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Spring Guide '07

You Game or No?

by [Philadelphia Weekly Editorial Staff](#)

Your choice, y'all: You can spend the spring and summer sitting on your tired ass checking Facebook and chomping on Hot Pockets, or you can rise up—that's right, *rise the eff up against the techno machine*—swing open the screen door, hot foot it down to the rec center and scream, "I'm going old school till Labor Day, goddamn it!"

One, two, three, *shoot!*

Red ball, blue ball, yellow ball, *out!*

Engine engine No. 9, going down Chicago line ...

That's right, fellow city dwellers.

Gather 'round. It may be too early to know the long-term effects of playing Xbox.

But the long-term effects of playing street games ...

Yes!

We got the bottom line 'bout them, sunshine.

Guys who played halfball, girls who double-dutched, kids who spent their childhood summer days making up games with chalk and sticks and rubber balls ...

... go on to have 40 percent better sex lives!

Make 70 percent more money!

Okay, maybe 30 percent.

But street-game veterans have better childhood memories.

And that's no shit.

(Think you'll have fond memories of dicking around with your MySpace page when you're 40?)



Photographs by Jeff Fusco

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This spring, this summer, we say, retake the streets! For fun.

No more drugs. No more homicides.

We're playin' with you, and with you, and with you, till the sun goes down.

For real.

Respect. (*Eds.*)



[last week's issue](#)

Four Square

I remember it vividly: grabbing a ball and racing to the painted asphalt grid to claim the game's coveted square No. 4. The seemingly endless futility of two opponents caught in an equally matched "hit war." The sheer adrenaline that shot through your body as an opponent called "cherry bomb!" and slammed the ball as hard as a fifth-grader can into your square, sending it soaring into the sky with a rubber-smacking snap.

It's a game that appeals to a 10-year-old's simplistic sense of social hierarchy: Continually hit the ball into the squares of your classmates without letting it bounce more than once in your own, and you move closer to the ultimate position of coolness and power. Miss the ball or hit it out of bounds, and you go to the back of the line—a devastating place to be in the realm of a 15-minute recess. If you wind up in square No. 4 when the whistle blows, you've earned yourself a good two hours of gloating before lunch—when it all begins again.

On any given day it's anyone's game. And the game flourishes on playgrounds because it requires so little equipment (a bouncy ball and some kind of grid), and its basic rules are easy to grasp.

But what makes four square so enduring (and endearing) are its variations—the special rules that vary by region, playground or person serving the ball. A Wikipedia entry for "individual server rules in four square" reveals 50 different rules that can be incorporated into the game, including: "sharking" (aiming directly for any part of an opponent's body—if the sharker hits the opponent, the opponent is out); "catching" (when the person catches the ball before it bounces in their square, dubbing the passer out); and "black magic" (if a player catches another player's ball above the waist and calls "black magic," the player who caught the ball can make the other player do any number of actions for the rest of the game, such as standing on one foot or playing only left-handed).

The possibilities are endless (and increasingly weird). And four square's not just for kids anymore.

"Right now there's an interesting revival of childhood games for the mid-20s to mid-30s age group," says Sean Effel, co-founder of the Cambridge, Mass.-based Square Four, the self-proclaimed "nation's first and finest four square league." Effel says participation has grown exponentially since he and friend Dana Ostberg started the league in 2003. A World Four Square Championship now even takes place annually in Bridgton, Maine, and attracted nearly 70 competitors and 30 spectators last month, including several international players.

"There must be something about our modern American lifestyle that denies us that degree of play and fun—and organized football, basketball and baseball leagues fail to include enough range of skills to be fulfilling for casual players," Effel says. "A simple game of four square gives everyone a pretty good chance of standing out and being top dog for a time."

Just like on the playground. But so far in Philadelphia, the playground is where four square remains.

"We live in such a competitive society—sometimes we just want to play sports like we were 10 years old again," says Tim Horan, director of the Philadelphia Sport and Social Club, which recently added the playground games dodgeball and kickball to their offerings.

But no four square just yet.

"If people want to play four square, we'll run it," Horan says.

Get the rulebook ready. I've been practicing my cherry bomb. (*Cassidy Hartmann*)

Chess



"Ah, check," says Pops, sitting on a marble-styled pillar underneath Center City's giant clothespin on a mild and breezy lunchtime afternoon.

In front of him sits his row of prisoners—a few pawns, two rooks and two knights.

"It don't look good," Pops advises his opponent. "It don't look

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good.”

Before long it's *checkmate*.

“Pop, you sit here all day and play this, huh?” asks a spectator.

“As long as they payin’,” says Pops, folding his weathered hands.

