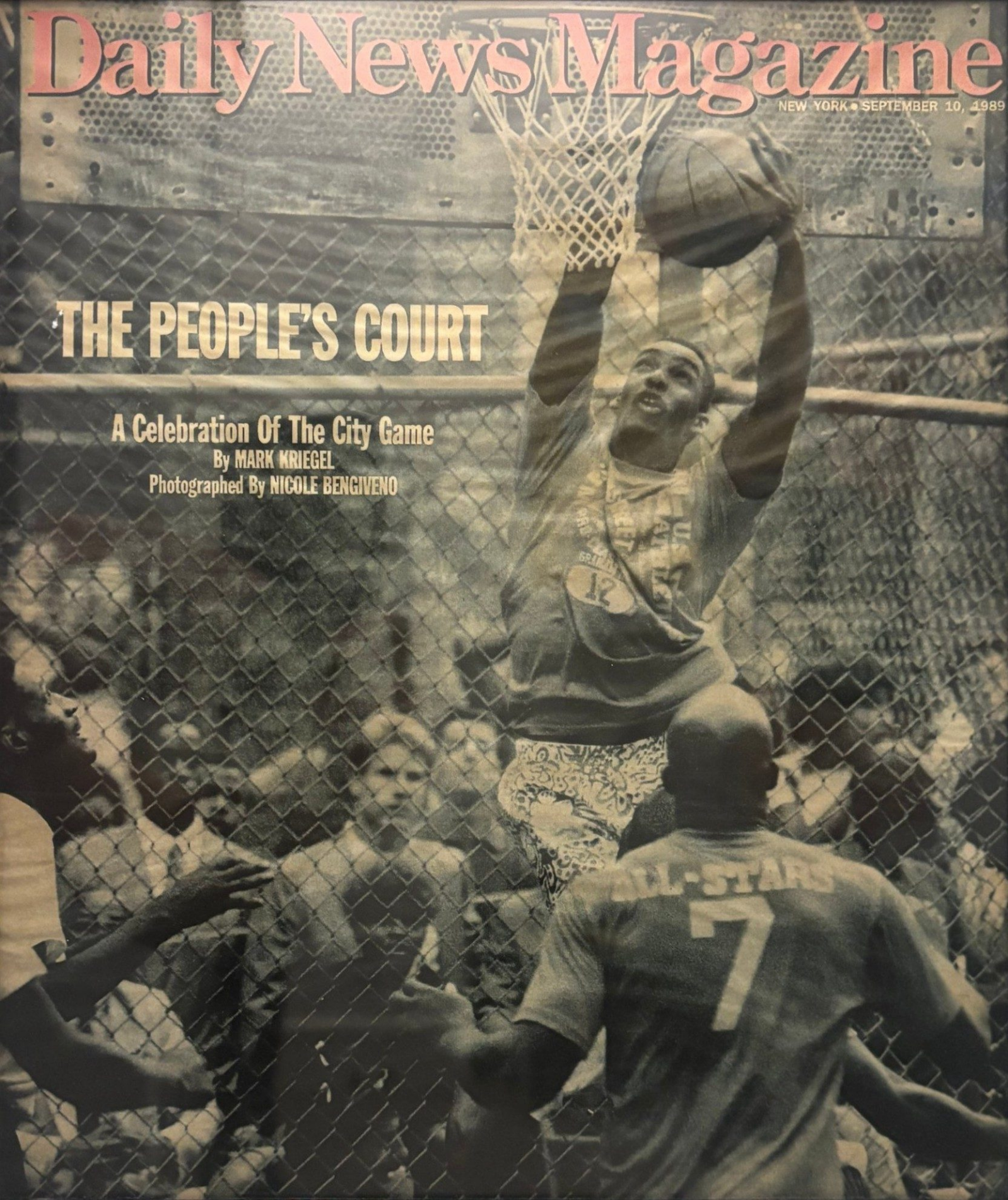
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THE PEOPLE'S COURT

A Celebration Of The City Game

By MARK KRIEGEL
Photographed By NICOLE BENGIVENO

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NINETY-THREE IN THE shade and spectators line the fence four deep. They've come to witness the return of Lloyd Daniels — "Sweet Pea" — who has declared his intention to play basketball this day with a temperature of 102 and a bullet in his right shoulder.

