

A Net reaches out to fans, wherever they are

Richard Sandomir

Nets guard Devin Harris sat at a table between the bread section and the produce aisle at a Pathmark here signing autographs and quietly representing a team that plays in New Jersey but wants to escape to Brooklyn.



Elizabeth Lara/The Bergen Record, via Associated Press - Devin Harris, center, kidded around with Nets mascot Sly at the Lincoln Middle School in Hawthorne, NJ.

Harris, the team's starting point guard and only star, is trying to do it one local appearance at a time.

"I've always been a fan of being personal with fans, to see me up close, rather than just giving money to charity," he said, as he signed his name to the small yellow picture frames given to about 50 shoppers and fans by Western Union, a Nets sponsor that invited Harris to the supermarket, where it has a money transfer outlet.

"I just like connecting with people," he said, a rack of Bundt cakes behind his chair.

Since his arrival at the Izod Center in the Meadowlands in February 2008, Harris has told the team to keep giving him community assignments. "I try to fit everything in," he said.

His injured groin has limited him to two of the Nets' seven games this season, all of them losses.

While he was growing up in Milwaukee, Harris said, the Bucks' coach, George Karl, and guard Ray Allen were models of community involvement. When he played in Dallas, his Mavericks teammates Dirk Nowitzki and Josh Howard inspired his civic work ethic.

"I learned that it's expected of me," said Harris, who has a foundation, 34 Ways to Assist, to help children.

His off-the-court schedule shows that he had breakfast with a hero police officer at a Dunkin' Donuts in Hackensack, N.J., helped clean Branch Brook Park in Newark before its Cherry Blossom Festival and took a cooking class at Fabulous Foods in Moonachie, N.J., with youngsters from Big Brothers Big Sisters of Morris, Bergen and Passaic counties.

Harris drove an eighth grader in Hawthorne, N.J., to school in his Ferrari, appeared with Nets center Brook Lopez at M&M's World in Manhattan (M&M's is the team's official candy), conducted clinics, hiked, climbed rocks and bowled with youngsters.

"I'm sort of like a kid myself, so anything with kids is fun," he said.

No Net does more locally, although all are active. But Harris has appeared solo, or with teammates and coaches, at about half of the team's events in New York and New Jersey since he arrived 21 months ago.

"If we asked him to do too much, he would tell us," said Brett Yormark, chief executive of Nets Sports and Entertainment.

Major league athletes regularly attend events at stores, hospitals and schools; the N.B.A. requires their players' community involvement. Harris would be active under any circumstance, but he and his teammates must simultaneously maintain the franchise's New Jersey fan base while building one in Brooklyn, where the team hopes to move in a few years to an arena that is part of the long-delayed Atlantic Yards project.

"Fans are in a tough situation," Harris said. "They wonder where we're going, to Newark or Brooklyn."

The team will probably decide in January to move from the Izod Center to a temporary home, the Prudential Center, in Newark, until the Brooklyn arena is completed. The move to Brooklyn depends on a pending New York appellate court's decision on the use of eminent domain at the site. Meanwhile, a Russian billionaire, Mikhail D. Prokhorov, is trying to buy 80 percent of the team and 45 percent of the proposed arena.

"From Day 1, we've had two strategies," Yormark said. "One, to market ourselves as if we're staying long term in New Jersey to give people a reason to come to see us. But it's important to seed our brand in Brooklyn."

Harris, wearing an untucked pullover and jeans, quietly charmed those who either read of his lightly marketed appearance at the supermarket or rolled a cart over to see what the small commotion was about.

"You're so cute!" one woman said, while a man marveled at Harris's jumper. "And you're just a baby," he said.

After Harris signed Gwen Williams's picture frame, she said over her shoulder, "Thanks for coming to Newark!"

As she self-checked her bag of groceries, Williams said: "Not many people like him come to Newark. People think Newark's the pits, and I think it is, too. I think it's great that he came because you need money to go the Prudential Center. But I wish he'd stood outside so kids can see an African-American role model."

New York Times, New York, Nov. 11th 2009, Sport Business, online.