

## Osama, aka Steve

*Meet Osama. To his players, he's 'Coach Oss.' These days, should he be 'Steve'?*

Kent Babb  
*The Washington Post*

The first time he tried it was three years ago. The high school basketball coach looked toward the scorer's table before a home game at John H. McIntyre Gymnasium in suburban Detroit and realized he didn't recognize the referee. The coach approached the game official for pregame introductions and extended his hand.

"I'm Sam," he said, but he fumbled the words; the name left his lips awkwardly, like a man pretending to be someone else. The official said nothing, just kind of looked at him, and the coach spent the next few minutes figuring the official hadn't bought it. A few weeks later, he went for it again. Over time he became more confident, the names more natural. He began wondering, particularly during the past year, whether it would ever be possible for him — and his players — to truly blend in, especially during such an unsettling time in America.

Before some games these days, he occasionally introduces himself as Ozzie. Other times he is Oss. Sometimes he is Steve. He likes being Steve.

Any name would be better, he finds himself thinking more and more, than the one he has.



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### **'I live in a bubble'**

There isn't much to see out the bus window, the city and its concrete long behind them. Osama Abulhassan sits in the second row, passing the final miles on this early January evening by alternating between the night's game plan and Twitter: the "Jayhawk" offense and Fordson High's plan one moment, the words and sprawling influence of Donald Trump the next.

"In the last weekend, someone said: 'Go back where you came from,'" Abulhassan says over the hum of the bus. "You can't respond to it. You've got to let it go."

He keeps scrolling.

"I would hope my kids would tell you: 'I was born in America.'"

Abulhassan used to hear the same kinds of things years ago, back when he played point guard at Fordson during the immediate aftermath of 9/11. Now he is 31, emotionally calloused after all he has been through. This Friday evening, he is leading his team out of Dearborn — of the

city's nearly 100,000 residents, more than a third are, like Abulhassan and his 11 varsity players, Arab American in ancestry and Muslim in faith — into a rural stretch of Washtenaw County: a bus of Muslims heading into Trump Country.

This is Fordson's first road game of the new year, an early January contest at Lincoln High near Ypsilanti. More than that, this is the group's first trip outside the cultural familiarity of Dearborn, a city with the highest concentration of Arabic people outside the Middle East, and deeper into a state that — by a razor-thin 10,704 votes — turned red for Trump, who had promised a Muslim registry and temporary ban on immigrants from Muslim nations.

"It's too early to tell if anything will change," Abulhassan says. "But I live in a bubble. Nothing will change in Dearborn. Because it's us."

For years, Abulhassan avoided leaving Dearborn's boundaries. There, his culture was shared, not feared.

He did leave Dearborn 10 years ago, and those days away changed him, though none of the young men on the bus know that story. They don't know that, while Dearborn and the entire nation adjust to an additional layer of uncertainty, those days still might be affecting him.

In his mind, though, one thing has remained the same, and it's why he can't just disappear like he sometimes wishes he could: He believes that when nothing else can, sports has the power to unite and inspire, and even if just for a while, games can ease the most relentless burdens — for the players and those who coach them.

As the bus eases over railroad tracks, narrow roads and sprawling fields all around them, Abulhassan checks Twitter again.

"Am I concerned about my kids?" he says, referring to his players but also his two sons. "Until I see the direction change, I won't worry."

He pauses, looking out the window.

"What's the worst that can . . ." he says, stopping himself as he remembers his own answer.

### **He knew how it looked**

He came in wearing shackles, and on the other side of the glass were his parents. Abulhassan saw his father's eyes well with tears. He was not used to seeing his dad cry.

Four decades earlier, Abulhassan's father had — like thousands of Middle Eastern immigrants who moved to Michigan to work in the automobile industry — left Lebanon in search of the American Dream. In August 2006, he opened the Detroit Free Press and saw his 20-year-old son's mug shot. Abulhassan's mother asked how this had happened.

Why, she asked, had he even ventured out of Dearborn? Years earlier, he had planned to attend college 100 miles away, maybe walk on to Saginaw Valley State's basketball team. But when his parents said they wouldn't support it, Abulhassan went into his bedroom and cried.

"The turning point of my life," he would say much later.

Here was another one. He attempted to explain: Abulhassan and Ali Houssaiky, a friend and former teammate at Fordson, earned extra money by traveling to

neighboring states and buying prepaid cellphones, returning to Michigan to sell them for a profit. Abulhassan would say later that he was paying for his own college expenses and needed cash for tuition and books.

