

UNRESTRICTED

An Inside Look at New York Sports

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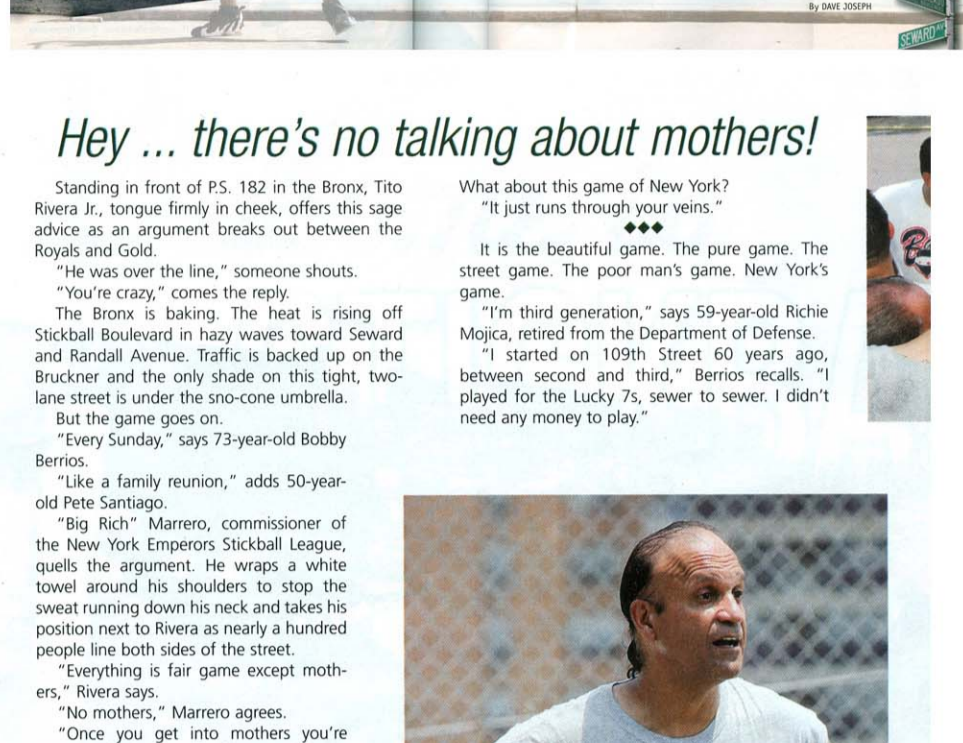
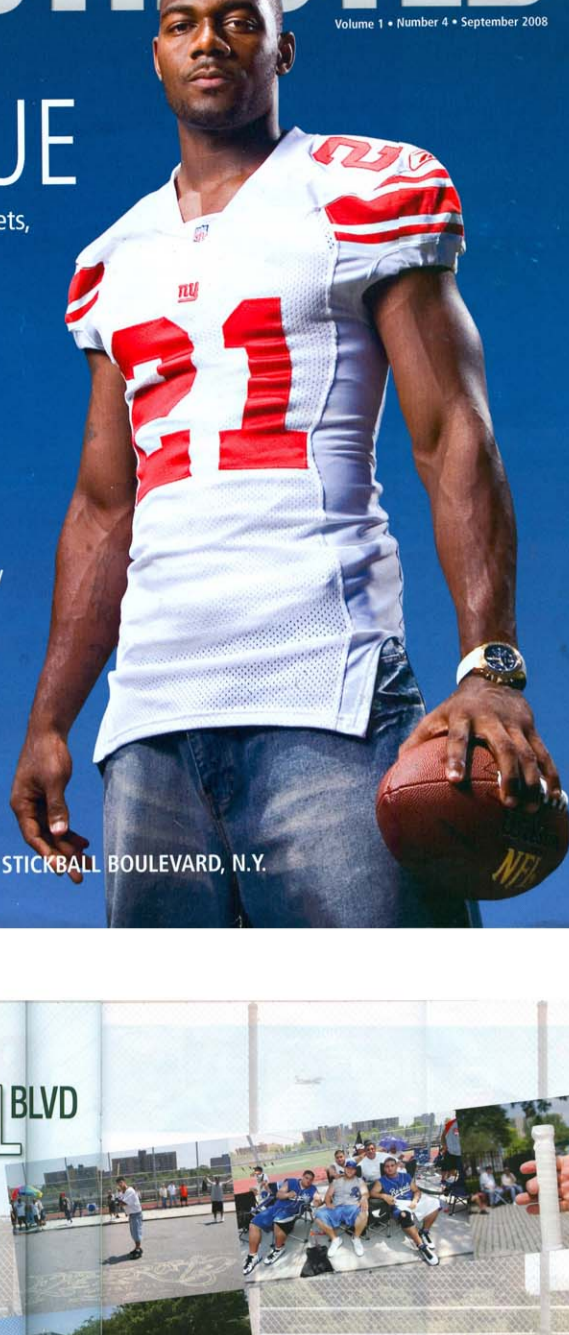
NEW BLUE