He is the latest, greatest attraction of a game that is ever in a golden age, and the people have been waiting to see if Lloyd Daniels is a has-been at the age of 21. They know that bullets have a way of ending a ballplayer's dreams. They know that Fly Williams, Sweet Pea's elder acquaintance from Brownsville, can't run anymore, not since he got his lung shot out.

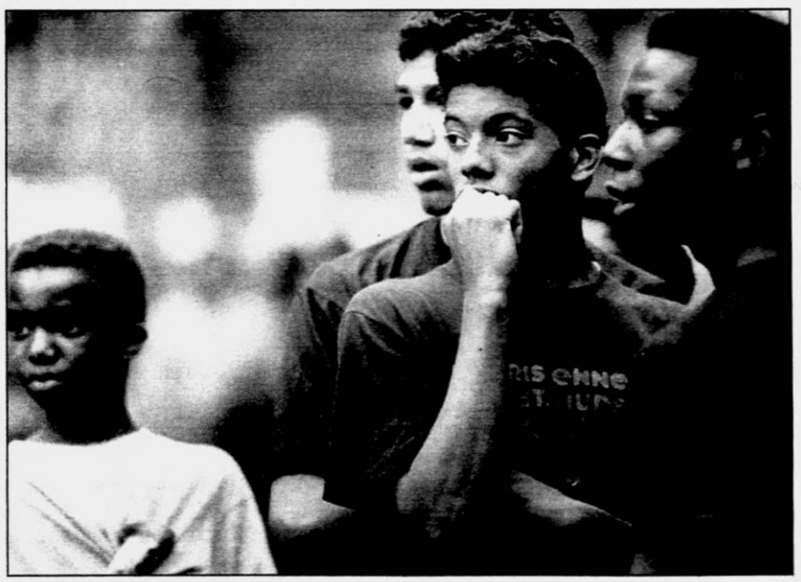
Understand that the court at Sixth Avenue and W. Fourth Street is a box, with little room to move. The players distinguish themselves by dunking and pinning each other's shots against the backboard. But Sweet Pea brings a different music to a playground.

He can shoot like a marksman. But today, Sweet Pea puts on a show just passing the ball. His passes explode as fast as shrapnel, are received as soft as feathers. They say Lloyd Daniels has eyes in the back of his head. Believe it.

The fans deem it a triumphant comeback: *Check out Sweepea, he thread the needle.*

Sweepea the best, and he ain't even trying.

Bullets don't stop my man Lloyd.



FORGET BROADWAY. THE TOWN'S best theater is in the schoolyards.

This city's game is basketball. It's funky opera, with tainted heroes and Faustian bargains. It's vanity. It's youth. It's battered Brownsville, pure as a jump shot, arrogant as a 360-slam. It's the bullet in Sweet Pea's shoulder; it's the majesty in the way he plays.

The city game is a distillation of its home. It imitates New York, with all the native vice and grace, a beautifully treacherous art. After all, this is the city of Sky Masterson and Superfly. That's how the fellas are gonna play.

The schoolyards and playgrounds establish a frame of reference, a personal landmark, for all who have played. You talk to ballplayers, you hear the phrase: "Back in the day."

It means different things to different people. For World B. Free, it was admittance to the closed fraternity of magnificent ballplayers like Country James and Juice at "66 Park" in Brownsville.

For Connie Hawkins, it was all-city at Boys High. For Jocko Jackson, it was two guys named Reeves and Drakeford. For Earl Manigault, the legendary "Goat" of Harlem, it meant omnipotence. It was being able to dunk twice before returning to Planet Earth. It was a pure time, before the heroin.

"Back in the day" is another way of saying *when we were young.*

And that is enough. To have been young and played the game.

JUST AS LEGENDS LIKE CONNIE Hawkins belonged to the '60s and Fly Williams the '70s, Sweet Pea Daniels will evoke his own time. He is a New York story.

A few years back, he was this city's best prospect since Kareem Abdul Jabbar. A natural, the kid was, a pure 6-9 guard. Guys like him come along about once a decade.

Sweet Pea read the printed word at a third-grade level, but he understood the game like a scholar understands ancient scrolls. That was enough for a big-time basketball school like the University of Nevada/ Las Vegas. Sweet Pea went to Vegas to be Magic Johnson with a jump shot.

