

GAMES GRANDPA USED TO PLAY

By Phil Starr

DEDICATION

To my wife, Rhea, whose love and support made me a better person and helped me to write this essay.

INTRODUCTION

I had been thinking of writing this essay about games that I played in Brooklyn as a youth on and off for several years. In the spring of 1999, there was a news story in the New York Times about a rubber ball which in my youth was used in games like punch ball. The story went on to say that the ball was being made again and that a teacher in a Manhattan public school was using the *game Hit the Penny* to teach children how to be creative in their play in a non-high tech manner.

Games Grandpa Used to Play is the name of this essay for two reasons. First, this essay is not a collection of all the street games, just the ones I remember playing in my youth. Secondly, while vacationing in Alaska, we bought a book called When Grandpa and Grandma Visited Alaska which gave my wife the idea to change the name of my essay to its current title.

To place these games in a historical context, my parents were deaf-mutes and were married in 1928. My brother Irving was born in 1929; I was born in 1935 and my sister Susan was born in 1942. The spacing between the three children was purposeful so that Irving would be my parents "ears" when I was young and I would do the same for my sister.

My parents did not have much money. My Dad worked for the WPA (Works Progress Administration) as a laborer building the Belt Parkway from the time I was born until 1940 when he became a presser in the garment industry where he worked until he retired a few years before his death. Because geographical mobility was limited due to the depression and World War II, our two blocks on Miller Avenue from Pitkin Street to Sutter Avenue was a small community within the East New York section of Brooklyn.

I lived at 367 Miller Avenue, one of five apartment buildings on Miller Avenue between Belmont Avenue and Pitkin Street. Each building had 20 units. Across the street there were 14 attached three family homes. All together, 142 families lived on my street. With about four people to a family, about 568 people lived on my street. Because of the depression and World War II, very few people owned cars in my neighborhood. More importantly, there was very little migration into or out of the neighborhood until after the Korean War in 1953, making it a tight-knit community.

As the title suggests, boys and girls played separately. Furthermore, most boys and girls did not become interested in the opposite sex until 15 years of age or later, a factor that helped each person develop without the pressure of dating.

In hindsight, my childhood neighborhood was extremely racist and sexist. For white boys, a sense of community was created. We were quite proud to be from the East New York section of Brooklyn where I attended Public School 173, 158, Jr. High School 149 and Thomas Jefferson High School.

It was my “love” for punch ball and two great physical education teachers, Mr. Adelson and Mr. Silverstein and a social studies teacher named Julius Cooper, who saw something promising in me that took me to college and then on to a career in social work, a wonderful marriage and families of three adult children of whom my wife and I are proud. Those three men guided me to a saner path than several of my classmates.

Game # 1 **Punch Ball**

In my neighborhood, punch ball was the “premier” game. Punch ball got its name from a person punching a rubber ball with a closed fist. It is a street variation of baseball in which each child could make believe he was Jackie Robinson, Ted Williams, Joe DiMaggio, or Pee Wee Reese. Like baseball, the goal was to secure the most runs in nine innings.

As a child growing up during the depression and W.W.II, I could not afford to own a rubber ball. We got the ball in one of two ways; first, a group of us would chip in and purchase what became a community ball; second, we would obtain a tennis ball and rub it against a brick wall until all the fuzz was removed and the rubber ball became apparent.

Generally, there were two types of players in punch ball. Some could hit home runs by punching the ball a great distance or so hard that it was difficult to field. Others, who slapped the ball using an open hand, sliced or curved the ball so it was difficult to field. I was the latter type of player.

Most of the time six or eight of us would gather after school or on a Saturday morning and play until mealtime. I was a rabid player who would slide into second base (remember that the game was played on asphalt) even when the rare car was approaching. I had the teenagers sense of immortality that nothing could hurt me. Because I was a good player, I was usually the captain of one team. I purposely selected players who tried their best regardless of their talent; instead of talented players who only played half-heartedly.