South Florida sun to New York streets, first-rounder Kenny Phillips impacts the Giants' secondary

- 10 Best football games in NY
- Reasons the U.S. Open rules
- Excuses for keeping UFC out of the City



WELCOME TO STICKBALL BOULEVARD, N.Y.



Hey ... there's no talking about mothers!

Standing in front of P.S. 182 in the Bronx, Tito Rivera Jr., tongue firmly in cheek, offers this sage advice as an argument breaks out between the Royals and Golds.

"He was over the line," someone shouts. "You're crazy," comes the reply.

The Bronx is baking. The heat is rising off Stickball Boulevard in hazy waves toward Seward and Randall Avenue. Traffic is backed up on the Bruckner and the only shade on this tight, two-lane street is under the sno-cone umbrella.

But the game goes on. "Every Sunday," says 73-year-old Bobby Berrios.

"Like a family reunion," adds 50-year-old Pete Santiago.

"Big Rich" Marrero, commissioner of the New York Emperors Stickball League, quiets the argument. He wraps a white towel around his shoulders to stop the sweat running down his neck and takes his position next to Rivera as nearly a hundred people line both sides of the street.

"Everything is fair game except mothers," Rivera says.

"No mothers," Marrero agrees.

"Once you get into mothers you're crossing the line," adds Rivera as Marrero nods in agreement.

And so it goes. The nicknames and trash talking. Every Sunday, from April to September, the nine teams comprising the Emperors Stickball League converge on this street off White Plains Road and play the game they grew up with, or the one they've grown to love.

There's Dusty and Daddy Pounds and Ounce, Waterbed Kev, Bam Bam. They've all been out here since the Emperors League started in 1985. And they've kept a game beating that might have otherwise disappeared.

One of the Royals bounces the pink ball, slowly follows it to the line, and whacks it down left field against the chain link fence against P.S. 182. There's a play at the plate, and one of the Royals, both thighs wrapped thick and tight in white padding, slides on the hot concrete.

Three sewers and your king. Or queen. Jennifer Lippold sits in a beach chair under a thimble of a shade tree. The only female to play in the Emperors League, Lippold is sidelined. She's eight months pregnant. She's out to here. She lives in Pennsylvania. But she still comes every Sunday to Stickball Boulevard.

"You know what it is?" she asks. "You don't have to hide here because of who you are, or what your social skills are. You are who you are, and everybody accepts you. People look after your kids. It's your family."