But he crapped out when he handed an undercover narc $20 for a piece of the rock. Sweet Pea was sent back home, where, one day last May, a few kids from the neighborhood came calling. It seems he owed somebody a balance of about $10 on an old crack

Lloyd "Sweet Pea" Daniels (left), the latest sensation, puts on a show at the W. Fourth Street cage.

debt. New York isn't Vegas. You don't play long on credit. The baby-faced ballplayer took three slugs in the chest.

For Sweet Pea, it's either the pros or the streets. "All I need is a chance," he says. "I can't even think about failing." Every day is a new drug test. "Working hard and pissing clean," he says, that's success.

It's not that sure a bet. But, whatever happens, Sweet Pea is ours. He belongs to New York. And someday, the parkies and the gym rats will talk of Lloyd Daniels, and they will begin by saying, "Back in the day. . . ."

THE REAL NEW YORK FADES FROM memory. The Art Deco splendor of the Chrysler Building has given way to Trump's towers. The automobile rendered stickball all but extinct. The Polo Grounds is a housing project where the signs read "No Ballplaying Allowed."

But the schoolyards survive, each a unique municipal miracle of asphalt, steel and chain-link fencing, arenas with more than 2,000 basketball rims around the city.

"The schoolyard was a way of life," says Ernie Grunfeld, who played, by turns, for Forest Hills High, the University of Tennessee and the Knicks. Now an assistant coach for the Knicks, Grunfeld came to New York via Rumania. Like most 9-year-olds who speak not a word of English, he had few friends. So he began to show up at the schoolyards, first on Austin Street, later at I.S. 8 in Jamaica and P.S. 209 in Bayside.

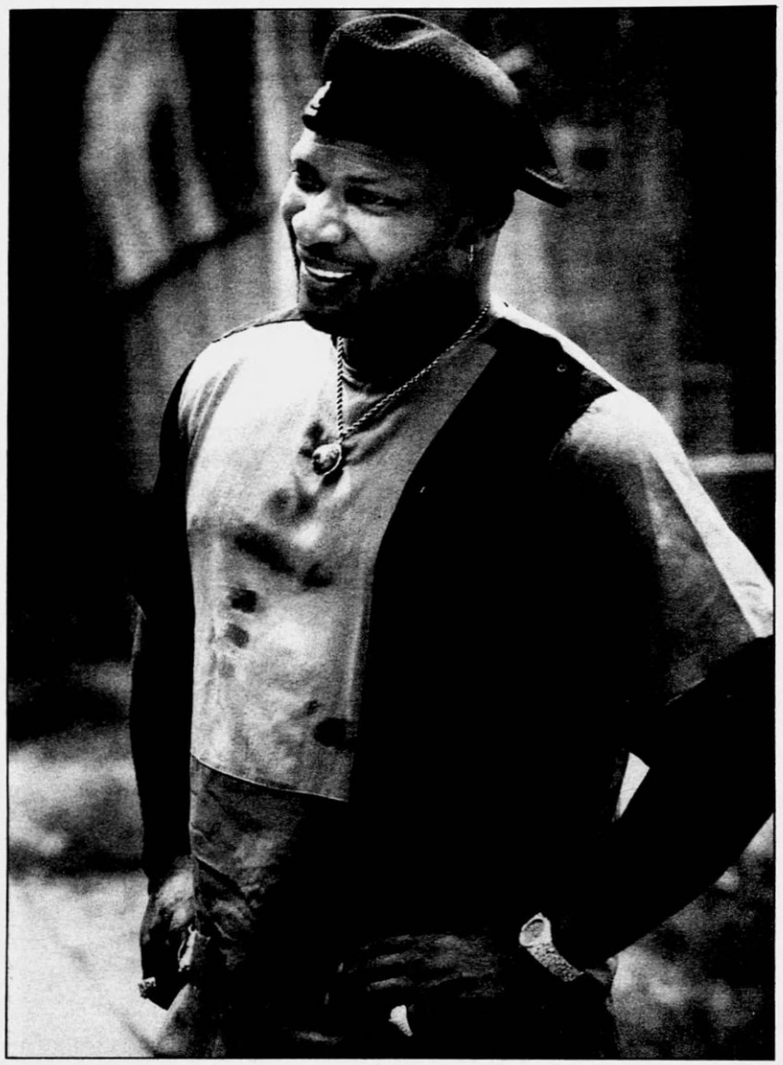
It was an apprenticeship in a whole new etiquette.

