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Folk Fest's Pitch For Pure Fun

NYC Street Games Swing

By Irene Noguchi
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Back in Brooklyn, stickball used to rule the streets. Kids came home from school, dropped off their bags and headed outside. First base was the manhole cover. The batter swung with Mom's mop handle. And all along the street, neighbors leaned out their porches and cheered or booed for the home team. It was baseball New York style, and the only thing that beat it was watching the Dodgers at Ebbets Field.

This summer the Smithsonian is bringing the streets of New York City to the Mall for the 35th Annual Folklife Festival, which continues this weekend and winds up July 4-8. Festival-goers won't be playing ball on the asphalt, but the museum curators did import two game experts -- Mick and Lori Brandston -- to have some fun.

"Anybody want to play stickball?" yells Mick to the crowd earlier this week. The 46-year-old Queens native is winding his way between tents, a bundle of mop handles slung over his shoulder.

"I do," calls a bearded man. Another fellow with a red Brooklyn cap follows them to an open spot on the Mall.

Brandston is an NYC game master. Skully. Stoop ball. Ringoleavio. Name a New York City street game -- any game -- and he can teach it. Many of these games are relics now, with most kids playing Little League or pickup basketball. And there's a lot more traffic these days than during the Depression and postwar period, when stickball was the game of choice for kids who eagerly followed America's pastime but couldn't afford a mitt.

When Brandston grew up in Brooklyn and Queens, he says, "you would hang out on the block and you'd have all these different games."

Skully. That's flicking bottle caps on the pavement.

Stoop ball. That's bouncing a plum-size ball off house steps.

Ringoleavio. An elaborate version of tag with two teams.

Last year Smithsonian curator and former New Yorker Nancy Groce flew to the Big Apple, looking for neighborhood life to showcase at the festival.

I need street games, she said.

She found Brandston, his wife, Lori, their two ball-bouncing kids and an entire street of stickball fiends. The Brandstons were also running a games Web site called Streetplay.com. It had skully secrets. (Use melted crayons to make your bottle caps heavier.) Stoop ball in three different styles (original, bounces and curb ball). Double Dutch and a "string quartet" (jump-rope in twos and fours).

The Brandstons left home on Tuesday and brought along enough chalk, crayons, bottle caps and mop handles to fill a walk-in closet. The Smithsonian provided the stoop. It built a brownstone front, complete with stairs.

For the fellas from the '50s, stickball is king.

"It was stickball from the afternoon till early evening, and we played it with a passion," said Tony Sogluizzo, 63, a librarian at the Brooklyn Public Library. "Once in a while a neighbor would complain and call the cops. [Then] the stick would vanish from the sewer [lid], vanish up a stoop and into a hallway before the cops got to home base. Then they'd make their pass, the stick would emerge again and we'd go back to our game."

Some of the neighborhood fellas would move on to sandlot baseball, others even going to the minor league level. Steve Weinstein, 68, played in the minors for a while after leaving Brooklyn. But he still remembers what it was like to hit "two sewers."

"That was your 455 [Mark] McGwire home run to us."

He adds, "No one was aware of the fact they were 'not wealthy' or 'poor.' [We were] never at a loss because we had games. . . . The streets were our playground."

Right now Brandston is setting up his playground.

"This is home plate," he says, pointing to the only cement square on the entire field. Pitcher's mound? The bases? Use your imagination.

He takes a swing at a spaldeen -- you ain't from New York if you say "Spalding Hi-Bounce Ball" -- and the mop handle flies out of his hands.

Some electric tape around the handle does the trick. Brandston hands the "bat" to 6-year-old Ricardo Manosalval.

The pint-size D.C. resident had nearly made the disabled list while playing stoop ball against a journalist with no aim, but now he's back in action. He straps on tiny sandals and toddles up to the plate.

In stickball, the batter can bounce the ball and hit it or swing at a pitch. This batter is an intimidating 2 1/2 feet tall. Someone bounces the ball for him.

Strike one!

This is different from his video games at home. Not like his soccer league, either.

Strike two!

Ricardo squares his shoulders. Mom is watching. The ball drops again . . .

CRACK!

It won't be a home run -- Ricardo is still spinning in circles from the momentum of his swing -- but the crowd is cheering and Mom is taking photos. The batter can't stop smiling.

"In my day, we had only two swings!" yells the umpire, who bears a keen resemblance to Santa Claus. That's Moe Moloney -- Brooklyn born and bred "and I'll probably die there."

Kids in his neighborhood used to call him the "mayor" of stickball, he says. In his day, kids would break windows every game.

"But you always paid," he laughs. "You know why you never ran? Because everybody knew who you were and who was the last guy that hit the ball."

More information on the Smithsonian Folklife Festival is available via the Internet at www.washingtonpost.com/folklife>www.washingtonpost.com/folklife.