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The (Real) Team at the Center of a Santos Tale

The Baruch Bearcats played their home opener on Tuesday under a new spotlight after George Santos's lie about having played for the team resurfaced.



The Baruch College men's volleyball team played its home opener on Tuesday. Representative George Santos, who lied about being a former team member, was barely a distraction. Credit...Dave Sanders for The New York Times

By [Billy Witz](#) and [Corey Kilgannon](#)

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Display cases in the foyer of the Baruch College athletic department are cluttered with shimmering trophies. Framed photographs of championship teams line the cinder-block walls of the hallways. N.C.A.A. tournament banners hang from the gymnasium rafters.

Nowhere, though, is there any sign of the man who put the Baruch men's volleyball team on the map — and on social media, network news and “Saturday Night Live.”

It is as if the collegiate athletic career of Representative George Santos — the self-described Baruch Bearcats volleyball star, whose teams vanquished Harvard and Yale and who gave so much to the game that he needed knee replacements when his playing days were over — did not exist.

Of all the fabrications conjured up by Mr. Santos, the newly elected Republican congressman of New York, the most fabulous may have been his claim to volleyball fame.

It's one thing to apparently lie about having two college degrees, working at Goldman Sachs and Citigroup, losing four employees in the Pulse nightclub shooting, his grandparents surviving the Holocaust and his mother escaping the South Tower on 9/11.

But being a volleyball star at a commuter school in the heart of Manhattan?

“I did laugh,” Michael Higgins, a senior middle blocker on this season's Baruch volleyball team, said Tuesday night after the Bearcats lost their home-opening match to Long Island's St. Joseph's University. “I thought it was pretty funny that he chose our team out of millions of other teams.”



Mr. Santos had falsely claimed that his years of playing volleyball at Baruch forced him to undergo knee replacement surgeries. Credit...Kenny Holston/The New York Times

Since Santos's 2020 interview with WABC radio in which he invented his college volleyball playing days resurfaced earlier this month, Baruch volleyball has become something of a gag, a punchline for comedians and a gift for GIF maestros.

"What do they say — any publicity is good publicity," said one spectator, Meni Musheyev, 23, who — according to Baruch — was telling the truth when he said he was a former player for the team before graduating several years ago.

The jokes, though, obscure an honest endeavor — that of the Division III athlete, who plays without athletic scholarships, packed arenas or much expectation of going pro. Tuesday night's match was played before a few dozen spectators. Admission is free — as are the broadcasts on the internet.

Baruch's players represent the quaint ideal of the student-athlete.

The team sported a 3.42 grade-point average last spring. There are 13 finance majors, two studying accounting and others pursuing degrees that are designed around a career path rather than ensuring they remain eligible to play sports.

In the off-season, many intern at finance or real estate firms, and some spend a semester studying abroad.

"It's challenging for everybody to handle both, but I love being here, playing every day," said Jack Centeno, a co-captain and outside hitter whose last season in high school and his first in college were wiped out by the coronavirus pandemic.

And they are not bad on the court. Baruch, now 2-1 this season, won the City University of New York Athletic Conference last year, beating out rival Hunter College. The team has won nine of the last 12 conference titles and has advanced as far as the Final Four of the N.C.A.A. Division III tournament.



Meni Musheyev, center, a former Baruch student and volleyball player, said that the tight-knit volleyball community had never heard that Mr. Santos played the game. Credit...Dave Sanders for The New York Times

College at Baruch is a quintessentially New York experience. Nearly 20,000 students are crammed into a three-block campus along Lexington Avenue, where the main building rises 14 stories. The gym is three stories below ground, in the basement, which affords privacy to N.B.A. teams, who often practice there when they are in town to play the Knicks or the Nets. (The Dallas Mavericks star Luka Doncic recently drew a crowd of gawking students through the court's lone window.)

Most students commute; there are only about 300 dorm rooms available. And many, including athletes, work while going to school. There is no fraternity row.