The games vary: five-on-five full court, three-man half-court, both straight-ups and take it back. There are other diversions designed for an odd number of players: "Taps," "21," "Knockout." The points differ: Some parks play to 32 by twos. Others, 21 by ones. Courtesies are reserved for extraordinary circumstances. Hence the maxim: *No blood, no foul.*

The parks are a meritocracy. All that's for sure is that the winners stay on.

"You go down to the playgrounds and there still are more players than baskets," says Grunfeld. "Demand outweighs supply. The winners stay on the court. You lose and you have to wait an hour and a half for the next game. No one wants to wait."

It's always been like that. And it always will be.



It is a game, like boxing, where the best come from the worst neighborhoods. It is a game of gangster style, where rank is reputation and reputation is deed.

"The challenge of the schoolyard remains the same," says Knicks broadcaster John Andariese. "The challenge is to play more games than anyone else, to become part of it, to be recognized," At age 50, Andariese, a hopeless basketball junkie, still drives by playgrounds asking himself, "Can I play with these guys?"

The necessities of "Winners" evolved into a distinctive brand of basketball. Nothing is left to chance, no outside shots to be perverted by the wind. That's for kids with hoops in their driveways. No, here we take it right to the hole. Any which way we can. And if you can dunk on someone's head, God bless.

The New York ballplayer places a premium on ballhandling, jumping and driving to the basket, abilities that bring you closest to paydirt. "We exported that style to the rest of the country," says Cecil Watkins, 59, who ran the Ray Felix Tournament in East Elmhurst. "New York City opened the game up."

"You had to be real good to stay out there," says Fred Crawford, a former Knick from Harlem. "So the game developed a special way in New York."

WORLD B. FREE, THE FORMER PRO star and now proprietor of World B. Liquors of Bushwick Avenue, cruises through Brownsville in a black Mercedes sedan. The tuner's locked to WBLS, Soul-to-Soul "Keep On Moving, Don't Stop."

"You can't really leave a place like this," he says.

The sedan slows to a halt on Stone Avenue, alongside a playground known as "66 Park." All that's left of a full court is a lot of broken glass and asphalt craters. Gunshots are as common as car horns. The last surviving rim hangs from its backboard at a precarious angle.

"I used to sit on the fence and watch the older guys," he says, "the *real* ballplayers." He runs off names like an old DJ recalling hits that no one remembers: George Young, Joe Washington, Country James, Juice, Tony Jackson, Fly Williams. . . . "I couldn't even step on the court with those guys."

After the games, Free hung around dunking empty beer cans. Pretending. In the winter, he'd shovel snow from the court to practice. In summer, the older guys would play with his ball and pay him no mind. And that was enough until he was 16, and by some accident of fate, there just weren't enough guys to run a game. "They let me on the court," he remembers. "There was no one else to pick."

Free, once known as Lloyd, went on to play 13 years in the National Basketball Association. After a time in 66 Park, he was dubbed "World," an abridged version of the hyper-superlative, "All-World." Never one for modesty, he eventually changed his name to World B. Free.

Beyond the hype, Free personifies the city game, a game, like boxing, where the best come from the worst neighborhoods, places like Brownsville and Harlem and the South Bronx. It is a game of gangster style, where rank is reputation and reputation is deed.

