

All-Star Gasol stays a kid at heart

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9:12 PM, Feb 14, 2015

LONG ISLAND CITY, N.Y. — The two faces appear shortly before 1 p.m. on Friday, sheepishly poking out from behind a door.

They are cautious, nervous and altogether giddy about the unidentified professional basketball player due to arrive at their school, and now they crane their necks in hopes of catching a glimpse of the NBA star.

“Excuse me, sir,” a young boy calls out to a reporter waiting in the lobby. “Do you know who is coming?”

“Marc Gasol will be here,” the reporter says, causing eyes to widen and voices to involuntarily shriek. The students scurry upstairs to their next class as the black shuttle bus carrying the starting center for the Western Conference draws nearer.

Gasol and his entourage are late, though it’s not their fault. Escaping the media swarm at the Sheraton New York Times Square Hotel required a full security team and 20 extra minutes of wading through reporter traffic.

Gasol, who is joined in New York City this weekend by his brother, Pau, is receiving the full rock-star treatment from dozens upon dozens of Spanish journalists who have crossed the Atlantic Ocean to document a remarkable family achievement.

The bus arrives and into the blistering cold steps Gasol, his black leather coat, red hooded sweatshirt and gray winter hat failing to block the wind on a frigid day in which the wind chill index dips well below zero. Gasol doesn’t seem to notice. He has flipped the switch to thoughtful mentor and now, as he enters Hunter’s Point Community Middle School in Queens, he is about to fascinate and entertain the next generation.

“They are the key,” Gasol says. “They are the future. They are the ones that are going to take care of us as we grow older.”

By now Gasol’s penchant for working with children, for visiting St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital and running basketball camps for kids in his native Spain, is well established. He is as gracious with them as he is with his teammates in Memphis, who often have to race him to pick up the dinner check.

But that doesn’t make this rare, behind-the-curtain glimpse of Gasol less interesting, less powerful. To see a man who is a consummate professional and gentleman let

loose for the sake of entertaining children is like watching the perfect rebuttal to Charles Barkley's claim that athletes should not be role models.

Within seconds of entering the school, Gasol is posing for pictures. He poses with a contest winner who guessed the identity of the NBA visitor. He poses with faculty members and students donning blue NBA FIT T-shirts with red letters.

He poses and poses and poses until, some five or six minutes later, he has elicited scores of smiles before stepping foot in the gymnasium.

"Are you all ready for basketball?" Gasol asks.

He enters the gym to a cacophony of screams and cheers that reverberate off the walls, dozens of sixth- and seventh-graders attempting to absorb the experience of meeting a 7-foot-1 NBA star. They pepper him with questions about his height, about his shoe size (17), about how often he practices, about whether he can dunk. Their visitor loves it all.

"They still have that naiveté about them where they don't really care about rules, don't really see the consequences, so they all get up and run and smile," Gasol says. "It's a wonderful thing."

Never do they smile more than when Gasol hoists the young contest winner, Maxx, high into the air for a two-handed dunk. The students roar and the teachers clap, and Gasol points to the lanky 12-year-old hanging from the rim and grins.

Then come the autographs, tons of them. With students clad in matching blue T-shirts, Gasol goes to work. He signs across their chests and along their backs. He signs extra T-shirts for their friends. He dishes out hugs.

"I touched him!" a young boy shouts.

"You did?" his friend gasps.

"I touched his leg!" the boy responds.

There was the unbridled joy sometimes felt by fans watching Gasol on the basketball court, his beautiful and fluid style unusual in today's NBA. But these 55 or so minutes in Queens were the source of unbridled joy for Gasol, the smiles and laughter of the children offering a welcome change from the interview circus he had just completed.

It's not merely that he is great with kids, which he is. It's not merely that he delays a meeting with Nike to make up for his late arrival, which he does. It's that through it all, throughout the hyperactive nonsense and sugar-filled fiasco with the students, Gasol never once looks bored.

He proclaims a left-handed shooter to be “just like Mike Conley.”

He lifts another student up to the rim for perhaps the only dunk that child will ever have.

He sits down for a private moment with a girl who could not participate because she was on crutches, and then he signs her cast.

He is genuine. He is thoughtful. He is Marc Gasol.

“I always appreciate every moment with every kid,” Gasol said. “If I can make an impact on one kid, to me that’s plenty. But to be able to make an impact on all these kids is great.”

Much like it was at the Sheraton, Gasol has to be prodded out of the gym. Representatives from Nike are waiting for him outside in a black Chevy Suburban with tinted windows.

But a young boy approaches as Gasol makes his way toward the exit.

“Could you sign my shirt as well?” he asks. “I know it’s a little extra.”

“Sure,” Gasol says. “Don’t tell anybody.”

He signs the shirt and walks out into the lobby, where police officers and faculty members have gathered.

That’s when Gasol begins signing and posing some more.