Third base was located in front of an apartment building. On the top floor of the apartment building, there was an elderly woman who was convinced that our consistent playing of punch ball was a factor in her daughter’s miscarriage .She

would throw at least a milk carton filled with water at the players, especially the third baseman. Thus, he had to watch for the elderly woman's missile while playing the game.

Sometimes, punch ball became the means to express rivalry between streets. My best memory of this occurred in 1943 when I was eight years old. My 13-year-old brother Irving and his buddies represented Miller Avenue in a punch ball against a team from Bradford St. Before the game began, ten dollars was wagered on the game. In 1943, it cost a nickel to ride a bus or subway in New York City (versus \$2.00 in 2009) so \$10.00 was a lot of money. A huge crowd gathered to cheer on the players from the respective teams. After the game, the winners silently gloated and the losers vowed they would win a rematch.

Materials Needed: A rubber ball

Number of Players: Six or more players divided into two teams of equal number.

Playing Area: The playing area for punch ball was Belmont Avenue between Miller Avenue and Bradford St. You played in the street with one sewer cover as a home plate and the next one was second base. The lack or the infrequent appearance of cars in my youth made it possible to play directly on the street.

Game # 2 **Stickball**

The goal of stickball is the same as for punch ball, to score the most runs in the seven or nine innings game. I did not play this game in my youth. However, it was quite popular in other parts of Brooklyn and New York City. It competed with punch ball as the premier sport. Its continuing popularity is due in part to the fact that Willie Mays, the great baseball player, excelled in this game as a youth. Moreover, there is an annual stickball tournament played in Manhattan.

Materials Needed: A stick like a broom handle to use as a bat and a rubber ball.

Playing Area: The same street dimensions as for punch ball.

Game # 3 **Stoop Ball**

Materials Needed: A rubber ball and a stoop (three front steps of a house or a store).

Number of players: Two teams consisting of one or two players.

Play Area: The size of the play area was from one sidewalk across the street to the other sidewalk.

Goal: Like baseball, the goal was to score the most runs in seven or nine innings depending upon what you selected at the onset. The batter threw the rubber ball at the stoop and tried to have it land in the street or on the sidewalk across the street without being caught on a fly. The street was divided into a single, double and triple areas; the sidewalk across the street was a home run if the ball landed without being caught on a fly.

Strategy: Depending upon where the fielder was standing on the playing area, the hitter would go for just a single or try to hit the stoop so hard that the fielder could not catch the ball.

Game # 4 Milk Crate Baseball

Materials Needed: A rubber ball and a milk crate

Number of Players: Two players

Playing Area: A wall where a milk crate could rest standing up. A player would stand about five yards from the milk crate and throw the rubber ball trying to get the ball to land in the favorable pockets. Each pocket represented an out or hit with the center pocket was a homerun. If the ball did not land in the crate, it was considered a strike.

Goal: Like baseball, the goal was to score the most runs. Milk Crate Baseball could be played in seven or nine innings.

Observation: This game required throwing the ball at the right speed or strength so that it would not bounce off the crate. It was not necessary to throw the ball into the milk crate on a fly.

Game # 5 Kick the Can

Materials Needed: an empty can with no top and no jagged edges

Number of players: eight

Play Area: The four corners of the intersection between Miller Avenue and Belmont St. One corner was home plate and each other corner was first base, second base and third base. The defensive team would have a player at each base and a fourth player who would move around in the outfield. The offensive team would kick the can and the rest of the game is like punch ball or stickball. A batter would get a home run if he were able to kick the can into the yard of the corner house.

Goal: Like baseball, the goal was to score the most runs. Kick the Can could be played in seven or nine innings.

Strategy: The same strategy as in Stoop Ball.

Observation: We played Kick the Can when we did not have a rubber ball or wanted a break from playing punch ball. As mentioned before, Kick the Can could only be played in the street because there were so few cars in my youth.

Game # 6 **Box Baseball**

Materials Needed: A rubber ball and three boxes

Number of players: Two

Playing Area: A sidewalk with three boxes in a row. Each player protected the box closest to him while the box in the middle was neutral ground.