On one trip they stopped at two stores in Marietta, Ohio, and after the second, they noticed the first police car. Before long, a half-dozen had arrived, and they found themselves amid a haze of barking search dogs and swarming news trucks.

Months earlier, the FBI had announced an investigation into a possible link between prepaid phones and suspected terrorism. Now officers found a dozen phones, \$11,000 in cash (money to be used to buy the phones, he said) and a security guide for a Middle Eastern airline under the passenger seat. (Houssaiky's mother worked for Royal Jordanian Airlines, Abulhassan said, and they had borrowed her car.) It didn't help matters that Abulhassan initially lied to an officer, saying his father had sent them to buy the phones.

"A perfect storm," Abulhassan said recently, but he knew even then how it looked.

Still, he tried to calm his panicked friend that first night in jail. Abulhassan was a strong student with plans for attending law school and something of an idealist: The legal system, he believed, couldn't screw up this badly; the law existed to untangle knots like this.

The next morning a judge assigned felony charges, including money laundering to support terrorism. Abulhassan thought it was a mistake, but then he saw their faces on television — "TIES TO TERRORISM"

along the banner — and by the time his parents began the five-hour drive from Dearborn, a national debate about racial profiling had erupted — and Abulhassan's will had begun eroding.

They waited in jail for a week, with inmates taunting them and guards laughing at them, before the county prosecutor's office dropped the charges. Abulhassan said there was neither an apology nor an explanation; more than a decade later, the prosecutor who oversaw the case said he doesn't regret holding the men in jail.

"Maybe because I'm hardhearted," said Jim Schneider, who was the county prosecutor for 10 years. "It's always regrettable if somebody is deprived of their liberty and charges are unfounded, but I don't know that charges were proven unfounded."

Abulhassan returned home, but he discovered that something within him had died that week in Ohio. He skipped classes and stopped studying, abandoning his dream of a law degree. He blew off friends and family functions, the only way to avoid reliving the story and renewing his despair.

"Everything kind of didn't matter anymore," he said. "What else can happen to me? I just lost faith in the system, and the system is everything."

Listless one day in December 2006, he called his former basketball coach at Fordson. He asked whether he could volunteer as an assistant coach while he decided his future.

"It was pure," he said of his reasoning. "Something that was unaffected by the ugliness of the world. My only answer was

to go to the youth and reach our kids. I wanted it to be *our* kids.”

### **‘If you respond, they win’**

Three hours before the game at Lincoln, the team bus parks. Abulhassan waits in his seat, asking each player the same question.

“What’s the rule?” he says.

They answer, and Abulhassan nods.

“What’s the rule on the road?” he says again and again, and one player cannot remember. Abulhassan issues a hint:

“Don’t go anywhere . . .”

The player remembers: “Without someone else!” Abulhassan lets him pass. A few years ago, Fordson was playing a road game, and an Arab American player wandered off alone. A group of students from the host school confronted the player, Abulhassan says, and though the incident did not escalate, Abulhassan forbids players from going anywhere without a teammate.

And so on this day, as they wait for the junior varsity game to conclude, that’s what they do: two-by-two to the restroom, to the concession stand, into the boys’ locker room for the sunset prayer.

Houd Mashrah and Hashem Aljahmi, both Fordson juniors, open their stalls, and Mashrah touches the “Islamic Stuff” folder on his smartphone. He unfurls a prayer rug, laying it on the mosaic tile, and opens an app with a compass that shows him the direction to Mecca. Then they remove their shoes, and Mashrah prays for forgiveness and health and for a good game against Lincoln.

Last year, Mashrah says, the mother of an opposing player called him a “terrorist,” and he was disheartened until the player himself approached Mashrah and apologized. Trump’s campaign was stressful to his family, Mashrah says; his mother speaks often about being deported, and the 16-year-old says he worries for his sisters.

But on the basketball court, a most American and politically neutral place, he says he focuses on the game, his team and its opponent — so much happening he can ignore most anything.

Mashrah says he feels the stares sometimes, hears the remarks about going back to where he’s from. He says he is trying to be a better listener. Trying to take the high road and understand those unlike him. But more than anything, during this period of uncertainty, he is trying to heed the words of his coach: that it is okay to feel anger and natural to experience anxiety. But it is never acceptable, he says, to allow emotion to overtake them.