Pops, nearing his seventh decade, is dressed in well-worn clothes and a linty black knit cap. He has a billowy white beard, warm eyes and a straight-and-easy way of talking. He plays chess for \$2 a game, or sometimes for whatever amount an eager newbie is carrying.

“I’m gonna try to learn something for a dollar,” the spectator says sardonically, digging a dollar out of his pants pocket.

“Nothing beats a failure but a try,” says Pops.

The banging of construction mixed with the hiss of mass transit along Market Street surrounds the game. Passers-by flow easily. Soon there's a gathering of men.

Pops has been playing chess out here at the clothespin for two summers, he says, and has played the game itself since he was 22. “I like it because I’m good at it,” he says, “and it’s a good game.”

He credits his skill to his sharp memory. Whoever can go the furthest in the game, he says, whoever can see the countless moves that lie ahead, has the advantage.

“I see you, I see you,” Pops tells his new opponent. “I *know* what you're about.”

His opponent squints at the board. His moves are slow and deliberate. Pops waits patiently. His moves are quick and wise.

Pops' bishop charges to the front line, eye to eye with his enemy's bishop.

“Oh shit,” the enemy says, his eyebrows furrowed.

“Check,” says Pops.

Then he waits, calmly, slowly rocking back and forth. Sometimes he hums between moves. Other times he plays with the loose change in his pocket.

In his next move Pops advances.

“That's nice there,” his opponent says.

“I've been *known* to do the right thing,” Pops says in his sing-song manner.

Check again.

The queen runs for her life.

“Well, let's just get it out of the way,” Pops says, capturing a rook. The battleground gapes from casualties of war.

Check again.

“An amateur can't see what the master sees,” Pops sings after his next move, topping it off with a toothless chuckle.

Check again.

“Right into the palm of my hand,” Pops says, clutching his dry fist. The men gathered around shake their heads knowingly. The opponent throws up his hands in defeat.

“That's it,” he says. “That's my \$1 lesson, and it was worth it.”

“Yeah,” says Pops. “You sure got a bargain.” (*Kia Gregory*)

Dominoes

The next mainstream sport isn't kickball or strip aerobics or even roller derby. There's no running, catching or weight-lifting involved—except for maybe raising a brown-bagged beer or a small bottle of rum. Slamming little wooden chips down and running your mouth is about as physical as it gets, yet ESPN is committed to making dominoes its next big spectator sport.

Lino Garcia, general manager of ESPN Deportes (the network's Spanish-language programming), calls dominoes "the next cool thing," and hopes to popularize the sedentary game nationally via television. After cashing in on televised poker, execs at ESPN realized dominoes had all the same attractions: competition, color and culture. They debuted their domino coverage on ESPN Deportes last spring, and have since added the sport to their English-language programming (on ESPN2) as well.

A national pastime in several Latin-Caribbean countries including Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Cuba (which plays a nine-chip instead of a six-chip game), dominoes is very much alive in North Philly as well.

"Soon as the weather breaks you'll see people bring out their tables," says 55-year-old City Councilman Juan Ramos. He says sidewalks, backyards, senior centers, rec centers and "wherever there's baseball"—Norris Square and Hunting Park especially—come alive with the dotted chips.

Ramos first started playing dominoes as a little boy. For Christmas he'd often receive a set of miniature dominoes. He now gives those miniature sets out at the LOVE Park Domino Festival, an annual event he's hosted since its inception two years ago.

But dominoes isn't just a summertime sport. In North Philly's Spanish-speaking neighborhoods a number of bars—including Raymond's nightclub at Fifth and Somerset, and Mis Viejos restaurant at Lehigh and Mascher—are home to year-round domino leagues. A couple hundred active members make up the 15 or so teams.

Juan Pagan, 61, is president of the Domino Association of Philadelphia. He says Philly has some of the nation's best domino players, several of whom travel to New York, Miami and Puerto Rico to compete in televised tournaments.

Pagan says the association welcomes all ethnicities—"Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Dominica ... Cubans, white guys, black guys, Chinese guys—all united," he says—and women too.

Although Ramos played a friendly game against Pagan at last year's festival, he admits he's not a serious player. "I can't hang with those guys," he laughs. "It's a game of mental discipline. It's very intense. I play at home and during the summer and in LOVE Park. I'd like to play more, but I just don't have the time."

