

Boys of Summer in Yonkers (Memoir Excerpt # 1)

by Gary Percesepe

Boys of summer in Yonkers played stickball and baseball. Baseball was played at Pelton Field, a short walk from our Lawrence Street apartment if you cut through the "old fogies home" near the convent at Saint Dennis, to get to McLean Avenue. Stickball was played against the wall of P.S. 13, the "Annex," where one of us would free hand a kid sized strike zone with white chalk, a neatly drawn box that went from our skinned knees up to the "letters" (though no one wore uniforms, unless you count the plain white T shirts our mothers purchased at Robert Hall). Both activities were mercifully free of adult supervision, which I think was the point—how could you have any fun with adults around? The kids on our block—me and my best friend David Martin, Fat Sam (also nicknamed Yogi, because he had the only catcher's mitt on the block, and looked like a natural backstop), Kenny, Dean, Tony, and the rest—had the good sense to recruit, organize, and police ourselves. If we fought, we fought. Blood, dirt, and baseball seemed to go together, and we always made up before we went home anyway, because you had to have nine guys and couldn't risk pissing off someone permanently. Little League? We hadn't heard of it.

Playing stickball was cheap. You got one of your mom's old broom handles, cut it down to size with your dad's saw, and you were good to go. No gloves were required, you played barehanded. The biggest expense was a Spaldeen—a small blue ball that cost a buck-ninety-nine at Charlie's corner store. When new, a Spaldeen bounced like a blue demon; smacked with a broom handle in the summer heat, it took off like an Apollo rocket. Hitting a Spaldeen with a one inch broom handle took the eyesight of a young Ted Williams and the

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courage of Mickey Mantle—a fastball taken in the neck could leave a welt for days. A bigger danger was losing the ball. Outfielders were under a lot of pressure. If the ball was hit over the fence you had to somehow keep an eye on it as you scrambled over the fence (there was no time to run all the way around the yard to the gate), before it went down the sewer or got knocked clear out of sight by passing cars on McLean Avenue, which was thick with traffic even then. If you lost a ball it meant the end of the game, which sucked, and made for a long walk home. None of us had the money for another ball. We'd have to wait for someone's allowance to kick in, or worse, beg a parent for a new ball, which would prompt the inevitable questions, "What the hell did you do with the last one I got you? You think I'm made of money? You think money grows on trees?"

When we didn't feel like walking over to the school yard we played a modified form of street stickball on Saratoga Avenue. There were two versions. The first involved bouncing the ball off the one inch ledge that ran the length of the firehouse at the bottom of the hill. This version could be played with just two guys, making it popular during holidays, when a lot of the kids on the block were gone with their families somewhere, or grounded, or both. By varying the angle that you threw the ball against the facing of the ledge you could produce a line drive, a grounder (automatic out) or a fly ball. If you hit one over the old lady's hedge across the street and into her yard it was a home run. Of course, it also meant the game was over, since the old lady had long since forbidden us to go into her yard, and asking her to retrieve it for us was out of the question. Go for the home run for yourself or keep the ball in play for your partner and you to play another inning, another day? The benefit of the individual or the group? We didn't know it at the time, but it was the classic risk/reward scenario, and my first introduction to the troublesome field of ethics.

The second version (my favorite) involved pitching the Spalden downhill on one bounce to a batter who stood beside home plate (a sewer cover). First base was the back bumper of the Martin family's Chevy; second was a large tar spot in the middle of the street up the

hill; third was the corner of the curb in front of Kenny's house. What to do if the ball hit a car and bounced up in the air? This was a weekly dispute. We invented our own rules on the fly. I still remember when we made a ruling that lasted an entire summer: Catching off cars was allowed. This became a specialty of mine. I liked cars. Judging the angle that a Spaldeen would bounce off the hood of a car or a curved windshield and lunging to make the catch before the ball hit the ground was all about good hands, impeccable timing, and gauging angles—good preparation for tenth grade geometry. If the ball bounced up high in the air there was time for your teammates to scream out the agreed upon rule, "Catching off cars!" as you camped beneath the ball, picking out the tiny blue sphere against the morning sun. Can of corn. The biggest annoyance were the constant stream of cars going down Saratoga Avenue (it was a one way street). When we spotted one at the top of the hill of the short street there would be a chorus of boys' voices raised in alarm, "CAAAAAAAR!," and we would flatten against the cars on the street to get out of the way, waving to the passing neighbors in their long finned Chevys and Fords (there were few Cadillacs or even Pontiacs in our neighborhood).

On the opposite side of the street from Kenny's house was a junk yard run by a mysterious man named Izzy, who traveled up and down the streets of Yonkers in a horse drawn cart, collecting, I guess, junk. I mean, to others it might have been junk, but to us kids it all looked like cool stuff. Izzy's yard—what we could see of it through the tiny peepholes in the tall fence that guarded his property—was filled with white appliances and toilets and car engines and the odd piece of furniture, piled high and guarded by a fierce German Shepherd. It seemed odd to have a grown man in the neighborhood who collected junk for a living. Is this something that adults did? Our parents didn't know much about Izzy either, though it was rumored that he was rich. This made him even more fascinating to us. You could get rich on junk? It seemed like a kid's fantasy. All that and you got to have a horse. Izzy had his name stenciled on the back of his cart. His horse, whose name we did not

know, wore black blinders, and was never seen unless harnessed to his cart. Presumably, he lived somewhere in Izzy's yard, though we could not make out a barn or anything suitable for a horse to live in. Granted, we were city kids and didn't know much about horses. From time to time, playing stickball in the street, we could hear him nickering in the yard. After a while, the big gate would swing open and out would come Izzy driving his horse, with the cowbells that were mounted above his head on the cart ringing as he drove down Saratoga Avenue. Izzy would nod at us—we never heard him utter a word—and we would all nod back. After they were gone we would pick up the game, on the alert again for cars.