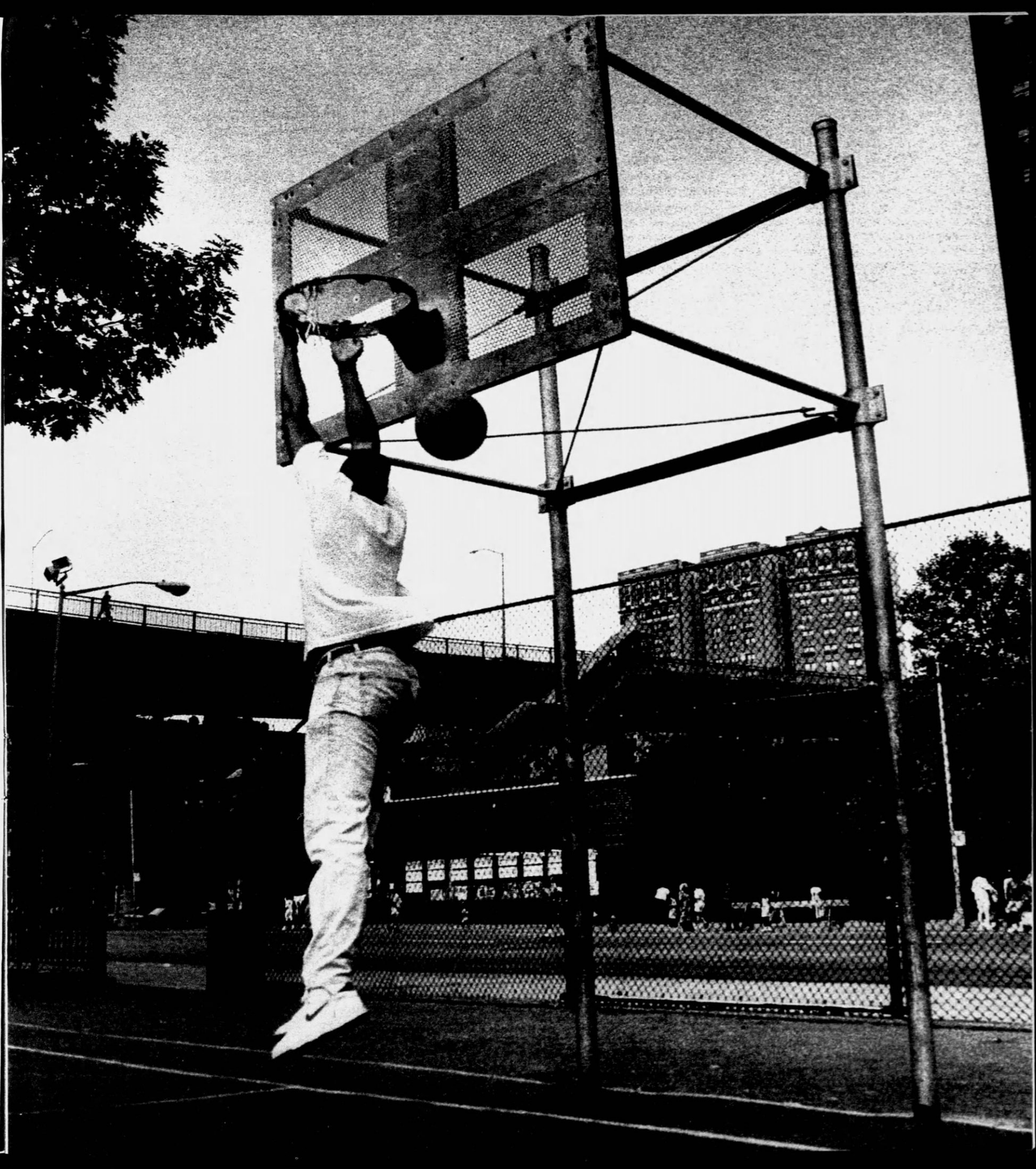
"It's a cold world out here," says Free. "You gotta make sure the other guy's dead and buried or he'll come back and do it to you.

"Once you get a nickname, you're supposed to make it," he says, fingering a gold replica of his planet that dangles below his neck. "I signed a pro contract when I was 16 years old in 66 Park."

The superstar adjusts the brim of his panama hat, puts the Mercedes into gear and talks about the crippled hoop. "If that rim could talk, it would tell you a whole lot of things."

THE GAME LIVES IN MEMORY. Guys who hung around P.S. 80 in the

World B. Free (top): "Once you get a nickname, you're supposed to make it." Right: fabled Rucker court on W. 155th.



Norwood section of the Bronx still speak of three-on-three games with players like Dolph Schayes, Leo Gottlieb and Sonny Herzberg. This was before Truman fired MacArthur, but the witnesses speak of those contests like they were yesterday.

Today, the guys speak of Rod Strickland playing for Truman, or Sid Green for Jefferson or Chris Mullin at Xaverian. The names change, but they fit like lyrics to the same old song. They are important not because they became big-time players, but because they mark time. The golden age is forever.

A while ago, Ed Quinn encountered Frank Layden, then coach of the Utah Jazz, at a game in San Francisco. The two men had not met in almost 40 years. "Remember me?" asked Quinn, now a Shakespearean scholar.

"Sure. From Brooklyn," replied the coach. "You were the kid who played guard at St. Michael's."