The LOVE Park Domino Festival invites amateurs and virtuosos to come out and play. Ramos says Mayor Street had such a good time attending the last two years he's in the process of starting domino clubs in the public schools, beginning in the Latino neighborhoods. Our schools may have violence problems, but with any luck, our students will soon be throwing fewer punches and more wooden chips. *(Kate Kilpatrick) LOVE Park Domino Festival: Sat., July 14, 10am-3pm. Free. LOVE Park, 15th St. and JFK Blvd. 215.686.3420*

Double Dutch

"Stop that damn double turning!" I used to hear this constantly while trying to jump double dutch with my sisters and cousins. I thought I was the only black girl in America who couldn't jump or turn double dutch, cornrow or play spades.

When I think of double dutch, I think of warm weather and the bouncing beaded braids of happy girls. First one, two, three ... now they're all in and jumping, the rope slap-slapping the pavement.

What is it about this game that's so nostalgic? Maybe it brings back childhood memories and the smell of your favorite uncle's barbecue.

Maybe it's the songs you sing—"All in Together," "Concentration," "Criss-Cross," "Pop-Up," "Around the World," "Cigarette," "Sleeping Beauty"—that can make an outsider feel included in the fun.

Maybe it's the joy of knowing as soon as what's-her-name misses, it'll be your turn again. Whether a nearby spewing hydrant calls your name or an ice cream truck resounds in the distance, you're not missing your turn. Bush could find Osama bin Laden before you leave the line.

The game is all about concentric circles created by two ropes, a turner on each end, and the art of finding just the right time to jump in.

Hold all your jewelry, long hair and anything else that could get caught in the rope, because once the pendulum swings and the ropes are moving, you either find a way in or get caught watching the phenomenon—that is, unless you've been doing it for years.



If you're a novice, never mind the fear or the impending ridicule. Close your eyes and wait until the ropes are parallel—one on the ground and one in the air.

Tempest Carter, a Temple student, recalls such trepidation: "I remember the immense feeling of fear. I hated double dutch. It seemed to be the place where your friends stopped being friends and started wanting to kill each other."

She's not the only one. In learning the art of double dutch, you must turn the rope the right way, jump the right way and exit the ropes the right way. Your friends won't think twice about kicking your ass right out of the session.

"I actually was a late bloomer in learning how to jump double dutch," says Temple student Jacqueline Nwankwo. "A little girl taught me when I was 10 or 11. She just told me to relax and not be afraid to jump in. And when I took her advice, it actually worked. I was jumping for a hot minute too. I became so good at it because I'd never stop. I remember sweating like crazy in the summer heat, but it was a good workout. I learned how to jump Irish just as well," she adds, referring to what's basically double dutch in reverse: turning the ropes outward.

Love the game or hate it, it's a universal symbol of a sunny afternoon in the neighborhood memorialized by DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince in the 1991 anthem "Summertime," and more recently by Corinne Bailey Rae in "Put Your Records On": "Three little birds, sat on my window/ And they told me I don't need to worry/ Summer came like cinnamon, so sweet/ Little girls double dutch on the concrete." (*Suhailah White*)

Street Hockey

The puck barrels toward the net, you barrel toward the puck and—*wham*—the puck sits plainly on the street as you untangle yourself from the net.

How can you not miss street hockey? The overzealous, overweight lumbering giant who was just quick enough to hurtle you into the very, very hard street; the crazed hockey stick swinger who mercilessly assaulted everyone's ankles; or the sheer glory of scoring on that damn kid who pummeled you every time in dodgeball.

Or maybe you don't even have to miss it. Maybe you still throw on the shin guards, pull out the old stick, and head down to Front and Washington for a weekly pickup game.

On this frigid night beneath the cars racing above on 95, Joe Corsui and his crew do just that. And they have every Thursday for the past 12 years.

"I used to have a station wagon," says Corsui, "and we'd pile 16 of us in there." But tonight, probably due to the biting early March wind, there are only six.

Corsui, 44, is clearly their benevolent leader, but more notably he's the patriarch of this Kensington/Allegheny bunch. His son Joe, 23, is here, along with two sons-in-law Tim Pritt and Bobby Hemingway, and Michael VanSkiver and Chris Walls, who bear that adopted-into-the-family status from hanging with the crew since they were 5.

Standing in a semicircle, the rosy-cheeked men clutch their sticks and recline their bodies atop their inline skates. They look like they're straight out of a feel-good Disney movie, especially when they speak of playing in the Freddy Adams tournament.

"Everybody gets together and we raise a lot of money for him," says one of the boys, his words ricocheting beneath the concrete overpass. "He died a real serious death."

Fourteen years ago Freddy Adams was murdered in a deadly scuffle between teens from rival playgrounds. The 16-year-old has been commemorated each year since in the Freddy Adams Sports Tournament, an event created to promote peace.