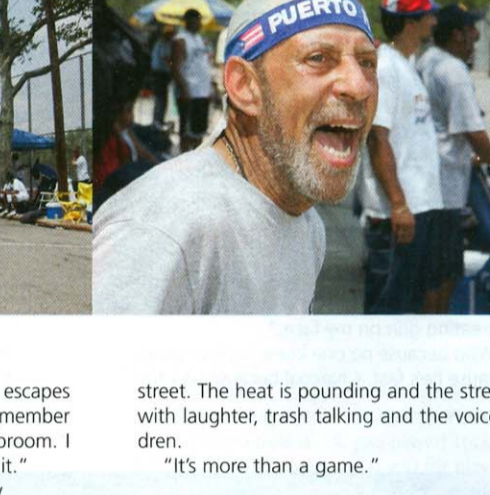
And what about the game? Lippold is asked.

What about this game of New York?

"It just runs through your veins."

It is the beautiful game. The pure game. The street game. The poor man's game. New York's game.

"I'm third generation," says 59-year-old Richie Mojica, retired from the Department of Defense. "I started on 109th Street 60 years ago, between second and third," Berrios recalls. "I played for the Lucky 7s, sewer to sewer. I didn't need any money to play."



A broom and a ball. The simplicity of stickball.

"And no matter what you play," Berrios says, "you always come back to stickball."

For those in the Emperors League, this patch of concrete earth, formally known as Newman Avenue, is the only place to be on a Sunday. Games are played from 10 a.m. through the middle of the afternoon. A batter bounces the ball behind a chalk line — once, twice, three times — and then he swings.

Poetry with a broom and spalden.

"I grew up, basically, watching my father play stickball out the second-floor window," says Steve "Powerhouse" Plerqui.



"People left their brooms on the fire escapes and we'd grab them," Berrios recalls. "I remember once my mom bought a brand-new red broom. I made it a bat and told her someone stole it."

The Emperors League has become a way to build a community. Teams meet in the winter and have cookouts. They go on vacation together to play in tournaments.

"Like Family," said Pete Santiago, a boxing referee for the New York State Athletic Commission.

The game used to be everywhere. Block against block. Neighborhood against neighborhood. The Bronx against Brooklyn. Sinatra played stickball. Willie Mays, Sandy Koufax, Bill Cosby, Joe Torre, George Gershwin and Joe Peppitone, too.

But the spalden, the pink rubber ball made by the Spalding Company, has been replaced by the high bouncers. And it's hard to find a game in the city now.

Except on Stickball Boulevard on Sunday.

"It's like a drug when you start playing," says Marrero. "My father played this game. My brother plays this game. There's so many other things you can do in New York City on a 98-degree day. But right here ..."

