

The Unknown Hall of Famer

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(Adapted by ReadWorks)



New York City is famous for many things, like pizza, Broadway shows, skyscrapers, and baseball. The New York Yankees are possibly the best-known sports team in the world. Baseball has been so popular in New York City that four professional major league baseball teams, including the Yankees, have made their homes in New York City.

Many kids in New York City have always wanted to play baseball. But playing baseball can be difficult in such an urban, or city-like, place. For the game to look and feel real, there needs to be a large grass field with a dirt diamond. The players need bases, bats, balls and gloves to play with. But it can be hard to get hold of all of these items. So a group of New York City kids, almost all of whom were boys, created their own version of baseball. Their version was played on the hard, concrete streets. They called it “stickball” because it could be played with a simple broomstick handle instead of a large, heavy bat. They used small, pink rubber balls instead of baseballs made of leather. And one day, some of those kids found themselves in an actual Hall of Fame. George “Lolin” Osorio is one of those players.

George’s family moved to New York City from Puerto Rico in the late 1940s. In Puerto Rico, he was given the nickname “Lolin” because, as a very young boy, he used to chase after a girl named Lola. His neighbors took to calling him “Lolin” since the two always seemed to be together.

After moving to New York City, he jumped right into stickball. He and the other kids on his block would take to the streets to enjoy the “cheap game.” All they needed was one broomstick, a few rubber balls, and nine or so other guys from another block to play against.

“We’d play for a little money, five cents a game or a quarter when I was about ten years old,” George says. He recalls that when his team won, they often used their money to see a movie. Sometimes kids would save their winnings to buy Puma sneakers for two dollars. These were more popular than one-dollar Converse sneakers because they were better for running. Plus, everyone knew they cost twice as much.

“But really we played for bragging rights,” George says. “You were on the team from your block. You played for pride.”

“Lolin was one of the best because he always hit the ball hard on the ground, and was so fast that nobody could throw him out,” remembers Carlos Diaz. Diaz helped to organize New York City’s Stickball Hall of Fame, of which George is an esteemed, or respected, member. He says George was someone you could depend on in the game. “He could get a hit just about anytime,” Diaz adds.

George and his friends were all from Puerto Rican families. They would play stickball for hours—or at least until the Irish cops showed up. There weren’t many cars on the streets in those days, and the kids’ rubber balls couldn’t cause much harm. But still, whenever the police found the kids playing, the officers would order them to hand over their brooms at once.

“I could never understand why they’d break up our stickball games,” George says. “We played to stay out of trouble.”

For a while, the cops would slip the kids’ sticks all the way down into the sewer. But after the officer had left and the boys had faked being upset for long enough, one of the smaller kids would climb in. He’d head down into the sewer and come up with the bat, covered in mud and muck. There was always an open fire hydrant nearby. They’d use that water to clean off the dirt from both the bat and the brave boy.

“Then the cops got smart,” George says. They started taking the bats and holding them just halfway down the sewer. And then they’d break them in half.

Still, George and his friends weren’t afraid. They kept playing stickball throughout their teenage years. With each passing year, they went farther away from their neighborhood, challenging players in different neighborhoods and having tons of fun.

Alfred Jackson, another Stickball Hall of Fame member, often played with George. Alfred remembers one amazing hit by a rival of theirs, or someone who played against them a lot. The rival's name was Tony Taylor. "He crushed the ball," Jackson begins. "He hit it so hard that it went off the third-floor siding of a building, came down, bounced off a car, hit the building again. Then it hit a lamppost and ricocheted to one of our outfielders that caught it for an out. The ball was in fair territory the whole time!"

As George's team got older, people bet more and more money on their games. Some games were played for more than five thousand dollars. The winning team always got some of the money. And players depended on that extra money. So just like in a professional baseball game, the players were under pressure to play well, because there was money on the line. Batters would try to focus hard on any throw that could change the game, for the sake of their wallets and their teammates. And fans that had their own money on the line would shout to try and throw the batters off.

Still, money was not the most important thing to the stickball players. The feelings of self-respect and community were more important. These feelings moved George to go outside and play each and every Sunday, even the day after his wedding. "I got married on a Saturday," George says. "We had a bunch of leftovers from the wedding in the refrigerator. The players' wives always made food for all of us, so I woke up and packed the leftovers to bring to the game," he laughs. He adds with a shake of his finger, "My wife wasn't very happy about that."

In the late 1950s and throughout the '60s, George worked at his job building clock radios, and, for a short time, delivering zippers. Around that time, the first official stickball leagues were forming in Manhattan and even beyond. Even with his job, George always found time to take part in stickball leagues. But though he has kept on playing, George and his friends have seen the game almost completely disappear.

"Not as many guys play anymore," says Carlos Diaz. He has tried for many years to bring back stickball in New York City. "And most of the young ones that do play are sons and grandsons of the guys who played fifty or sixty years ago." Part of Diaz's efforts include opening a gallery this past winter. This gave the Stickball Hall of Fame a more lasting home.

No matter what, George still finds himself out on the streets of New York City every Sunday. Nothing will keep him from playing the game he loves with the guys that he loves, all of whom have respected, and even honored him, for decades.