"It's not just about sports. It's about life. And dreams. And education. And getting involved. It's about making a difference in the lives of our children." This is the tournament's motto, and each year tournament organizers award six scholarships to local students. Last year the tournament drew 200 teams and 4,000 spectators from as far away as North Carolina. One of those teams was the Misfits, which Joe Corsui coached.

"Everybody's just there to have fun," says Pritt.

This is Philly at its best—peacefully confronting its most notorious problem. Disney on line one. (*Brook Midgley*)

Dodgeball

I'd guess I was in third grade or so when I realized, without being able to articulate it, that whatever instincts my friends had that enabled them to enjoy hurting one another wasn't part of my genetic makeup.

When the movie *Dodgeball* came out, I laughed like all my friends, but shuddered at the attention the movie brought to the sport. The truth is, throwing hard vinyl balls at your classmates with impunity from adult punishment merely offered us another way to terrorize each other, to sort out the winners from the losers.

There was a girl named Mercy who was so small in sixth grade she could actually climb inside her desk and close the lid. In retrospect I think the other girls might've hated her because as they started swelling in some places and getting too long in the legs to walk with anything approaching grace, Mercy was still a smiling child.

Dodgeball was a chance for the other girls to hit her in the face. And man, that's what they did—till Mercy took to sitting down in the middle of the floor as soon as the game started. She covered her head with her arms and waited. Sometimes the girls on the other team—still getting used to their growing bodies and, well, throwing like girls—would miss the tiny little spot of Mercy just begging to be struck in the center of the floor.

They howled like doomed badgers when that happened, pulling at their hair with their nails and staring at each other in horror. Life had just taught them hard lessons: They'll often miss targets that are sitting still, and the smaller girls with slender hips will always have an advantage over the ones with thick thighs and shoulder spans like linebackers.

I usually got hit somewhere in the middle of the game. Sometimes I lasted until just two or three people were left on my team. But I never won.

Last week I called Mark Murphy, founder of the National Dodgeball Association, frankly wondering what might be wrong with him. But then he explained to me that organizing dodgeball tournaments and insuring the participants is how he makes money to buy food and such. I guess he's to be commended for finding such an unusual niche in the world.

Murphy is trying to schedule regional tournaments through Arena Football League teams, including the Philadelphia Soul. And he's also talking to the Philadelphia Sport and Social Club.

Sport and Social director Tim Horan says they started some dodgeball leagues after the movie came out, but the sport never took off. Still, he remains interested in getting some leagues going, and the Club is targeting this summer for the reintroduction of Philly dodgeball.

On the national level Murphy's next two scheduled tournaments are in New Orleans and Phoenix. I humbly suggested the New Orleans event go pay-per-view, with a match between residents of the Lower Ninth Ward and representatives of FEMA as the final act. But then he told me the league-sanctioned dodgeballs they're selling online for \$17.99, including shipping, are special no-sting, fabric-covered dodgeballs, so I'm not sure if there's any point to a grudge match.

And in general, I'm not sure if I approve of the idea of no-sting dodgeballs. In hindsight, the big girls of this world get only so many opportunities to hurt Mercy. (*Steve Volk*)



Wall Ball

There's little agreement about what exactly wall ball is. The name of the game varies from person to person, from the unassuming "wallsies" or "patball" to the antagonistic "suicide" or "slaughter house." But there are some common threads. There's a ball, a wall and a laundry list of rules.

Then things get a little murky. Is it a tennis ball or a handball? Do you catch the ball or swat at it with an open palm for continuous play? Is there shoeing after roofing, or can people call mercy?

Game rules vary from court to court and even day to day. And that's the beauty of the game. It's malleable enough to fit all conditions. It can be transformed with the slightest impulse of the players. It's the pinnacle of cutthroat competition.

Because wall ball exists in this intangible form, everyone has a unique version—likely burned into memory by a particularly hard pegging. Most versions include this violent component, which requires players who've broken a rule or missed a hit to run for safety by reaching the wall before another player can hit the wall with the ball. Failure to do so results in tennis ball-sized red welts on your ass.

I would know. I grew up in a neighborhood with highly accurate boys.

Strangely, I've never seen children playing this timeless game in Philadelphia. The closest encounter was after school hours on the corner of 18th and Green, where a group of older men were playing some mutilated version of what I remember from childhood.

Attempting to organize and harness the awesomeness of the spontaneous schoolyard amusement, the Western Wall Ball Club, as far as it knows, is the first official wall ball club in the world. Founded in 2003, the club has a 14-article constitution in which Article IX requires all new members take an oath on a "death ball."