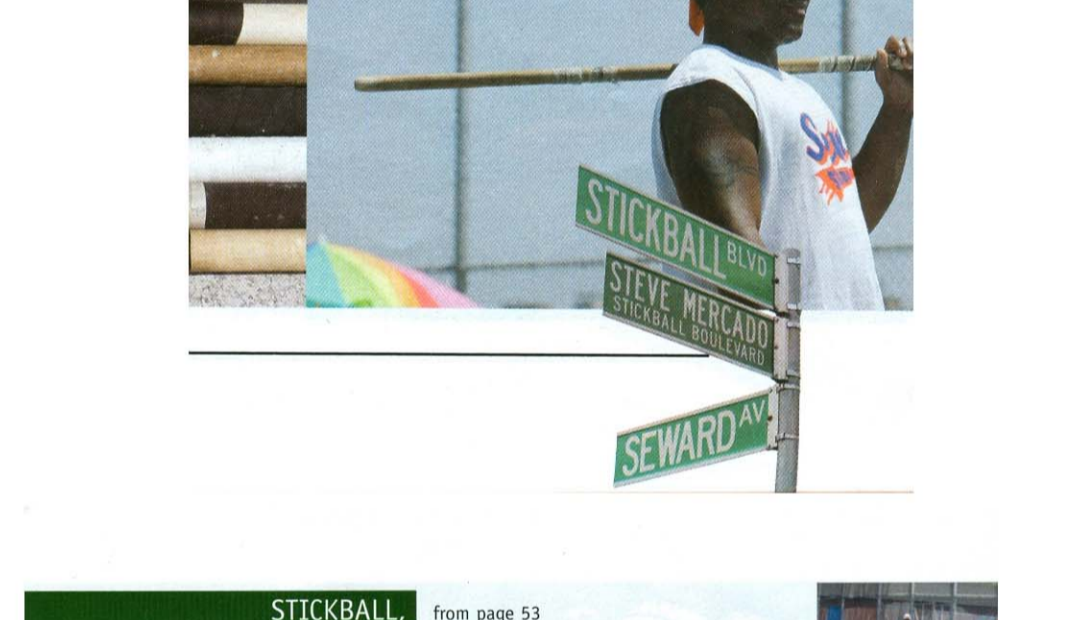
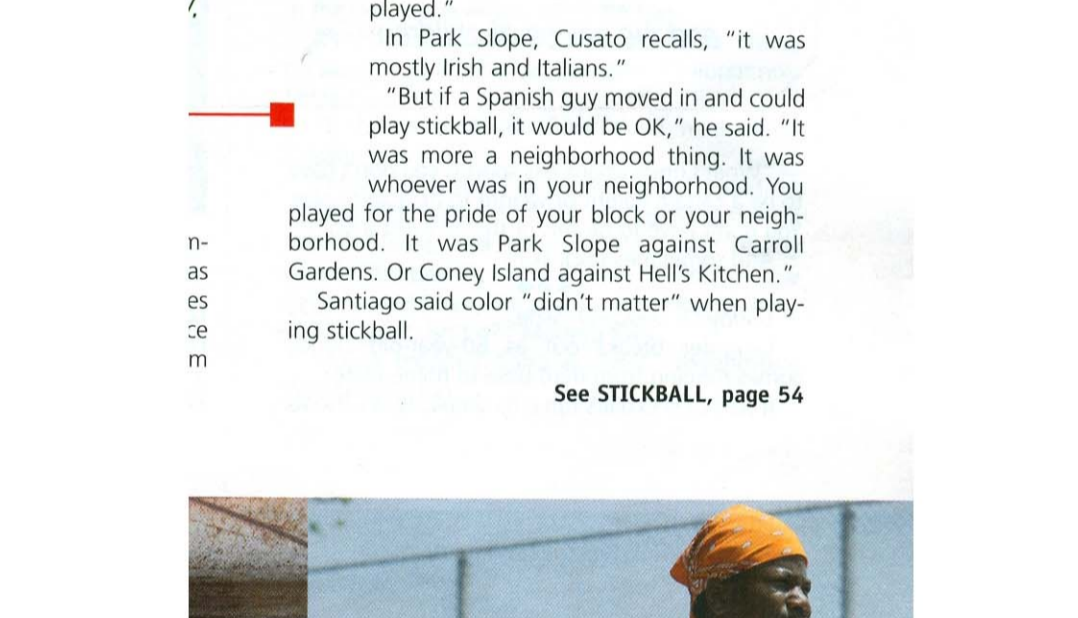
He looks down Stickball Boulevard. Players, friends and families stretch down both sides of the

street. The heat is pounding and the street is filled with laughter, trash talking and the voices of children.

"It's more than a game."

"It's like a drug when you start playing. My father played this game. My brother plays this game. There's so many other things you can do in New York City on a 98-degree day. But right here ..."

Not far from Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn, filmmaker Jason Cusato steps away from the cameras and lights inside 2 Toms Restaurant and discusses the game that brought him to direct and produce the award-winning documentary "When Broom Sticks Were King."



"When our parents were kids, there was literally a game on every block," said Cusato, who has dug in here on the corner of Union and 3rd with his film crew to shoot his latest movie. "If it was summer, you were playing stickball. You were challenging other blocks. You'd go down to 15th Street and say, 'We're going to kick your ass.' During the game you'd hate each other. Then after the game everyone was friends."