“If you respond, they win,” the coach likes to say. “They’re not going to remember you as Fordson. They’re going to remember you as ‘that damn Arab.’”

Not long before the varsity game, Mashrah quietly collects his rug and reties his shoes. Teammates filter in, and players form a semicircle around Abulhassan, who speaks quickly and tells them to avoid turnovers and to distribute the ball swiftly. Then the most important thing: “Don’t let them light any fire,” Abulhassan says. “You’ve got to light the fire.”

They clap and come in close, forming a cluster around the coach. “Together on three: One, two, three — together!”

### **By any other name**

On that September morning in 2001, Abulhassan was in class when the first of the planes hit. It was a half-day at school, and after the bell, a cluster of sophomores piled into a car and flipped on the radio. The voice was panicked: New York and Washington were under attack.

That, he says, was his 9/11 moment: the image forever seared into his mind like most Americans old enough to process that day. But a short time later, Abulhassan experienced another moment that took his breath away: hearing he shared a name with the mastermind of the attack, Osama bin Laden.

“What am I going to do now?” he remembered thinking. “I’ve got the name of the worst person on earth, and I’ve got to go back to school tomorrow.”

He never did like the name. Even in the Dearborn enclave, it made him different — he said he was the only Osama in his graduating class — and strangers had trouble pronouncing it, though after 9/11 he never had that problem again.

Fordson played a road game a few days after the attack, and during pregame introductions, he heard the crowd gasp. As the months and years passed, some snickered when they heard it; others paused. He braced himself when he said it, and even now, Abulhassan lowers his voice and tenses when using his full name. It became easier to introduce himself as “Oss,” and after joining the Fordson staff full time he became merely “Coach Oss.”

In coaching basketball and football, he rediscovered purpose, connecting with a dozen or so young men who reminded him of himself. He outlined post-graduation plans and found himself encouraging them to leave the psychological safety of Dearborn — to go searching for their true selves somewhere outside the bubble.

But occasionally he retreated into his own mind, lost in it sometimes, and felt trapped. Was this all he was meant for? What if Ohio had never happened, tamping down his ambitions?

He tamed his regrets by studying coaching theory, reading books by North Carolina basketball Coach Roy Williams and former New York Giants coach Tom Coughlin. He studied how New England Patriots Coach Bill Belichick answers questions from reporters and paid attention to how the great ones deal with adversity.

No coach made sense to him like Jim Harbaugh, the former Michigan quarterback who in 2015 took over as coach in Ann Arbor. Harbaugh was skilled, insatiable, a bit of an oddball — a kindred spirit, as Abulhassan sees it.

“I felt like he was equally crazy,” he says, and he believes Harbaugh being 40 miles away is the universe telling him something.

A few years ago Abulhassan wrote a list of goals, listing them in a way only he could decipher. “Calihan Hall” meant Fordson’s basketball team reached the state quarterfinals; “POTD” was short for “Practice on Thanksgiving Day,” signaling the football team had reached the state championship. Then the most meaningful one: “WWJH,” and it was one he found

himself thinking about all the time: “Work with Jim Harbaugh.”

Last year he researched how to become a graduate assistant at Michigan, thinking about how he would introduce himself to the Wolverines coach. Then — and he hates this about himself — he felt the regret and uncertainty creeping in again. What if Harbaugh liked Abulhassan’s passion, his communication skills, his work ethic — and then Googled his name? He would see the broad-stroke rundown of those four days in 2006 — “suspected terrorism” and “prepaid phones” and “Osama” — and, no, he decided he could not apply. The 10-year-old stain on him was permanent.

So he spoke with his brother, an attorney, whispering at first about legally changing his name. Then, the idea growing louder, he mentioned it to his wife, Jouhaina. He said his faith remained strong, but he trimmed his beard close, prayed in public less often and occasionally tried, as he puts it, to “look less Arabic.”

He began verbalizing the names he was considering, often to basketball officials during pregame introductions — “Sam,” “Ozzie,” “Steve” — and listening to how each one sounded, whether he could say it with confidence, whether it fit.

“Steve” felt right, so plain and unmemorable, and so he decided that if he ever left Fordson, he would go all-in: “Steve Hassan,” a man with no past. Osama, and everything that stood for, would disappear forever.