Alas, attempts at an organized wall ball nation seem to have met an untimely end. A number for the club's coordinator was disconnected, and calls to the assistant coordinator resulted in a disgruntled conversation where my inquiries for a Kelly were met with shouting for a "Tony?" and then a "Cody?" and eventually a "Kelly?" but to no avail.

Maybe it's better this way. Wall ball can't be boxed and packaged like its close relatives basketball and soccer. It's a formless game that floats across schoolyards at the mercy of middle schoolers' whims; its rules are rewritten every day.

But I know what wall ball is. It'll always be a game I played with Jamie Katz at the rec center on Monte Hermoso Drive with a tennis ball against two white closet doors. At least that's how it went on the day that sticks in my memory. (*Jess Fuerst*)

Hopscotch

There's a nostalgic innocence to hopscotch, played seemingly 100 years ago by me and my girlfriends, long before crushes and Jordache jeans overturned our lives. Back then we needed nothing more than a piece of chalk, a rock from my mother's garden and a warm breeze flowing through my backyard to pass a lazy spring day.

Since it was my yard, I was the one who designed the long rectangular box, added the numbered squares, and carefully drew the dome at the top as a place of rest. I'd then stand poised at the starting line, like a ski jumper on the mount, and gently toss the stone into 1.

At that decisive moment, I'd leap and plant both feet into 2 and 3. Then I'd hop to 4 and hope to make my way to the top. When I did, the dome provided only a quick haven before I had to head back down the course and pick up the rock—all without losing my balance or stepping on a line.

The game, which made its way from ancient Britain to my backyard in North Philadelphia, sounds easy until you're tossing to any square past 3. It sounds easy until your Reeboxed feet start tingling on the black concrete. But you don't care. The desire to be the first to complete the course, tossing that stone from 1 through 9, hopping your way from start to finish, is too strong.

At some point during our exhibition the screen door would swing open, and my mom would step out with cups and a pitcher of lemonade. She'd set it all on the table and sit in her chair with a watchful eye. But not for long. She'd soon be at the starting line, tossing the stone into 1. Then just like that, there she'd be, making her way down the course. And there we'd be, idling on the sidelines, soaking up sunshine, waiting for our turn.

Miss. Miss. Miss! She never did. She never missed a toss. She never lost her balance. She never stepped on a line. She was a hopscotch god.

If hopscotch were an Olympic sport, she'd win the gold every time. In the history books she'd be right up there with athletic giants like Wilma Rudolph and Althea Gibson. Maybe her petiteness made her quick and agile like a cat. Maybe her wisdom made her judicious with her tosses and leaps.

Whatever the reason, her game seemed effortless, like something she did on a lazy spring day in between sips of lemonade. God, I hated playing with her. But there were a few times when I secretly cheered her on. There were times when seeing her smile made me smile, when her being that good made me want to be that good. It still does.

Which after all these years makes me wonder: Do girls still play hopscotch? And if they do, do their mothers still watch? (*K.G.*)

Halfball

There are certain indisputable facts that ring true for all teenagers. You'll look back and regret that atrociously trendy hair cut. You'll wear something ridiculous to the prom. You'll get pimples.

But sometimes having pimples isn't always a bad thing. At least not when the pimples are on your balls.

Strike that. Too dirty.

According to Bob Montgomery, Cheltenham native and former halfball player, pimple balls were the

weapon of choice for pickup games of halfball, a bastardized combination of baseball and stickball.

"You cut a pimple ball in half. A pimple ball had a star on each end and rows of dots all around it, bumps that stuck up and a line down the center, so you could always get it dead center. A pimple ball was always the best for halfball," Montgomery recalls.

Halfball was played throughout Philadelphia and other major cities during the 1950s and 1960s, and though the game's origins are unknown, there's much speculation about the birth of the sport.

"The way I figure it started was in the inner city," says Montgomery. You couldn't play baseball with cars parked all over the place—you'd constantly be paying for new car windows and house windows and whatever. Plus, if you hit a whole rubber ball and it hit a car, it'd make a *thwack*, and you'd get people yelling at you. So you'd cut a ball in half, flip it inside out, and if you hit it, it would just bounce away and it wouldn't make any noise, and nobody got upset."

John Kodis, founder and owner of Halfball.com, has a similar theory. According to his site, "Halfball began when a group of kids were playing a stickball game and the white pimple ball split in half. Having no money for a new ball, the boys started throwing the ball at each other. All of a sudden one of the halfballs began to float toward the batter like a flying saucer. Legend has it that the batter doubled off a triple-decker."

