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At Home, Knicks Go From Bad to Worse

By **HOWARD BECK**

The staff directory for the [Knicks](#) lists six assistant coaches, two athletic trainers, two doctors and one person with the oddly vague title of team assistant.

There may not be enough office space at 2 Penn Plaza to accommodate a squad of psychologists, sociologists and relationship specialists, but the Knicks might consider adding some cubicles and couches if they hope to save their season.

The Knicks are bad, which is not news. But they are having a new sort of identity crisis that screams for professional help. In games played outside New York, the Knicks are proudly mediocre, with a 5-6 record. But they have lost 8 of their first 10 games at Madison Square Garden, which has gone from being the World's Most Famous Arena to the World's Crankiest Home Court.

Fans boo, a lot. They chant for various folks to be fired. They taunt their star players.

Sometimes it all starts before the game is six minutes old.

“It’s New York,” said the star guard [Stephon Marbury](#), a native of Coney Island. “They’re always going to boo us if we’re not playing well, period.”

Marbury says this with a shrug, echoing the sentiments of his teammates. But the Knicks are

better at shrugging than they are at ignoring. While the Knicks seem to play freely on the road, their home record suggests they are freaked out, rattled, tense and tentative.

And if the record did not suggest all of that, Coach [Isiah Thomas](#) has, and often. The Knicks were 0-2 at home when Thomas first complained about the boos, saying, “Fans play a big role in winning and losing in the arena.” By the time they reached 1-7, Thomas was convinced of the cause, saying, “I think it’s totally mental.”

Fans might dismiss Thomas’s psychoanalytical skills as quickly as they dismiss his coaching and his roster management. But he might have a point.

“It’s all in the mind; of course it is,” said Dr. Paul Baard, a sports psychologist at Fordham who has studied anxiety and player performance. “You can wake these guys in the middle of the night and they can hit a 3-pointer. But not when they think about it.”

And that, it would seem, is the problem for the Knicks. Sometimes all it takes is a first-quarter turnover for fans to boo Marbury, or a missed free throw to boo Eddy Curry. If players feel a sense of dread, anticipating the inevitable taunts, then their concentration is blown.

Baard, who has worked with a number of players and coaches, has seen it before. Among those he has advised are the former major leaguers Frank Tanana and Brett Butler and the George Mason basketball coach, Jim Larranaga.

“Anxiety does funny things to people, and it’s very, very contagious,” Baard said. He advised that Thomas’s focus “needs to be on containing anxiety” and noted: “That’s easier said than done. But it’s always what we’re dealing with.”

Rather than feeding the players’ anxiety by pointing out the fans’ behavior, Thomas should be

telling his players to pay them no mind. Thomas, in fact, took that tack this week.

“Don’t start thinking you’re worthless because someone says you’re worthless,” Baard said.

“And don’t blame the fans. Don’t let them do that. You are responsible for how you are and how you act.”

Contrary to Thomas’s assertions, the Knicks’ players generally say that the boos have little or no impact.

“I think if people are doing that, we’ve got bigger problems,” forward David Lee said. “I think all of us have been playing basketball long enough that we should be able to get through it.”

In the meantime, the Knicks have apparently lost the vaunted home-court advantage that teams so often cling to like a security blanket. Although not easily defined, the home advantage “is there, it’s real, it’s a phenomenon that’s been studied for 30 years,” said D. Randall Smith, a sociology professor at Rutgers who has authored some of those studies.

According to the “Encyclopedia of World Sport,” to which Smith contributes, pro basketball teams generally win 64 to 65 percent of their home games.

There are exceptions, though they are rare. Only four N.B.A. teams since 1991 have finished with a better record on the road than at home. The [Houston Rockets](#) were the last, going 15-26 at home and 19-22 on the road last season.

The worst home record since the N.B.A. adopted the 82-game schedule was posted by the 1993-94 [Dallas Mavericks](#), who went 6-35. At their present rate, the Knicks would finish 8-33 at home.

But before Garden officials issue a no-booing edict, or begin revoking tickets from anyone chanting, “Fire Thomas,” Smith has some words of caution for everyone involved.

“Maybe this is a little bit of a statistical blip,” he said. “It’s still a little early for this.”

In other words, 10 games is too small a sample on which to base anything, including the idea that the Knicks are too frazzled to win at home.

“Home-advantage stuff sort of gets blown out of proportion a little bit, in terms of its effect on the outcome of the game,” Smith said. “Good teams are going to be good no matter where they are playing, bad teams are going to be bad teams no matter where they are playing, and mediocre teams are going to be mediocre teams no matter where they are playing.” He added, “This kind of discussion feeds the fans’ belief that they influence the outcome of the game,” which is not necessarily the case.

After 21 games, the Knicks (7-14) are on the wrong side of mediocre. Yet their road record — which includes victories at Denver, Cleveland and Miami — ranks among the top 10 in the league, and seems to suggest they are not horrible.

But try telling that to the irritable folks in the Garden seats. They are booing for a reason, and they are not about to stop just because Thomas thinks it is affecting the Knicks’ mojo.

“If they want less boos, they should play harder,” said Hughie Choe, a 23-year-old from Manhattan who attended Monday’s victory against Memphis. “They knew what they were getting into when they came to play here.”

So maybe what is needed is not a psychologist at all, but a relationship counselor. After all, the

boos are merely the sign of a fractured relationship between team and fan.

“The Knicks aren’t getting any love from their fans, and that is what happens when a relationship falters,” April Masini, a self-styled relationship expert, said in an e-mail message.

“When the players feel the love, they play better. When the fans feel the love from the team, they love harder and root louder.”

Masini, the author of four books and the AskApril.com Web site, said the dynamic was akin to a quarreling couple.

“To the fans, their feeling is that the Knicks cheated on them, the same way a boyfriend might betray a girlfriend. Now the fans aren’t so eager to get back together without some serious apologizing by the Knicks. And jewelry never hurts.”

Michael S. Schmidt contributed reporting.

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