

Looking for his sweet spot

Hoops-loving Obama needs a place to play

BY RICHARD SISK

DAILY NEWS WASHINGTON BUREAU

WASHINGTON — He can trash-talk and throw an elbow if need be, but Hillary Clinton and John McCain knew that about President-elect Barack Obama's style of play.

He also has some game to back it up, or so he says. "I could get to the rim on anybody," Obama said with a laugh of his hoops skills in an HBO interview last spring.

The big deal now is to find a place for the left-handed, long-range jump shooter formerly known as "Barry O'Bomber" to indulge his basketball jones when he moves into the White House.

Next to the selection of the new First Puppy, choice of a new home court for the dribbler-in-chief has generated the most "no comments" from Obama aides.

Obama has mused about installing a full-sized basketball court at the White House — right after he gets rid of the bowling lanes.

"I have sworn that we're taking out the bowling alley in the White House and we're putting in a basketball court," Obama said while

campaigning last month in basketball-mad Indiana.

That, of course, was a joking reference to his disastrous attempt at bowling during the Pennsylvania primary last April. He rolled a 37, with numerous gutter balls, while trying to boost his blue-collar cred in Altoona, Pa.

If he doesn't build his own court, Obama could play at several of the nearby military bases around the capital.

And there's buzz that Obama has his eye on the glass-enclosed court less than a mile from the White House at the upscale Sports Club/LA gym, where Secretary of State Rice works out.

There's also the excellent facility at the National Capital YMCA just north of the White House.

Obama made a habit of playing on election days during the primaries. One of the few times he didn't play, he lost New Hampshire to Sen. Hillary Clinton.

Sen. Bob Casey (D-Pa.) and state Treasurer Alexi Giannoulias (D-Ill.) were among the select few who played full-court in Chicago with Obama on Nov. 4, just hours before he became President-elect. They both described Obama as highly competitive and focused on the court, despite the off-court pressure.

"He does have game and he takes a leadership role," Casey said. "He takes it seriously and he likes to handle the ball and, sure, he likes to shoot."

"It was a momentous day," Casey, who played high school ball at Scranton Prep, said of the election, "but he was able to concentrate. And yes, he does trash-talk"

— but only in retaliation, Casey said. "If somebody starts in on him, he'll come back."

Giannoulias, who played for Boston University and for the Panionios squad of Athens in the European pro leagues, said Obama "knows how to play. He's very unselfish and in great shape."

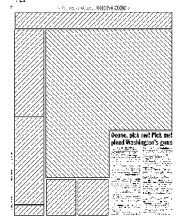
During the campaign, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R-Calif.) kidded Obama about his "scrawny little arms," but Giannoulias said "he's stronger than you think. He'll throw an elbow if he has to, and he normally finds a

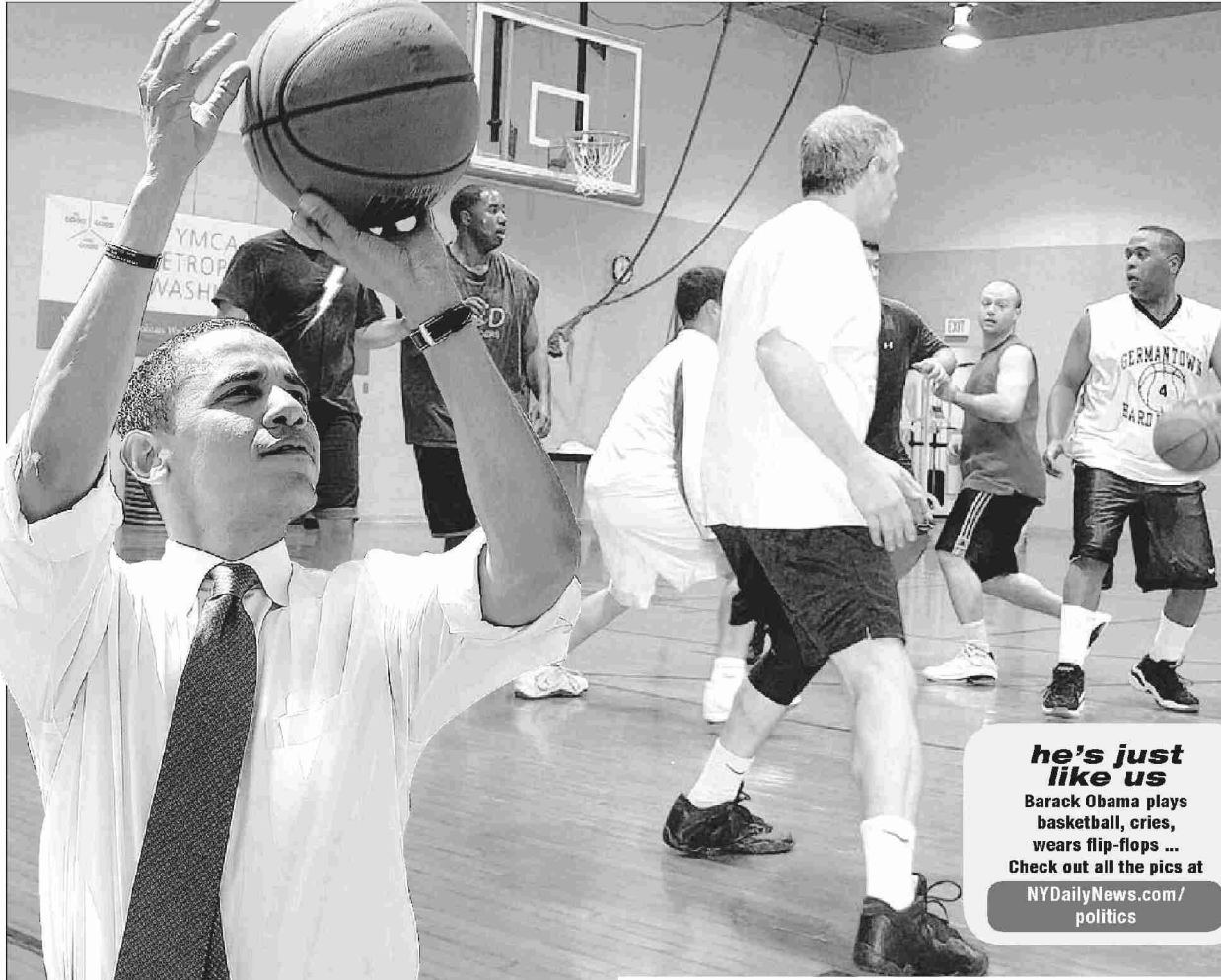
way to win. He plays tough without being dirty."

In his autobiographical book "Dreams from My Father," Obama wrote in near-mystical terms of what the game has meant to him.

There were times on the court when "you might make a move or a pass that surprised even you, so that even the guy guarding you had to smile, as if to say, 'Damn.'"

Obama sensed immediately that this macho take on the game might be a bit over the top. His next sentence was: "My wife will be rolling her eyes right about now." *rsisk@nydailynews.com*





he's just like us

Barack Obama plays basketball, cries, wears flip-flops ...
Check out all the pics at

NYDailyNews.com/politics

Barack Obama may take his game to the National Capital YMCA (above) where pick-up games are easy to find. Photos by Emmanuel Dunand/AFP/Getty Images (L) and Elisa Miller