Goal: The goal was to score the most runs in seven or nine innings. Each player was given three tries to hit the ball that his opponent pitched him. The player would try to hit the ball into the opponent's box so that the opponent would not be able to return it. If this happens, the player would score a run. If he was unable to do this, he was out. Three outs made an inning.

Strategy: A player was prohibited from throwing the rubber ball hard into the opponent's box. Instead, the pitcher was able to develop a way of throwing the ball so that it curved after it bounced in the opponent's box making it difficult to hit it. If he was unable to return the curve, an out was recorded.

Observation: This game was popular when there were not enough players to play punch ball. It required skill by the pitcher to throw pitches that would curve when it bounced and skill by the hitter to know which direction the curve would go so that it could be returned.

General Observation

Games # 1-6 are street variations of baseball reflecting the importance of baseball in my youth. Growing up in Brooklyn, we were Dodger fans and hated the Giants and the Yankees. For the Dodger fans, the collective cry each year was "Wait until next year". Baseball represented community identity and a sense of communion among fellow fans. The Brooklyn Dodgers won their only world series against their greatest rival, the New York Yankees, in 1955. Following the 1957 season, the Dodgers moved from Brooklyn to Los Angeles. For many people like me, the move seemed like betrayal of the fans loyalty to the Dodgers through the best and worse of times. Consequently, my interest in baseball as a

loyal fan of any team ended as the era of baseball was no longer primarily a sport but entered the era of being a big business.

Today, I tend to root for the underdog and enjoy watching the Chicago Cubs play because of their incredible fan loyalty and beautiful ballpark.

Game # 7 **Box Ball- Against the Wall**

Materials Needed: A rubber ball

Number of players: Two

Playing Area: A sidewalk with two boxes and a wall. Each player defended his box and tried to hit the ball off the wall in the other player's box so that it could not be returned. If he succeeded, the player scored a point.

Goal: The player won when he scored ten points first.

Strategy: A player had to protect his box whose length ran from the wall to the curb. Therefore, it was possible for player A to hit the ball softly so that the player B would have to rush the wall in order to return it. At the right moment, player A would hit the ball so hard that player B would be unable to return it resulting in a point being earned by Player A.

Observation: This street game was played when there were not enough players to play punch ball.

Game # 8 Hit the Penny

Materials Needed: A penny (any size coin can be substituted) and a rubber ball

Number of players: Two or more

Playing Area: Find a line on the sidewalk and place a penny on it and stand equidistant from the penny, about two yards. In Brooklyn, as a child, we played this game on the sidewalk. However, you can create your own play area in a gym, basement of a house.

Goal: To hit the penny by throwing the ball at it. The person who hits the penny ten times first was the winner.

Strategy: The primary objective was to avoid hitting the penny so hard that it would move closer to your opponent making it easier for that person to hit the penny the next time and harder for you when it is your turn.

Observations: My wife and I were traveling west to Akron, Ohio on the PA Turnpike when it came to a complete standstill for an hour. Later, we learned there was a nasty accident and some people had to be flown to a hospital. While waiting for the traffic to move again, I saw a young lad about ten years of age with a beach ball. I asked him if he liked to learn a street game from my youth. He said yes and we went to the shoulder area of the turnpike and played **Hit the Penny**. It helped both of us to pass the time. He was a “happy camper” and I found an outlet to handle my impatience.

For smaller children: For children under the age of five years of age, you may want to use a larger coin such as a quarter and a larger ball so that it will be less difficult for the child to hit the coin.

Game # 9 **Pitch the Penny**

Materials Needed: A penny and a wall

Number of players: Two or more players.

Playing Area: In my youth, we played this game against a brick wall and the players stood near the end of the sidewalk and “pitched” or threw the penny against the wall.

Goal: To throw the coin closest to the wall. The person who gets closest to the wall ten times first wins.

Strategy: To throw (pitch) the coin so that it will bounce close to the wall. It is not advisable to throw the coin directly at the wall as it will bounce off and away from the wall.