Though Montgomery admits that rules for the game changed from block to block and from street to street, he clearly remembers his neighborhood's rules: "We played with whatever number of guys you had, and we'd split up. You didn't need nine guys or five guys. We just played for distance. If it went up to the green car, it was a single. If it went to the red car, it was a double, and so on. There was no fielding because halfballs don't bounce, and as I remember, you either missed it or you hit it a mile."

Despite being a decidedly middle-class sport—in lieu of bats, most players used small broom handles wrapped in tape—Halfball.com offers a \$30 starter set with three balls and a specially handcrafted bat. An additional \$60 will score you some customized bat engraving. And for the true halfball enthusiasts, there are several pieces of apparel—including a silk halfball necktie—that can be purchased for less than \$40.

Robert Montgomery says he enjoyed halfball because it accentuated his skills. "I was fair at best. But I was a rotten fielder, so I made out good."

And there ain't nothing dirty about that. (*Erica Palan*)

Basketball



While your bracket has been in shambles since about the second day of the NCAA tournament, March Madness will wrap up in just a few days (when it becomes April). As the weather gets nicer, thousands of Philadelphians break out their high tops, dig in the garage for that old basketball with the perfect shooting touch, and head to the neighborhood playground.

There aren't any set rules for playground basketball. Sure, the games are all basketball at heart, but the rules are different, and not just because a bucket is usually worth one point. (Tip: This means threes—now worth two—have greater value, so bomb away.) The game might be half-court or full, might be five-on-five or two-on-two, might not have a net—but probably will, though not a chain one anymore. Sometimes players stop and walk it down to the other end full court, and sometimes everybody cherry picks, and virtually every point is scored on the fast break.

Nobody's getting the ball down from a peach basket, but games do vary widely. Sometimes you have a good ball; sometimes you have one that seems to be made of hard plastic. Sometimes the court is pristine; sometimes there are cracks everywhere. Nowadays you usually have a three-point line.

Even the pros started by playing pickup. Wilt Chamberlain played at the Shepard Rec Center at 57th and Haverford. Sonny Hill, who runs the eponymous summer league, played there too. The Hank Gathers Rec Center, nee Moylan Rec, at 25th and Diamond, hosted a bevy of Philadelphia greats, including Chamberlain, Wali Jones, Guy Rodgers and Dawn Staley.

The courts at 33rd and Diamond down the street have equally good pickup games. Ditto Eighth and Diamond. It's not all Diamond Street, though. The courts at 16th and Susquehanna, 10th and Lombard and 20th and Chew have received top ratings in recent years.

Not everybody plays pickup. Grow up in the Northeast and you'll play knockout, a game with a line of players shooting jumpers from the free-throw line. Or you might play roughhouse, a game with three to

15 or so people where the rules are lax and the elbows are sharp. Alone, you might just shoot free throws, or play beat the pro, where you lose if you don't make 10 shots before you miss five.

And as the temperatures warm up, the courts of Philadelphia put rims back up, and the high tops begin to hit the asphalt, all you need to do is grab a ball and get out there. *(Daniel McQuade)*

Breakdancing

As the applause echoing off the sun-baked bricks of Rittenhouse Square recedes, we huddle around our backpack of crumpled bills. "Yo, there's 20s in this jawn," Rukkus whispers as he pauses to extract a tiny note hidden within our Saturday street-show earnings.

He reads slowly: "'To the boy in the jade necklace'—yo, Metal, that's you!" he says to me. "There's three phone numbers here, son!"

Maybe the girls who wrote the message to our Repstyles crew didn't understand how we view breakdancing as a true art and a means to express ourselves. But they did get how our games are played, and their three-in-one note was definitely helping me win.

Breakdancing (or B-boying) predates *You Got Served* and iPod commercials. It contains more than just the recognizable power moves (continual gymnastic-like spins), blow-ups (crowd-pleasing, gravity-defying poses and movements), footwork (rapid leg shuffling while on all fours) and toprocks (rhythmic upright dance steps and kicks).

The first B-boys in the 1970s were solely about having fun when they dragged flattened refrigerator boxes onto street corners in the Bronx. When the dance craze spread to Philadelphia and reached its heyday around '83 and '84, kids were buggin' out on what seemed like every sunny patch of concrete.

"B-boys were outside everywhere!" remembers one Walnut Room DJ. "Cats wouldn't hit—they'd just dance or straight get their battles on." He recalls how many of Philly's dance legends got their start B-boying on the streets. "Peace [of Illstyle & Peace Productions], Rennie Harris [of Puremovement] and his crew Scanner Boys were gettin' down in my neighborhood like every day."