The game back then, and still today, knows no racial boundaries.

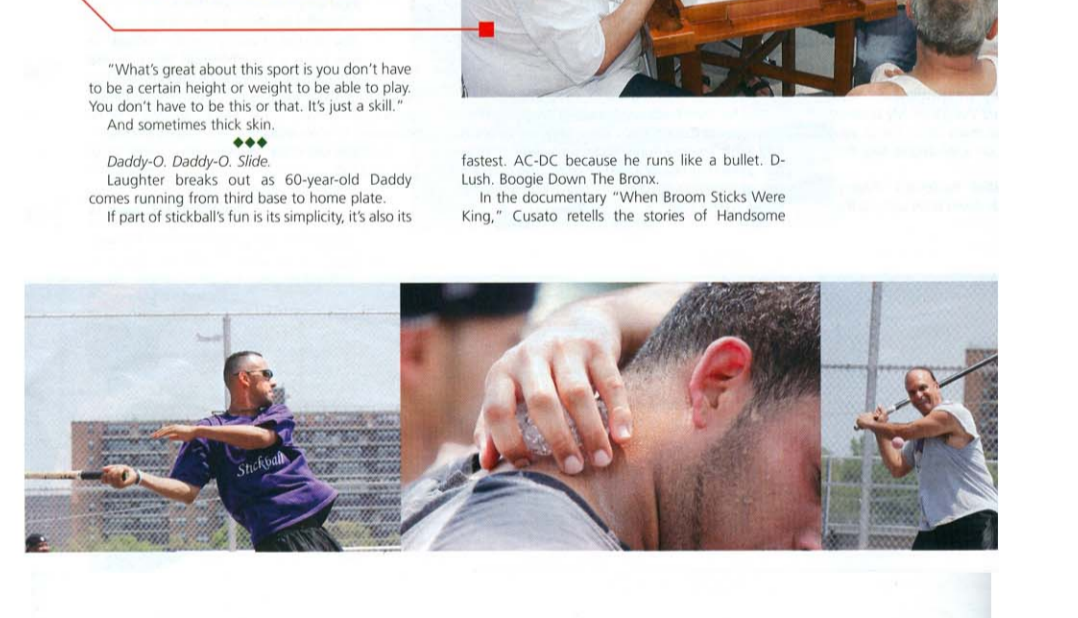
"Teams were made up of the community," Berrios said. "Ninety percent of Manhattan was the Italians. You had the blacks, Jews, Irish, even the Greeks. Then when it came to the Bronx, everyone played."

In Park Slope, Cusato recalls, "it was mostly Irish and Italians."

"But if a Spanish guy moved in and could play stickball, it would be OK," he said. "It was more a neighborhood thing. It was whoever was in your neighborhood. You played for the pride of your block or your neighborhood. It was Park Slope against Carroll Gardens. Or Coney Island against Hell's Kitchen."

Santiago said color "didn't matter" when playing stickball.

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Along Stickball Boulevard, players, friends and families stretch down both sides of the street. The heat is pounding and the street is filled with laughter, trash talking and the voices of children.

"What's great about this sport is you don't have to be a certain height or weight to be able to play. You don't have to be this or that. It's just a skill."

And sometimes stick ...

Daddy-O, Daddy-O. Slide. Laughter breaks out as 60-year-old Daddy comes running from third base to home plate. If part of stickball's fun is its simplicity, it's also its