“We like to utilize sport here as their outlet,” said Heather MacCulloch, the athletic director. “Two hours in the pool where I’m not figuring out calculus calculations, I don’t have to have my McDonald’s uniform on and my mom isn’t yelling at me for not taking out the trash. Those are hours of solace and rejuvenation.”

The men’s volleyball team looks like New York, too. There are players who grew up in Guyana, China, Serbia, Japan and Colorado, and freshmen twins from Albania. Other players were raised in Queens and Brooklyn.

Their first-year coach, Alexander Moule, a 26-year-old native of Rockaway Beach in Queens, is not much older than his players. His parents, Patricia and Simon Moule, were among the very few parents in the stands on Tuesday night. He “took no shortcuts to his American dream,” Simon Moule said.

When the team hit a lull during its fall practices, Mr. Moule told his team about a concept from Japanese business culture — kaizen, which means continual improvement. He asked Naoki Tani, a player from Tokyo who knew little English when he arrived three years ago, to speak to the team about it.



Alex Moule, the coach of the Baruch Bearcats, huddles with his players during a game that the team would ultimately lose. Credit...Dave Sanders for The New York Times

“Finding success at this level takes a certain mind-set, a certain resilience that you have to have when you’re going into matches,” said Ryan Oommen, the setter and co-captain who was introduced to volleyball growing up in an Indian community in Nassau County on Long Island, where he said the sport and his culture were intertwined. “We have a whole season ahead of us. Building that type of fighting back mind-set, it’s great for success in life.”

There have also been lessons from being drawn into the Santos story.

Mr. Moule, the coach, said he was taken aback when the recording of Mr. Santos’s volleyball boasts surfaced anew. He got texts from friends and began reading up on a story that he had not paid close attention to before he addressed it with his players.

“The No. 1 thing that came to mind is we really encourage accountability,” Mr. Moule said with a laugh.

Interestingly, there are some kernels of truth in Mr. Santos’s volleyball fever dreams.

Baruch beat Harvard in 2010, the year that Mr. Santos said he had graduated from the school. (Baruch could not have beaten Yale, as he claimed, because the university does not have a men’s volleyball team.) The star of that 2010 team was Pablo Oliveira, a Brazilian outside hitter.



The Baruch men’s volleyball team has won numerous conference championships in the past two decades. Credit...Dave Sanders for The New York Times

Mr. Oliveira may be the best all-around player ever at Baruch: He remains among the career leaders in kills (second), aces (second) and digs (fifth). Now, though, he is known as Pablo Patrick, using his middle name as his surname. Pablo Patrick is the chief executive at LinkBridge Investors, the financial firm that once employed Mr. Santos. He did not return a call seeking comment.

It was unclear if Mr. Santos’s lies about playing volleyball for Baruch were influenced by Mr. Oliveira’s past. On a résumé that Mr. Santos submitted around January 2020 to Republican leaders in Nassau County, he made no mention of his volleyball prowess, even as he falsely claimed to have earned a bachelor’s degree in economics and finance from Baruch in 2010 — graduating summa cum laude in the top 1 percent of his class.

He apparently saved the volleyball lie for conversation pick-me-ups with Nassau County Republican officials.

“He said he was a star and that they won the championship and he was a striker,” said Joseph G. Cairo Jr., chairman of the Nassau County Republican committee. (Striker is a position in soccer, not volleyball.)

Along the hallways outside the gym at Baruch hangs a photo of the 2010 Bearcats men’s volleyball team after it had won the CUNY Athletic Conference championship, completing an unbeaten conference season. In the photo, which on Tuesday was hidden under plastic because of construction, the Bearcats have medals around their necks and their arms around each other. Oliveira is holding a two-foot-tall trophy in his left hand.

Elsewhere in the photo, standing side by side, are a George (Chave) and a Santos (Rivera). But George Santos is nowhere to be found.