In Rittenhouse we try to keep the true-school soul of buggin' out alive, but our outdoor breakin' also comes with myriad implicit contests. If rivals seem to call out or challenge us, then we battle or attempt to best them in dance.

There are other mini-games too: Who can score the most digits? Who can get the loudest cheers or laughs? Who can botch someone's solo with the funniest heckling from the sidelines? Who can hit movements in sync with James Brown's funky wails blaring from the stereo? And how long before the cops kick us out? (Advice to future hitters: Malls may boast spin-friendly floors and an assortment of females, but they also have antsy security guards. Steer clear.)

At first glance our Repstyles crew might look like a bunch of guys simply showing off in the park. But our funk keeps Rittenhouse alive every sunlit weekend. And I still keep that prize note hidden in our backpack. *(Mark Wong)*



Bocce

"Bocce is a social event. It's a way for decrepit old men to get by and think they're still athletes," says Fil Verticelli, an original member of the Real Italians, winning team of 11 out of 15 championships in the Villari Bocce League. "Once we get old enough to stop thinking about playing pickup basketball, well, this is one of the lesser evils."

Bocce, as played by the Villari Bocce League on an indoor court in South Philadelphia, is certainly a social event. One might even say it borders on a full-blown soiree.

The game is simple, and has roots in ancient Rome. The essence, according to the United States Bocce Federation, is "to roll the bocce, a 4.5-inch ball weighing about 3 pounds, as close as possible to the pallino, a 1.75-inch ball which is rolled down the alley first. The bocce closest to the pallino scores. Twelve points constitute a game."

The game, as played by the Villari Bocce League, is incidental, although the Real Italians make sure visitors are aware of who's won the most championships. While the Federation declares that bocce demands "good judgment of distance, the ability to size up a situation immediately and the proper

psychological frame of mind," what's really important at the weekly all-male gatherings is the wine, the cigars and the wit.

Verticelli comes straight from his finance job in Manhattan for the Monday evening games, bringing red wine, red grapes, cheddar cheese and bulbs of fennel. "I don't have a chance to eat dinner," he explains as he slices the cheese and fennel, and arranges them on a plate as hors d'oeuvres. "Sal brings me pasta from the restaurant."

Sal is restaurateur Sal D'Angelo of D'Angelo's restaurant and one of an interesting assortment of players that showed up one recent evening. Ranging in age from their mid-30s to their 70s, many claim proud middle-age paunches and graying hair. Others are slim and wiry, and sport trendy Adidas sneakers. In addition to the restaurateurs and finance guys, there are attorneys, film distributors, dentists, professors and well-known artists.

The league, founded in 1991, includes six teams of five to eight members, only four of whom can play in a game. The teams have changed over the years, but currently include the Real Italians, the Neo-Notsos (formerly the Notsos, as Joe Evancich, the de facto and du jour commissioner of the league explains, because they were not so Italian, not so Jewish), the RCs (*Rompere Coglione*, which basically means ball-busters), the Wise Guys, the New Bloods and the Blind Jews (a hybrid of two previous teams—the Venetian Blinds and Joe and the Jews).

As the players stroll through the door, wine bottles are uncorked, beer bottles are uncapped and cigars are lit. The din on the courts increases in proportion to the thickening haze of acrid smoke. Good-natured insults are shouted across the room, ribbing ensues and posturing commences.

"A big part of the subculture of bocce is needling each other," explains Steve Tyre, a member of the Blind Jews.

Eventually the teams wander onto the courts and assemble. The pallino is tossed, and the bocce are gently bowled down the AstroTurf surface. The game moves at a leisurely pace, leaving plenty of time for lobbing one-liners and swirling wine in plastic cups. The room quiets down toward the end of each game, the players focusing on the last bocce rolled, then fills up again with the sounds of victory and defeat.

Dr. Richard Tobey, a newer member of the New Bloods who likes it so much he built a bocce court in his summer home, describes the sport best: "It's a great excuse for a cocktail party." (*Kirsten Henri*)

Dice



"It's a hustler's game. You got people in Philly who really live off shooting dice," says Gillie Da Kid, the Major Figgas rapper from the Erie Avenue section of North Philly. "In the 'hood you'll find it everywhere—anywhere there's ground and a wall that's kind of smoothed out with not too many cracks in it. You can gamble on the same block all week long and not gamble in the same spot. You might gamble at the top of the block one day, in the middle of the block the next day, on somebody's porch the next day."

In Philly you'll find kids as young as 12 shooting with men as old as 60. "Money has no age," says Gillie, who started playing at 14, but got heavily sucked into the game in his early 20s. "I was playing every day. I had a serious problem. I wasn't always losing, but I wasn't always winning either."

