

At Play in the City

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stickball

standard—played between sewers up the block; the batter hit the ball himself with a broomstick.

variation (1) occasionally the ball would be pitched in on a bounce.

variation (2) where a blank wall (no windows) was available this version was played across the street and the ball was pitched fast on the fly. Scoring was on the basis of how high up the wall you could hit a fly.

A variation called “steam” was usually played in Queens by two boys in a school yard. One pitched the spaldeen very hard on the fly. Scoring was by how far the ball was hit in the air.

punchball

The ball was pitched on a bounce and the batter would hit it with his fist or open hand. The court was square with home next to the curb and third base on the curb across the street, first was up the street and second across the street. In Queens the ball was never pitched. It was hoisted, tennis-style, by the batter who then punched it with his fist down the street or across the yard.

stoopball

A variation of punchball except the ball was hit by the batter against the stoop or ledge on a wall—the court across the street was diamond shaped. Not played in Queens.

pointball

An individual game where the ball was thrown against the stoop or ledge, points were scored by catching flies, grounders were no points, if you missed the ball you were out. Called “stoopball” in Queens, never “pointball.”

handball

(not the standard game) but similar. Two or more players in sequence, but the ball returned had to bounce before hitting the wall.

WG on Brooklyn: These are, to the best of my memory, street games we played in Park Slope about 50 to 60 years ago. “Street Games” by definition excludes those games played on a court, playground or park. In those days there were only two schoolyards, so most games were played from sidewalk to sidewalk on the street where you lived or “hung out.”

All the games were passed down from one generation of kids to the next, and there was never an involvement of an adult except to “break up” a game. From neighborhood to neighborhood we all played the same games with some variations probably due to neighborhood characteristics, e.g. fences, walls, stoops, traffic, etc.

The “ball” games were always played with the ubiquitous “spaldeen,” a hollow pink rubber ball made by A.G. Spalding that sold for about 20-25 cents. For a season in the street the requirements were few, somebody had to have a



boxes

a sort of ping-pong kind of game—no net—you defended a square on the sidewalk. Called “boxball” in Queens.

running bases

played across the street by any number of players.

touch football

played up and down the street usually with a newspaper football - e.g. the *Daily News* folded once, rolled up and tied at each end - one hand or two hand variety. Seldom played in Queens, but then always with footballs.

johnny-ride-the-pony (or buck, buck) one team formed a “bridge” while the other team jumped on them one by one. If the bridge collapsed you got to do it again. Only played by boys in Queens.

red rover

an across the street game - ‘Red Rover, Red Rover, can I cross over?’ The person who was “it” would answer, ‘Not unless you have (name of color).’ If you had it you were safe, the rest just ran, if you got caught you were “it.” Seldom played in Queens and then only by girls.

statues or freeze!

at the beginning of count everyone ran,



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“spaldeen,” a box of chalk, or a length of rope. The rest might include an old broom, with the straw removed, a tin can or a discarded newspaper (see touch football).

Aside from the games listed here, the girls played “jump rope” with all sorts of rhymes, the boys played marbles along the curb instead of a circle. There were all sorts of variations of tag (e.g. iron tag, blind tag). Roller skates and “Pusho” seasons brought their own variations of games.

With the number of kids in our neighborhood and their resourcefulness, few if any ever complained about being bored, except when it rained.

FN on Queens: In Hollis we had some differences, but surprisingly few. Differences probably were due to the lower population density of kids in eastern Queens and our access to large school yards and, importantly, vacant lots. Games played in lots might be considered street games since they were never supervised or affected by adults – unless a homeowner got annoyed and broke up the sport. Lots got used, well, a lot.

Bill’s observations about jump rope, marbles (but always played in a circle on the ground), and tag match mine. I do not recall any game or toy called “pusho.”

Maybe 50-60% of my schoolmates and 90% of my immediate friends were Irish American, but virtually all the games had participants from other white ethnic groups. My part of Queens was a melting pot in the late ‘40s and the 1950s, but one in which Irish Americans were, probably by a small margin, the largest ethnic group and, I would venture, the most influential.

until the person who was “it” shouted “freeze!” Then you had to stop exactly as you were - anybody who didn’t stop immediately or subsequently fell or flinched was “it.”

russia

played mostly by girls, a sort of “jacks” played with a ball against a wall. Not played in Queens.

giant steps

played mostly by girls. Each person was told in turn by “it” how many and what kind of steps they could take (giant, umbrella, teeny-weeny, etc.). The person had to ask “May I” and repeat the instruc-

tions. If they did, they could then take the number and kind of steps, if they didn’t ask “May I?” they lost their turn. The idea was to tag “it” and then everybody had to run back “home.” If the person who was “it” tagged someone then that person was now “it.” In Queens it was played mostly by girls, or boys and girls.

war

chalked circle was divided into segments for each player who was a country. Starting from the circle the person who was “it” declared war on a country by bouncing a ball in the center high in the air. Everybody ran until the aggrieved country caught the ball and yelled stop!

From that position he had to throw the ball and hit someone who was then “it.”

kick-the-can

a variation of dodge ball, with a can. FN saw it played as a 5-6 year old, but he and his contemporaries never learned it. It disappeared.

ring-a-levio

a sort of tag game with “capture,” “jail,” and “escape.”

snap-the-whip

a circle of players had to jump over a rope snapped ankle high. Not played in Queens.

high-low

players had to jump over a swinging rope that got higher and higher. Not played in Queens.

pussy-in-the-corner

played mostly by girls along a chalked court - a variety of “Marching to Jerusalem.” Not played in Queens.

hopscotch or pottsy

a chalk game usually played by girls.

honeymoon

a chalk game that involved rolling a ball into progressive boxes and catching it. Not played in Queens.

guns

played in Queens by younger boys (6-9) in lots and yards. Sides were chosen, one side was sent out to hide, and the other side tried to find them and kill them! Some boys had toy pistols; others simulated pistols with sticks or fingers. Ambushes were the only way kills were assured.

street sledding

called “sleighriding” in Queens. With packed snow on the streets, boys and girls would use hills where cars and trucks had packed the snow. There was a variation in which boys and girls would sneak in back of a car or truck that was just starting, catch hold of the bumper and get towed for blocks at a time. Occasionally, some trucks would have trains of kids hooked on the back. Drivers usually broke up the riding when they discovered the kids.