

The CourierNews

Reading with the Racers

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By Charity Bonner STAFF WRITER

The sight of a towering basketball player from the Elgin Racers can make more than 20 rambunctious children get quiet.

The sound of hands slamming handles on a foosball table and the crash of a hockey puck lodging in its plastic goal reverberated through a room filled with more than 20 kindergartners and first-graders at the Boys & Girls Club of Elgin on a recent weekday. However, when Brandon Moore, a guard for the Elgin Racers, brought out a book for reading time, the games stopped, and the children listened with rapt attention as he read *Duck for President*, a humorous story about a duck, unhappy with conditions on his farm, who proceeds to become governor and sets his sights on the presidency.

Moore was reading for Reading with the Racers, a program meant to encourage literacy for children in elementary and middle school.

One little boy garnered several giggles when he yelled out, "Ducks don't talk!" after hearing Moore read the title of the book. After reading the story, Moore led the children in a craft where they made models of Abraham Lincoln's home out of Popsicle sticks and construction paper.

Eyes were riveted on Moore's every move, and most of the children were more interested in hovering around Moore, offering him suggestions and watching him create his cabin, than they were in their own craft. At the end, they completed the cabin with pennies for windows, fitting because the pennies bear the likeness of Abraham Lincoln. At the end of the session, the kids did a thank-you cheer for Moore.

Reading incentives

Keena Tavares, program manager at the Boys & Girls Club, watched the children emulate Moore's facial expressions as he presented the pictures and dramatized the reading. During one part when the farmer looks very dirty, Moore made a disgusted face; the children instinctively mirrored his expression.

"He was able to come in and interact with them and get on their level. He made sure he spent time with every group in the club," Tavares said.

The power that local celebrity basketball players have to be role models is something Tavares and members at the Boys & Girls Club of Elgin hope to harness by offering free tickets at the end of each 8- to 11-week quarter to children who attend a majority of the reading times. At the end of the activity, Moore signed autographs, while several of the youngsters eagerly practiced his signature.

The Elgin Boys & Girls Club Choir will perform the national anthem at a Racers game on March 30.

The Reading with the Racers program was started by the basketball team last spring. The team has visited local schools and organizations, such as Kenyon Woods Middle School in South Elgin and the Boys & Girls Club, to offer incentives. They include things such as free tickets to children who meet the reading goals set



Elgin Racers basketball player Brandon Moore works on an arts and crafts project with Keimier Johnson (left), 7, and Armando Rivera, 7, at the Boys & Girls Club of Elgin.

(BRIAN LOEB/SPECIAL TO THE COURIER NEWS)

by their school or organization. The Racers' goal over the next couple of years is to visit all the elementary and middle schools in Elgin School District U46.

Racers owner Bob Fischer said the team is setting its sights beyond the hoops.

"Part of our motto for our professional basketball team is that we are more than a basketball team. It is more than a game to us. We are involved with giving back to the community as well," Fischer said.

Major impact

Brandon Moore wants to have a firsthand impact on the children in the community. Moore grew up in a challenged situation in Chicago, and he vividly remembers the day Scottie Pippen came to his school to encourage kids to read and achieve in school.

"No matter how old I get, I will always remember that day," Moore said.

He hopes to set a positive example for kids, in spite of the reputation some professional sports players have.

"Right now, you see basketball players on TV getting arrested. Being a better person overall will help the kids in the long run. I think because basketball is so popular in Elgin, the kids will be more willing to emulate what I do," Moore said.

Fischer said he has seen a great impact in the short time the program has existed.

"We have appeal because we are a professional basketball team. The biggest impact I have seen is on the kids. When they see these basketball players, they get a glow. It looks like they are open to receive at that point, and it is up to us to share how important reading is. Just seeing the kids reading and watching the kids with the players, there is a great connection," Fischer said.



Kalyn McGee (center), 7, of Elgin listens to Elgin Racers basketball player Brandon Moore read a story at the Boys & Girls Club of Elgin on Wednesday afternoon.