### **The time to tell**

The sounds had begun shortly before the game started. A man in camouflage trilled

his tongue when Fordson players jogged onto the floor. A young man in the student section mimicked players when they occasionally spoke Arabic.

With Lincoln beating Fordson by double digits in the second half, turnovers collecting and the “Jayhawk” and “Baylor” and “Memphis” offenses failing, the crowd was chirping at players. Amid the jeers, a sophomore player had enough and did the one thing Abulhassan tells his players not to do: He reacted.

The young man turned toward the student section and began shouting, and teammates hurried to restrain him. An official issued a technical foul, and Abulhassan tried to figure out what had been said and by whom. (Later, he said he still wasn’t sure.)

Lincoln beat Fordson, 55-40, and the coaches and players shook hands, the stands emptied, and the teams retreated to their locker rooms.

Abulhassan was furious.

“Whatever you are, you are. Whatever they are, they are,” he told his team. “Let them say what they want to say. They earned that right.”

The sophomore, Abulhassan would say later, was smart and mature, thoughtful and filled with potential. He also had a short fuse, and his grades had plummeted to the point they threatened his sports eligibility. Abulhassan had tried to get the player’s attention, at first by shouting and then with love, but nothing seemed to work.

He wondered whether it was time to deploy his last resort.

A few years ago, a student entered Abulhassan’s office and threatened

suicide. Another time, an athlete approached him to discuss his poor grades, saying he was on the verge of giving up. In each case, Abulhassan took a breath and began a story he tells almost no one: how he wandered too far from Dearborn and found himself locked away and accused of being a terrorist — every Muslim's worst fear.

Over time, it has become Abulhassan's "scared straight" story, a tool he has repurposed for kids he otherwise cannot reach. If they think this is rock bottom, he would tell them to imagine being named Osama and spending seven days in Marietta, Ohio.

They are stunned, and they seem to discover a new perspective. If Coach Oss hadn't been broken by that, surely they wouldn't be beaten by this.

"Every time I get a kid to walk out of my office like, 'I've got a shot,' " he said, "that's why I do this."

On this Friday night, players dressed and eventually trickled out of the locker room and into the parking lot, where the team bus waited to return them to Dearborn. Abulhassan greeted parents and a few old friends, and when he eventually made his way outside, he saw the sophomore standing on the blacktop.

He walked toward him and put a hand on the kid's shoulder, wondering whether the time had come to tell him about Ohio.

### **'I'm not the same anymore'**

Back in Dearborn, Abulhassan sits on the sofa and watches his 2-year-old son draw on the folder that usually contains his legal documents. He can't bring himself to throw them away.

These papers have, for so long, defined and limited him — even as the years pass and the story dissolves. He can't help but think of a life beyond the safety, for better or worse, of Dearborn.

"It's not so much wanting to know what's out there," he says. "It's — I want to know what's out there for me."

His wife walks in, just home from a gathering with friends, and leans against a doorway. They have had this discussion many times: the regrets and the ambition, along with Abulhassan's strengthening desire to shed his own skin.

"I don't see you leaving here," Jouhaina says. "This was your dream: to coach and have influence and be a role model for kids and change who you can."

It's what he needed a decade ago. He's uncertain this is what he needs now.

Sometimes the dream changes.

"A lot of what you're talking about is where I'm telling you I'm not the same anymore," he says.

She asks about the kids at Fordson: Imagine if young Osama had had a Coach Oss so many years ago — a man who had traveled the darkest of paths but knew the way back.

"I mean, you're great at what you do," she says. "You really are, you know?"

He stares ahead, and she walks toward the kitchen.

He is silent for a long time, and during moments such as this, his mind races.

Abulhassan, with a young family and a mortgage, wonders whether he owes it to himself to be selfish. He also wonders whether staying at Fordson, during the most uncertain time for Muslims in a

generation, is his calling — even if he's no longer sure he wants it to be.

He wonders whether a man with his heritage, with this name, at this moment in time can make it in America without giving up a major part of himself: his dreams or his identity.

Abulhassan leans down finally, taking the folder from his son and sliding into it a stack of documents, an important chapter of who he was and who he's still waiting to become. He glances at a page and sees the name at the top.

"It still is mine," he says. "I've carried it through the mud and dragged it out. I guess I can say I've built it up. The people I care about, they know who I am, by name. You can't say Steve Hassan is the same as Osama."