

Hooked on hoops? Take your best shot

Rec league junkies find nonstop action

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To truly understand Craig Ganek's passion for basketball, you need to wake up at 5:30 a.m. on weekdays.

That's when the 29-year-old from Lincoln Square gets up to dry his basketball gear and get ready for work.

While colleagues at his Lake Bluff-based land planning and design firm use their flex-hours to spend quality time with family, beat traffic or head to grad school, Ganek works 7:15 a.m.-3:15 p.m. so that he can play basketball—sometimes as often as six times a week.

Crazy? Sure. But he's not alone. More than 100,000 guys play rec hoops throughout the city and suburbs, estimates Jocelyn Diehl, league coordinator for Windy City Fieldhouse.

In the cut-throat world of pick-up basketball, where winners play again and losers sit out the next game, players like Ganek are key. In league play, where summer-long bragging rights hang in the balance, Ganek-quality balers are essential.

"Pound for pound, [Ganek's] among the elite I've seen in 10-plus years of playing basketball," says fellow hooper Mark Church. "There are definitely younger, taller and maybe even faster recreational players out there, but none better than Craig."

Diehl categorizes rec league hoopers as a step above the stereotypical weekend warrior athlete. "Most played some high school or small college ball," she says.

"They're typically not just rolling off the couch and playing. They're usually in decent shape and will use a rec league as a night away from hitting the weights or working out," she says.

Ganek's NBA-like league schedule would be a dream for most rec hoopers.

"Your average rec guy plays in probably one league game a week," says Diehl. "Some may add a second league or a nights of pick-up games here or there. But not six nights a week, that's a lot."

The first thing you notice about Ganek is that he doesn't look much like a basketball player. He's 6 feet tall, 180 pounds and built more like Mike Brown than Michael Jordan.

But watch him play a game and you'll realize why fellow recreational league players rank Ganek among the best in the city.

While others in a recent pick-up game at the Lakeview YMCA lumber up and down the floor trying to catch their breath, Ganek dashes. Stealing a weak pass, Ganek, who plays guard, pushes the ball up the court. He head fakes around one defender, slashes through the lane and scores over the outstretched arms of another opponent 4 inches taller and three years Ganek's junior.

Without missing a step, Ganek, his shoes squeaking, bounds back on defense, where he tallies another steal. He streaks down the floor and stops in mid-stride, launching a three-point shot. The ball passes through the hoop with a soundtrack-perfect swoosh.

"That's game!" teammate Akiba Medina, shouts as he greets Ganek with a high five. Last season, Ganek played on three rec-league teams—one on Monday and two on Sundays. Two—his Players Sports League

and Windy City Fieldhouse teams—won championships. His third team lost in the finals. In all, he notched a combined 34-2 league record last season, he thinks.

“Or something like that,” he says. “I lose track.”

Whether 34 or 35, it’s a feat Ganek hopes to duplicate this season.

A 30-plus win season is even more impressive when you realize that unlike some rec players trying to re-live their glory days, Ganek never played a minute of college basketball, though he did play guard for two years at Hoffman Estates High School.

“Craig isn’t going to win any beauty pageants with his game or any slam dunk contests with that height,” says fellow league player Mike Andrews, 32, of Hoffman Estates. “But he’s a scorer and a born leader. He’s the Kirk Hinrich of rec basketball.”

Ganek is an organizer, too, says league teammate Todd Takes, 30, of Ukrainian Village. “He’s also the guy who’s rounding up teams and pushing organizers to set up leagues on the nights that best fit into his schedule.”

Rattle off the number of hours Ganek plays basketball to his wife, Kristene, and she respond with only a shake of the head.

“Yep, pretty much everybody thinks he nuts—my girlfriends, his mother, even some of his guy friends are amazed at the amount he plays,” the grade-school teacher says.

A former high school basketball player, Kristene says she’s understanding of her husband’s passion, to a point.

It still confounds her that he watches sports after the playing stops.

“He’ll play basketball from 5 to 7 p.m., come home and then want to watch a game on TV,” the 28-year-old says.

For Ganek and other league players, basketball is more than just a game. It’s a stress-buster, with no comparison.

“You get out here, you start playing and you forget about any hassles,” he says. “And, it’s also the ultimate workout. I can’t just go and run on a treadmill. I’d go nuts with boredom. Out here, you’re sprinting, backpedaling and jumping. It’s a real workout.”

And one his bosses don’t seem to mind.

“Basketball is a great activity,” says Jon Wildenberg, Ganek’s boss at Rolf C. Campbell and Associates. “It keeps you fit and in shape. And as an employer, it’s such a healthy outlet from work.”

The work-life balance is going to get harder for Ganek soon; his wife is expecting their first child in July.

“Being a father will definitely force me to cut back on the basketball, but I know I’ll never quit completely,” he says.

Back standing in front of his laundry closet where the day started, Ganek, exhausted and a little sore from the game at the Y, loads his sweaty shirt, shorts and socks into the washer.

In five hours or so, he’ll move the clean clothes to the drier as another day of hoops dawn.

Got Game? Join a league!

Ganek and fellow rec league hoopers recommend these city and suburban leagues:

CHICAGO

The Windy City Fieldhouse runs a year-round Sunday evening leagues. The league has a seven-game regular season and two weeks of playoffs. 2367 W. Logan Blvd.: 773-486-7421.

Players Sports runs leagues Monday night at Windy City and Hamlin Park, 3000 N. Damen Ave. Tuesday league plays at Clemente High School, 2334 W. Division St. and Wednesday and Sunday leagues play at Windy City. All leagues have a seven-game regular season and two weeks of playoffs. 773-528-1999.

Sports Monster has Monday, Saturday and Sunday night leagues at Lincoln Park High School, 2001 N. Orchard Ave., Tuesday and Thursday night leagues at Windy City. All leagues have a seven-game regular season and two weeks of playoffs. 773-866-2955.

DES PLAINES

Des Plaines Park District runs two Tuesday night winter rec leagues at Prairie Lakes Community Center, 515 E. Thacker St., Des Plaines. One is a competitive rec league. The second is for players 30 and older. Both play 10-game regular seasons and two weeks of playoffs. 847-391-5711.

BATAVIA

Batavia Park District runs a Sunday morning 30-and-older rec league November through April. Games in the 10-team league are played at Rotolo Middle School, 1501 S. Raddant Rd., Batavia. 14-week regular season and two weeks of playoffs. 630-406-5282.

ITASCA

Itasca Park District has a Tuesday night winter rec league at its Recreation Center. The 10-team league plays at the Itasca Park District Recreation Center, 350 E. Irving Park Rd., Itasca. 630-773-2257.

WILMETTE

Wilmette Park District has three leagues. Thursday's league is for players 19 years and older. Sunday league is 30-and-over with two divisions, competitive and recreation. Games are played at Wilmette Junior High School, 620 Locust Rd., Wilmette. 847-256-9689.

NORTHBROOK

Northbrook Park District has two Wednesday winter/spring rec leagues, one for corporate-sponsored teams and one for more competitive players. Both are 10-game regular seasons followed by two weeks of playoffs. Games are played at aGlenbrook North High School, 2300 Shermer Rd., Northbrook. 847-291-2369.

---M.R.

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