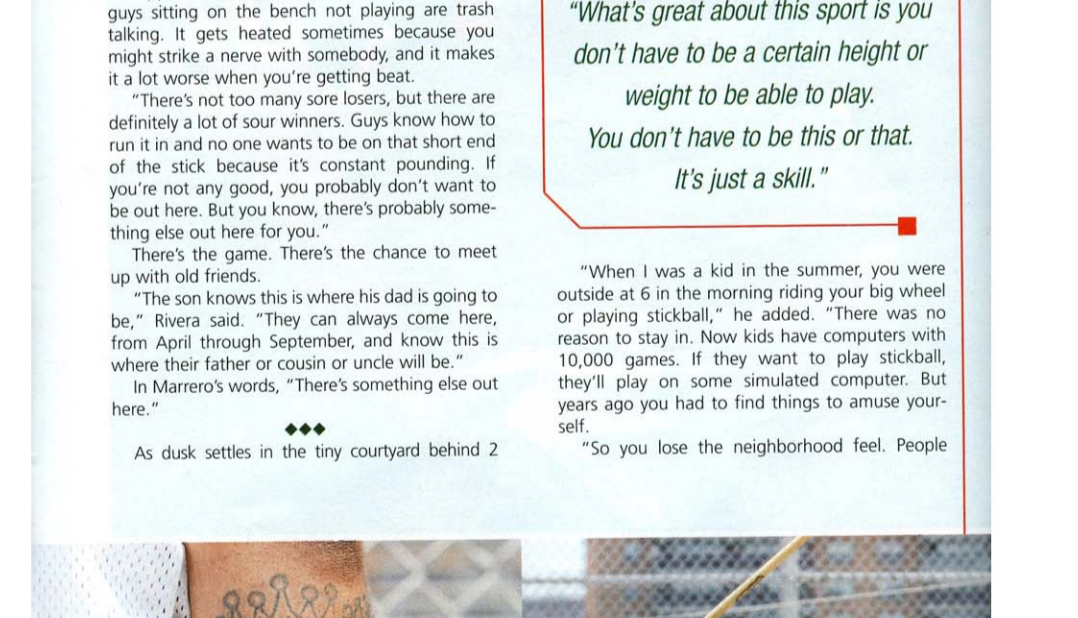
tradition of trash talking and nicknames. And it isn't always pretty.

"There was a guy (who) used to play on the Silver Bullets called Hollywood," Rivera recalls. "The way he approached his at-bat, he'd dribble the ball between his legs, wave the stick ... he'd go through this whole thing. And 50 percent of the time he'd strike out."

Waterbed Key? "Guy slipped in a puddle and fell," said Cusato's cousin, Scott Nawrocki, also known as Kool-Aid because, as he put it, "I always had a shit-eating grin on my face."

Eddie Who because no one knew his last name. Dusty because he's fast. Charcoal because he's the

fastest. AC-DC because he runs like a bullet. D-Luth, Bogus Down in the Bronx. In the documentary "When Broom Sticks Were King," Cusato retells the stories of Handsome



Hank ("He was so handsome you forgot you were straight") and Paullie ("The Legend" Ganuch ("He shaved in grammar school") and Sal ("The Natural" Nunzio, who played like Fred Astaire danced).

Any nickname is fair. And so is any trash talk.

"But no mothers," Marrero says.

"No mothers," Mojica agrees.

"You can talk about a guy's clothes, his swing, his approach to the game," Rivera says. "Even guys sitting on the bench not playing are trash talking. It gets heated sometimes because you might strike a nerve with somebody, and it makes it a lot worse when you're getting beat."

"There's not too many sore losers, but there are definitely a lot of sour winners. Guys know how to run it and no one wants to be on that short end of the stick because it's constant pounding. If you're not any good, you probably don't want to be out here. But you know, there's probably something else out here for you."

There's the game. There's the chance to meet up with old friends.

"The son knows this is where his dad is going to be," Rivera said. "They can always come here, from April through September, and know this is where their father or cousin or uncle will be."

In Marrero's words, "There's something else out here for you."