"How could you forget that?" Layden recalled later. "He played for St. Michael's, I played for Fort Hamilton. That was a big rivalry. The games were on Friday night, and we'd meet in the park behind Fort Hamilton High School at 8 the next morning and play again. There was as much pride at stake in the schoolyard as there was at Madison Square Garden. Whenever I'm home, I drive by the park, circle it twice. I have to do it. That's where the ghosts are."

CECIL WATKINS HAS SEEN IT ALL, from Jackie Jackson, known to pluck quarters from the top of backboards, to Knicks' point guard Mark Jackson of Queens. But there was a guy who articulated the entire style before anyone else. His name was Connie Hawkins. He came from Bed-Stuy and Boys High. And he was like a jazzman who played bebop while the other guys were playing sheet music.

Those who saw the Hawk almost 30 years ago saw the future.

It was 1960. Connie Hawkins, who had just led Boys High to another city championship, was on his way to the University of Iowa. "We ran an all-star game, New York versus Philly, the second weekend in August, at the P.S. 127 schoolyard in East Elmhurst," remembers Cecil Watkins. "It was a duel. Philly brought in all the big horses. They had this guy Tom Hoover, an all-America, who was killing the New York squad. Finally, Connie shows up at halftime. He doesn't even have a pair of sneakers. Somebody has to lend him a size 14. Anyway, Connie just annihilates Hoover. New York won, Connie was the MVP and people are still talking about that game. I've never seen anything like it. Connie blocked every shot, dunked over everybody. It was like watching Houdini: Now you see it, now you don't."

The Hawk lasted less than a year at Iowa. While on Christmas vacation, with no money in his pockets, he took a $200 loan from one Jack Molinas.

Molinas was a beauty, a pure New York guy. This kid from the West Bronx was a star everywhere he went—Stuyvesant High School, Columbia University and the pros, until he got tossed for betting on his own games. In the summer of 1975, he was gunned down while showing a girlfriend the expansive view from his home in the Hollywood hills.

Nothing is left to chance. That's for kids with hoops in their driveways. Here we take it right to the hole. Any which way we can.

Back in 1961, Molinas was a fixture on the playground scene. He collected players like pinkie rings, gambling they would return his favors by shaving points. That way, Molinas and his bookie friends would beat the spread.

"Maybe he was trying to set me up," reflects Hawkins. "But I was out of money and he was the only one who came to my aid."

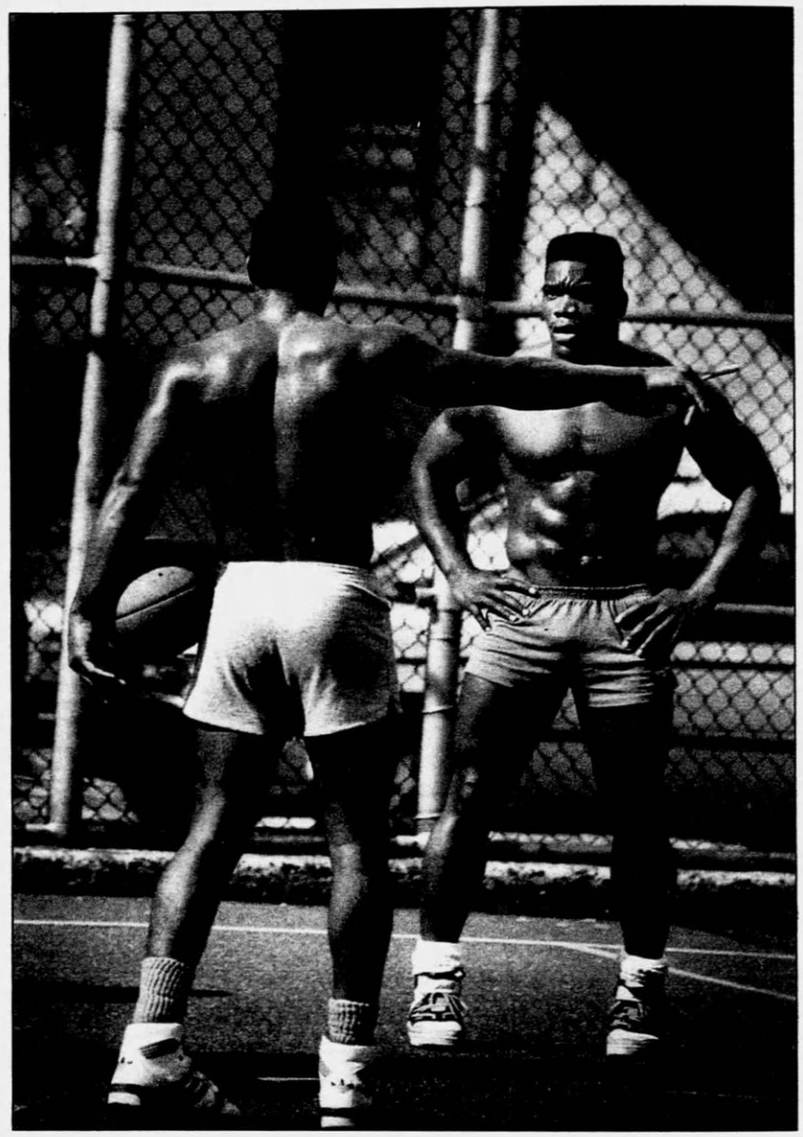
Connie Hawkins didn't even know what a point spread was. It mattered little that evidence against him was invisible. The men who run professional sports are experts on public piety, and they determined that Connie Hawkins, the teenager, didn't have enough integrity to play in the NBA. The $200 handshake cost Hawkins eight years in exile.

