these games. And they won’t want to embarrass themselves once they get out there.”

The image of a wing-tipped brown-noser learning to execute a crossover is hilarious, of course. But a lot of people around town, when they stop laughing, say it won’t ever happen.

Why? If the lessons weren’t totally secret, it would defeat the purpose. In the Washington where regular people are scarce, the only thing worse than not operating is being caught operating.

Jackson gets that, so he’s figuring out a way to offer classes firm by firm in a private gym. He hopes to start executive training in the fall.

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