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The Street Was Our Playground

Frank Palladino

I. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this book is not only to teach children of today some of the many street games that were enjoyed and played decades ago before the age of the computer, cell phones, and other wonderful technological enhancements that have become popular in our culture today, but to give those of you who played these games a chance to reminisce about a special time in your lives.

The year 1941 was an exciting and historical time in the lives of kids who were alive then. The games played back then were some of the same as thousands of other kids were playing throughout the United States.

The games, I'll explain, were but a few of the many passed on to us from the guys who made up The Great Generation. Their parents and grandparents came to America from many different countries as well as those who were born here. The street games helped us to have a common denominator to bond us. From the twenties to the early fifties every boy learned to hit, punch, slap, and throw a ball. They also mastered the art of dodging cars, being tagged, and to run from dawn to dusk. I firmly believe if they had light to play under, they probably would have played ball all night.

Their playing fields were the sidewalks, street corners, stoops and the walls of apartments and commercial buildings. But always the street was their main field. Some streets were big enough to have four cars abreast of each other. Most others could only have a car parked on either side with a center lane for travel.

The equipment they used were tennis balls, spaldeens, broomsticks, mop handles, a piece of chalk, baseball cards, comic books, marbles, bottle caps filled with road tar, a football (it always had to be filled with air), a coverless baseball, a blend of pieces for roller skates(unless a relative gave you a pair of

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Chicagos) a roll of black tape, taped together hockey sticks, two-by-fours, chicken wire, shovels and rakes, or anything else they could use to play their games.

They grew up on the street and on empty lots. They learned to improvise, compromise, to handle defeat and to relish success. They developed rules and punishment and learned to treasure their possessions. They were passionate about life and friendships and grateful for opportunities. This is the legacy left to them by the big guys who were off to war.

I encourage all of you younger people to try these games as an alternative to our modern conveniences. Compare the excitement, competition and laughter to the sit at home requirements of our modern marvels. Feel the satisfaction of winning with physical and mental abilities. Learn the skills and values taught when you use the games of the street.

To forget these games and the lessons learned would be a tragedy. These experiences helped to form lives and to keep the values learned. As I stated earlier, the games I am presenting were some of the most popular of the many available to them. Some rules and procedures might be different from other neighborhood, but the names are pretty much the same.

To those of you who played in the streets, I hope you will enjoy the many memories that will be rekindled about the games you played on the street that was your playground.

II. TWO CAR AND FOUR CAR STREETS AND SEWERS

A. A STICK, A BALL, AND A METAL HANGER

It was 1942 and there was a World War going on, but as a nine year old boy, the only thing on my mind was playing ball. The boys in my neighborhood would be in the streets looking to play stick ball. The eight to twelve year olds played in the street. If you were thirteen or older you played in the school yards or the parks or maybe on a special field like an empty lot.

All we needed was a stick (bat), a ball, (tennis or spaldeen) and a metal hanger. Yes, a metal hanger!

Because of the war, the country needed all the rubber for tires. The only available tennis balls were those we already had or those we could find. Once you split or lost a ball on a roof top, in someone's yard or through a window, you had to go fishing for them. That's where the hanger came in.

Every street had sewers at the corners to catch the rainwater. These sewers had heavy metal covers with oval shaped holes in them, plus a wide opening along the side of the curb. There was a stickball game, or a variety of games played with a ball, and in every neighborhood, there was always a ball or two rolling into the sewers. Many times there were cars parked over the sewer cover so the players couldn't retrieve the balls. Once the ball was in the sewer it was finders' keepers, losers' weepers.

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BALLS:

Each morning two or three of us would go searching and fishing for balls. To make a hanger into along fishing pole, unbend it and then straighten it out. Next, form one end into a circle, big enough to hold a ball on it, and then bend the circled end at a right hand angle.