The story is instructive. For basketball is New York, and the city's corruptions always will be part of the game.

But now the cast has changed. We have seen newer, badder guys: the heroin pushers, and now the crack dealers. We lose more kids than other cities ever have.

Consider Earl Manigault.

They called him "Goat," a simplification of his surname. He was 14 years old when he first slammed one for Millbank Community Center. "I was above the rim," he remembers,



"and there wasn't nothing else to do with the ball."

It should have been a clear run from there. At 6-foot-1, the Goat obeyed another physics. He could dunk twice before returning to earth. His reputation at Benjamin Franklin High, and more important, at Holcombe Rucker Park, was untouchable.

The Rucker, at 155th Street and Eighth Avenue, was basketball's greatest municipal theater. For the guys who made it—Connie, Cal Ramsey, Tiny Archibald, Jabbar—the Rucker was a summer home. For the guys who didn't—Joe Hammond, Herman "The Helicopter" Knowings, Goat—the park was all that stood between fame and obscurity.

"Everybody was looking to knock you off," says Fred Crawford. "Your reputation was on the line. To me, the games at the Rucker were more important than games in the Garden. People were hanging out of windows, climbing fences to see you play. These were the people you came up with. These were people you knew."

It was Jabbar, himself a city-spawned legend, who christened Goat "the best basketball player his size in the history of New York City."

But as the city learns again and again, talent isn't nearly enough. Manigault became a heroin junkie. And in the junkie's natural progression, he became an inmate, busted for some doomed scheme to heist $6 million.

"I brought myself down," says Manigault, now 44. "But it was New York, and the city can take it all away."

Today, he lives hand-to-mouth from the proceeds of odd jobs in Charleston, S.C. He is clean, and plays ball in a local park. "I chase the young kids. I rest. Then I go back and chase 'em again."

He returns to New York a living

Courtesies are rare; the maxim of this municipal theater: *No blood, no foul.*



ghost. The park at 98th and Amsterdam was christened by the city "The Happy Warrior Playground." But a 13-year-old kid from the neighborhood calls the asphalt by a different name.

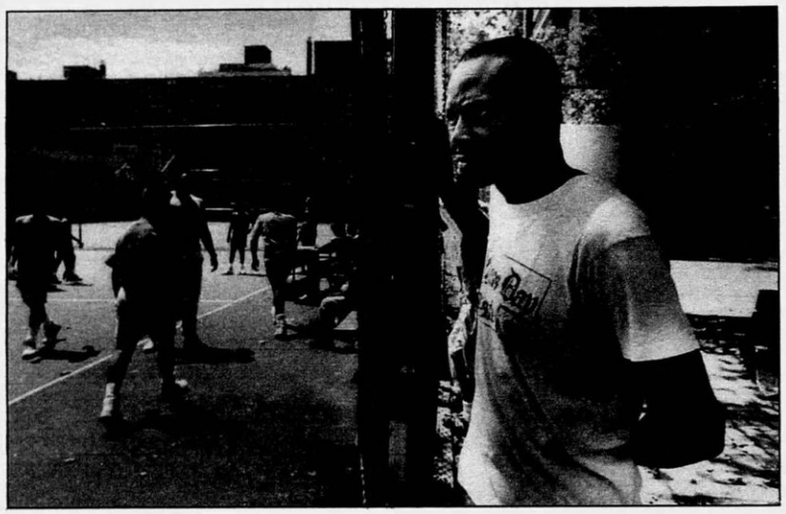
"This is Goat Park," says the kid. "They named the park for him."

