

# Slow roller

A film about stickball brings memories back from the street

I bounced in my seat watching "When Broomsticks Were King: A Tribute to Stickball and the Heroes Who Played," a movie by Brooklyn filmmaker Jason Cusato that played last week at the Independent Features Film Festival.

The 27-minute short, shot several years ago, is currently making the rounds of the festivals winning prizes and standing O's for its nostalgic gaze back at this vanished king of New York City street games. It hit me like a three-sewer shot because most of what I know about life I learned from stickball.

Stickball is — or, sadly, was — a stripped-bare version of baseball played in the gutters of New York City using your mudda's wooden mop handle as a bat and a small pink ball called a "spaldeen," a Brooklynese bastardization of Spalding, the company that made the magical little orb.

Back in the 1960s, I spent almost every single day of spring, summer and fall playing stickball on 11th and 12th Sts. in what Realtors today call Southern Park Slope. You showed up with your stick and met your friends on Winslow's stoop, where the two best players chose up sides.

Some neighborhoods played pitching-in, but we played fungo style, meaning you stood at a manhole cover that served as home plate and tossed the ball up and hit it and ran the bases.

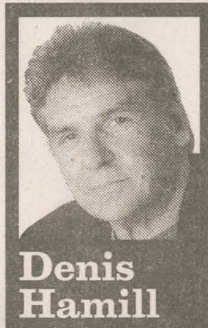
A two-sewer shot was considered a slug. If you hit "three sewers," you were up there with Maris, Mantle and Mays.

The games were loud, argumentative and fiercely competitive, and clutch hits or heroic plays became the stuff of local legend. The girls used to sit on stoops with a tinny transistor radio listening to Cousin Brucie spin the top 10 on "W-A-Beatles-C," watching and whispering color commentary on the sweaty guys who were mostly trim and ripped from tireless daily play. The best stickball hitters usually scored with the chicks.

Stickball taught us team play, competition, tenacity, hustle, discourse, discipline, performance under pressure and how to navigate the endless roller-coaster ride between triumph and defeat. Like life. No classroom could ever teach you the second set of street-smart-instincts that came from fearlessly shagging flies in honking bus and truck traffic when someone launched a fly into the middle of Seventh Ave.

Guys who played stickball as kids still know a 10th of a second before the rest of the world when the red light is gonna turn green.

That game, that Brooklyn, that city and that street education that came from stickball played for keeps from dawn to dusk has all but vanished. My theory is that stickball was swallowed whole by Pac-Man in the late 1970s; as computer games rose, street games declined. And stickball's demise has made for fatter, duller, dumber, less motivated generations of indoor kids. Sorry, video games don't prepare kids for

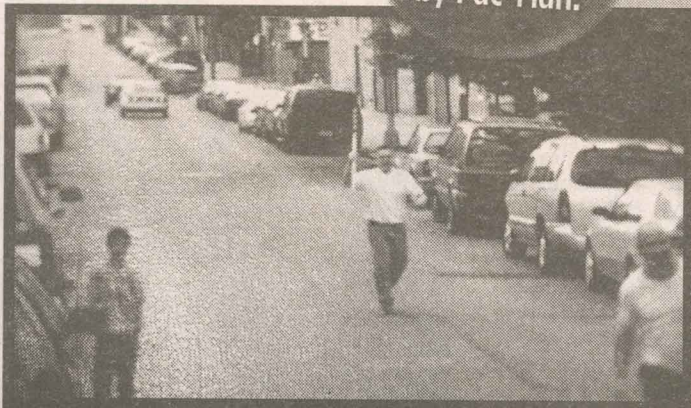


Denis Hamill

life. Toru Iwatani, the man who created Pac-Man, has probably done more to promote childhood obesity than the Big Mac.

So it was pure nostalgic pleasure to watch "Broomsticks." This is not a documentary; anyone looking for a history of the greatest street game ever played should look elsewhere. Instead, this little film is a fictional three-sewer tribute to all middle-aged guys who ever worshiped at the altar of the manhole cover. Starting

Cusato's father, uncles and cousins with pitch-perfect Brooklyn accents and nicknames like "Boom Boom" Nunzio, Pauly (The Legend) Ganuch, "The Natural" and "The Spanish Guy," "Broomsticks" features sepia-toned re-creations of old stickball games juxtaposed



An old-time game is the subject of a newer movie, "When Broomsticks Were King," which has Brooklyn as its base.

with talking gray heads reminiscing about the days of old when stickball was gold.

"I'm 32, and my generation was probably the last one to play a little stickball," says Cusato, who grew up on 11th St. in Park Slope, went to LaSalle Academy and studied filmmaking at the School of Visual Arts. "But mostly we played computer games. Occasionally, we still play stickball. We used to play in Curtis Sliwa's stickball tournament in Coney Island, and he screened an earlier version of my film afterwards. But for my father and uncles, stickball was like a religion. Hearing their stickball stories moved me to make the film as a tribute to them."

"Broomsticks" was benched as Cusato directed his first feature-length film, "York Street," a gritty street tale with a powerful lead performance by Edward Heegan, a Windsor Terrace resident. That film is available on DVD.

"After 'York Street,' I reedited 'Broomsticks' and started taking it to festivals,"

My theory is stickball was swallowed whole by Pac-Man.

Filmmaker Jason Cusato (above) of Park Slope shows off his batting form; right, a scene from Cusato's short "When Broomsticks Were King."

says Cusato. "We've been accepted or won in film festivals like Brooklyn Indie House, Rutgers, E.Vil, Jilted, Georgetown, Rochester, Del Ray, Staten Island, Coney Island. The next local festival it will play at will be Wildwood in September, and a DVD release is coming soon.

"Even people who never heard of stickball love the film because of the Brooklyn characters and because it celebrates a forgotten generation. Someday, I'd love to shoot a feature set in the age of stickball." ♦

(For more information on the film, visit [www.parkslopefilms.com](http://www.parkslopefilms.com).)



GARY HE