Using the hanger wasn't as easy as it may seem. You can't fit your hand through the sewer holes except for the opening by the curb. Since the balls were at least four feet below the cover, you had to lie on your side and loop your arm and hanger around the opening by the curb. When the hanger was under the ball it was raised up until it was under one of the openings. Your partner then placed two fingers, from each side of the hole, under the ball and then pushed it through the opening. The easiest effort was after a rainstorm as the floating balls would be in reach of the hanger, but you still had to push them through the holes.

BATS:

While some were fishing for balls, others were looking for a bat. The major source was a straw broom usually found in the garbage. To make a bat only required the removal of a small nail holding the wire coiled around the straw. Once the nail was removed, the wire would unwind and the straw would fall off. This made a perfect bat five feet long by two inches round.

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FIELD:

Now we had a bat and a ball to play with. Our field was the street, usually with a car or two parked on either side. The foul poles were the homes on either side of the street, with the car fenders and manhole covers used as bases. If a ball was hit into a fenced yard or onto a fire escape or rooftop the batter was out and he had to go and get the ball. We quickly learned to hit the ball straight down the middle of the street. Sewers and light poles were the road markers for doubles, triples, and home runs. If the balls were caught on the fly the batter was out. All ground balls had to get past the pitcher to be a single.

B. TWO A CAT

TEAMS:

Most of the time we had enough boys to make teams of four to six players each. If there were only five or six boys we would play Two a Cat, with the same rules applied as if we were playing with a full team. Two boys would bat until they made two outs. We would then rotate with two others coming in from the field. For team play, we had to choose up sides, a most demonstrative exercise. The most popular method was for two boys to choose either odds or evens and then proceed to thrust out either one or two fingers after saying "One, two, three, shoot." Their extended fingers always added up to either an even or odd number so which ever boy called the right combination three times got the first pick. They then rotated until every boy was picked.

A second method was called One Potato. All the boys would line up in a circle with their hands forming a fist in front of them.

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The first boy would bring up his fist to his lips and say the following as he sequentially brought his fist to his lips and then hit each other boy's fist with his. "One potato, two potato, three potato, four, five potato, six potato, seven potato more. My mother said to pick this here one." Whomever's fist was hit last became a team captain and he got the first pick. This ritual was repeated for the second captain.

The final method was for one boy to hold the top of the bat with two fingers and twirl it around his head three times. He then held it up for a second boy to try and kick it out of his hand with one kick. If he held on to the bat, he got first pick. Now we finally got to play stick ball.

So there it is; a simple game providing hours of fun, competition, decision making and excitement with just a stick, a ball and a metal hanger.

C. PUNCH BALL

Every now and then, when we couldn't find a bat, we played punch ball. The game and rules were the same as stickball, except we hit the ball with our fist. The ball was not always pitched in by the opposing team. We either hit it on a bounce or threw it up in the air and punched it before it hit the ground. As no one could hit the ball as far as hitting it with a bat, we could play on a smaller area with fewer players. Once again, Two a Cat was always a possibility.

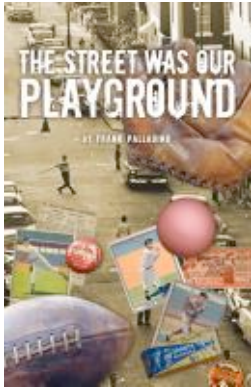
D. ROLLER HOCKEY

The ultimate challenge was to find a street wide enough, with as little traffic as possible, and practically no parked cars. This was almost an impossible task. So there we were at least six to ten boys on roller skates, fighting for the puck while dodging cars and hoping our skates wouldn't fall off. Black tape was not only the puck, but the final strap to hold on our skates. Sometimes we were lucky to have someone act as a lookout for cars.

When it was a scheduled game between neighborhoods, who ever lived closer to the field was the home team. They provided their own handmade nets. The main ingredients were two-by-fours and chicken wire. Once in a while the nets were not available and we drew chalk lines to designate the scoring areas. This procedure often led to many disagreements.

In addition to being the puck and skate strap, the rolls of black tape repaired our broken sticks, ripped pants and it replaced band aids.

Checking someone into a parked car was an automatic penalty. Even though hockey is noted for many fights, there were relatively few in neighborhood play.



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