He says the most he ever pocketed "from a 'hood dice game" was about \$6,500. At big games with a lot of bettors, he's watched guys go home with \$80,000 or more.

"Rolling bones"—an expression that dates back to when ancient Greeks and Romans played with sheep anklebones instead of

plastic cubes—has a small vocabulary of its own. "Fever," for example, means five. But mostly the language of dice is pure and simple shit-talk.

"There's all kinds of sayings, unbelievable sayings," explains Gillie. "Your number could be five, and the person shooting is saying, 'Come on, it was me and four bitches at the hotel room last night!' And then the guy who wants you to hit seven, he'll say, 'Aw, I thought it was you and six bitches!' Or if your number is eight but the person you're betting against wants you to hit seven, he'll say dumb stuff like, 'I thought you was from Seventh and Erie. Show me that seven.'"

Although you'll find people playing regular street dice everywhere in the country, some cities don't lay odds. In those spots, rolling a four or 10 pays the same as rolling a less statistically probable five or nine, or even a six or eight. In Philly a four or 10 pays 2-1, or double. A five or nine pays 3-2.

"I never want to get on the dice [in other cities]," says Gillie. "Some places if you hit a four, you're just betting straight up. We look at that as robbery." (*K.K.*)

Ball States

Americans are missing out on the world's greatest sport, along with its many mutations.

// By Steven Wells

America, as we all know, is the greatest county in the world, ever. But it's not perfect. Because this great nation needs only two things to make it a veritable paradise on earth: kettles (to make decent tea) and soccer street games.

Seriously. What is wrong with you people? With your silly dodgeball and four square and 500? Why don't you just put the ball down and kick it? You know you want to.

Unlike the so-called "American" sports, soccer and its many street mutations needs no special equipment and can be played anywhere—on grass, snow or asphalt, a flat surface or a slope. Outdoors or indoors. Upstairs, downstairs or in your lady's chamber.

Coupla bags or coats or small children for goal posts, and you're ready to play. No soccer ball? No problem. You got a golf ball, a pair of rolled up socks, a Coke can, a frozen turkey, a bundle of rags or the freshly severed head of a vanquished foe? Then you're good to go.

I've heard of a couple of gents playing the game in a lady's boudoir using a Ferrero Rocher chocolate. I know of a mental nurse who played the game with an old patient "who thought he had fairies in his legs" using a cockroach for a ball. *PW's* own Cassidy Hartmann remembers using a roadkilled kookaburra for a ball in Australia. "It might have been late and I might have been drunk," she says. "But it remains the greatest night of my life."

So you've killed your bird and put down your coats. Now you're all soccered up. So here's your guide to the mutant bastard street offspring of the world's favorite game.

Slam Think soccer-squash. You need a wall and a ball (or ball substitute). Players are allowed one kick to keep the ball in play.

Three and In Two bags for goal posts. The goalkeeper hurls the ball into a frenzied each-man-for-himself mob of attackers. First player to score thrice becomes the 'keeper.

World Cup/Wembley The knockout version of the above. The last person to score drops out—round by round—until only two remain.

Attack and Defense One set of goals. One team defends; the other attacks until three goal-kicks have been conceded. Then the sides switch.

Psycho Soccer/No-Rules Soccer The game of choice on playgrounds all over the non-American speaking world. The rules? There are no rules. Just two goals, a ratty tennis ball and a two howling mobs of snarling, sweat-drenched and borderline psychotic adolescents.

This is of course the original "football" game—the undisciplined and anarchic gnarly granddad of football, soccer and rugby—as it was played for centuries between rival villages in merry ol' England.

This is "football" as it was before tape measures and clocks, TV advertising and a set of rules so byzantine that no one except anal-retentive social inadequates really understands them.

The soccer template is so adaptable that it's evolved superior versions of most other sports. Kickball is much better than boring old baseball, for instance. And five-a-side indoor soccer is way more fun than the overelaborate hockey and basketball mutations it so closely resembles.

So there you have it. No hoops, no pads, no gloves, no sticks, no tedious time-outs or sissy helmets.

One day soon America's children will wake up from their century-long isolationist sporting coma and stop playing with themselves. They'll join the rest of the world in the parks, in the playgrounds and on the streets, playing frenzied, savagely competitive, super-aerobic and hastily improvised versions of the only game that matters.

Photographs by Jeff Fusco // Art direction by Sara Green // Photo assistance by Michael Persico // Styling by Melanie Cotton // Models: Mark Wong, Steve Lunger, Jaamal Benjamin, Emiko Sugiyama, Macca Malik, Melanie Cotton, Sara Green.

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