Observations: When we have out of town guests, one of the activities we do with them is to go shopping at the outlet malls. (Unfortunately, Lancaster has too many of them as valuable farm land is being paved over.)

I’m not a good shopper. I can do this for about 30 minutes before my patience begins to deteriorate. To prevent myself from becoming a pest to my wife and guests, I stop shopping and find an area with little foot traffic. I play “Pitch the Penny” by myself by becoming both players and using two coins to play the game.

Another observation relates to when one of my children’s family visits us. All of us whether it is six or seven people will go out for supper. Sometimes, we have to wait until a table is ready for us. To keep the grandchildren occupied and out of trouble, our grandchildren and I play **Pitch the Penny**.

Game # 10 **Over the Wire**

Materials Needed: A rubber ball and a wire

Number of players: Two or more players divided into teams.

Playing Area: The dimensions of the playing area were the same as in punch ball. A wire usually electric or telephone hung across the street. In my youth, it was easy to play this game on the street as there were so few cars in those days. With so many cars today, you could string a cord or wire in a gym or on grassy area and play this game.

Goal: To throw the ball over the wire so that the opponent could not catch the ball on a fly (without bouncing). You scored a point each time the ball landed without being caught on a fly. The team that scored ten points first won.

Strategy: to throw the ball so far or so short that your opponent would start moving back or come in before each throw. At the right moment, you would just lob the ball over the wire or throw it extremely far over the wire making it difficult for your opponent to catch it.

Observation: The reason **Over the Wire** was popular in my neighborhood it only required two players and a ball to play. Punch ball required a minimum of six players and a ball to play.

Game # 11 **Johnny on the Pony**

Materials Needed: a wall.

Number of players: Four players on each team

Playing Area: A wall on which the first player stands against the wall. The next player bends over and leans against the first; this continues until three players are bent over like a human chain.

Goal: With team A bent over like a human chain, the goal for team B is to jump on team A and have it collapse under the weight of Team B. The team that could do this first ten times is the winner.

Strategy: From a defensive posture, you want the heaviest two players in the middle of the chain so they can withstand the weight of the offensive team. From an offensive posture, you want your heaviest players to jump first and second so that the accumulative weight would collapse the defensive team.

Observation: I was a good player in Johnny on the Pony because I was overweight. At the age of 15, I weighed 175 pounds. Despite the fact that I once fainted while playing basketball in J.H.S., I did nothing about losing weight from

then until 1994. It took a heart attack and bypass surgery, finally to get me lose weight and adopt a healthier lifestyle.

Game # 12 **Hit the Curb**

Materials Needed: A rubber ball

Number of players: two

Playing Area: Player A would stand on one sidewalk and try to hit the curb on the other sidewalk. Player B would do likewise.

Goal: The player who hits the curb across from him on a fly ten times first won the game.

Observation: **Hit the Curb** was a difficult game to play in the sense since it required good hand-eye coordination. There was great skill in hitting the curb across the street on a fly. Size or weight was not a factor in playing this game.

Game # 13 **Dodge Ball**

Materials Needed: A ball the size of a volleyball or basketball

Number of players: six or eight players

Playing Area: We played this game in Junior High School in the play yard or in the gym at high school. A player was selected to be the thrower for a particular game and this designation would rotate until all the players had a chance to be the thrower.

Goal: The goal was to avoid being hit by the thrown ball because, if you were hit, you would be eliminated from the game. The aim was to be the last one who has not been hit and, therefore, the winner.

Strategy: To observe the thrower closely, especially his body language, to get an idea of where he was most likely to throw the ball.

Observation: I remembered the game of **Dodge ball** while reading the biography of Jackie Robinson by Arnold Rampersad. On page 27, it is mentioned that Jackie Robinson excelled at this game in his youth that surely was a precursors to his great talents as an athlete. Moreover, it is a reminder that these games were played by children of all races in large or small cities in the western or eastern parts of our country.

In conclusion, this essay is a tribute to the creativity of my peers when we were young and to the three teachers at Jr. H.S. 149 who had a significant impact on me.