As dusk settles in the tiny courtyard behind 2

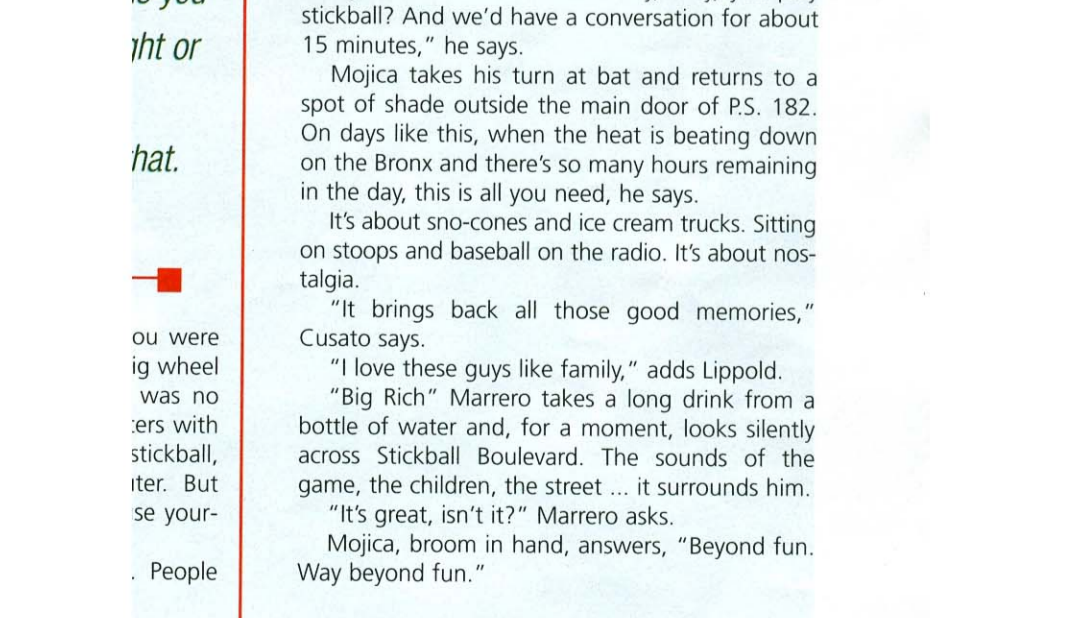
Toms Restaurant, Cusato is melancholic about stickball's diminishing role in New York sports and culture.

As Cusato puts it: "If you played stickball now, half the people would yell at you for playing in the street and the other half for hitting the ball off their house."

"What's great about this sport is you don't have to be a certain height or weight to be able to play. You don't have to be this or that. It's just a skill."

"When I was a kid in the summer, you were outside at 6 in the morning riding your big wheel or playing stickball," he added. "There was no reason to stay in. Now kids have computers with 10,000 games. If they want to play stickball, they'll play on some simulated computer. But years ago you had to find things to amuse yourself."

"So you lose the neighborhood feel. People



out stickball culture. The game is still played, but the passion and community feel are fading.

aren't coming together. You don't have 20 guys or 10, 15 guys hanging out every weekend because kids break off more. I think there was more pride about where you were from back then, too."

Back on Stickball Boulevard, the sno-cone man is doing brisk business. Mojica finishes off making a bat — white tape, sticky side out — and talks about traveling recently with a stick ball.

"People would see me with it and people would always come over to me and say, 'Hey, you play stickball?' And we'd have a conversation for about 15 minutes," he says.

Mojica takes his turn at bat and returns to a spot of shade outside the main door of P.S. 182. On days like this, when the heat is beating down on the Bronx and there's so many hours remaining in the day, this is all you need, he says.

It's about sno-cones and ice cream trucks. Sitting on stoops and baseball on the radio. It's about nostalgia.

"It brings back all those good memories," Cusato says.

"I love these guys like family," adds Lippold.

"Big Rich" Marrero takes a long drink from a bottle of water and, for a moment, looks silently across Stickball Boulevard. The sounds of the game, the children, the street ... it surrounds him.

"It's great, isn't it?" Marrero asks.

Mojica, broom in hand, answers, "Beyond fun. Way beyond fun."