SPEND ENOUGH TIME IN THE schoolyards, and you will meet an Earl Manigault or two. They are the sport's unknown soldiers. They were so damn good, but for reasons too much to understand, the city overwhelmed their gifts.

Joe Hammond, who nine years ago set a playground record with 73 points, went away to Dannemora for drugs. "I would write you more," he said in a letter two years ago to a friend, "but it hurts to think about the good times."

Pee Wee Kirkland, whose Bronx battles with Nate Archibald are the stuff of folklore, took a fall on federal drug charges. Fly Williams, known as the best pure talent to come out of Brownsville, was shotgunned during an ill-fated robbery attempt that got him an extended stay on Rikers Island. And Richie Adams, the Benjamin Franklin product picked by the pros, gave in to the drugs.

In Queens, a referee was beaten to death last summer, after making a controversial foul call during a game at Baisley Pond Park. Ask the kids in the



neighborhood: It's no secret that the drug dealers had wagered $50,000 on the playground contest.

And in Manhattan, the Rucker Tournament was moved from its namesake playground, after it was revealed that the dealers were routinely betting five-figure sums on the games.

THE SAME HAZARDS THAT BRING the New York guys down also provide grist for the heroes. They are gentlemen like Det. Larry Smith in Jamaica, who runs the 113th Precinct basketball league, transforming teenagers into college students. Guys like Bob McCullough, 48, who came back from the pros to inherit the legacy of Holcombe Rucker.

It was a mission that began at the age of 12, when McCullough was locked up following his lackluster debut as a gangfighter. Rucker came down to the 32d Precinct, pulled McCullough out of jail and put him on a team called "Saint C."

"Holcombe Rucker saved my life," says McCullough, who founded Harlem's Each One Teach One youth program 22 years ago. "I have a debt to pay."

ON SATURDAY MORNINGS, THE kids flock to P.S. 275 to act in a play previously rehearsed by generations of New Yorkers. They are the Brownsville Jets. You could field a pro team with Jets alumni: World B. Free, Pearl Washington, Fly Williams, Phil Sellers, Geoff Huston, Ice Reynolds, a guy named Jocko. Even the boxer, Eddie Mustafa Muhammed, throw him in there as an enforcer.

But these kids don't know about all that yet. They just want to play ball.

The gymnasium is the same as it's always been — plywood backboards, wooden floor, fountains that occasionally spew warm water. Bouncing balls and screaming kids produce a timeless echo.

They are between 6 and 12, and they move like little men, already hip to the insolent body language that makes the game. They pump, fake, stutterstep, put the ball between their legs, and take it straight to the hole, trying to smack the backboard. For them, the game already is a matter of how much you can get away with.

"We started the Jets 24 years ago," says Greg "Jocko" Jackson, a former Knickerbocker. "We weren't good enough to play with anyone else." And

The kids move like little men, already hip to the insolent body language that makes the game. For them, the game is already a matter of how much you can get away with.

even today, no one is cut from the Brownsville Jets. It is not an aristocracy of talent, like the teams from Riverside Church or the Bronx Gauchos. To play is enough.

The original roster included Jocko and his buddies Willie Reeves and Wyman Drakeford. When they weren't playing ball, they were running in the streets doing things Jocko doesn't discuss.

Then, Jocko met a counselor in a community center, Ed Towns, who told him, "I know you can be a nice guy." Towns, now a Brooklyn congressman, got Jocko out of Tilden High and sent him to North Carolina for a year. Cool the kid out.

That was the year Reeves and Drakeford found smack. "I think it was Willie's first time," says Brownsville's first Jet. By the time Jocko got back to the city, his best friends had died the bad death of an overdose. They were 17.

The kids at 275 wear the names "Reeves and Drakeford" on their jerseys. A city park worker, Daryl Glenn, bought the shirts, $576 out of his own pocket.

Jocko and his partner, Ron Jones, look at the kids. "They might be better than we were," says Jones.

Here in Brownsville, the past informs the present. Some of these kids will be lost like Reeves and Drakeford. For others, the Jets will provide the margin of safety needed to become big-time ballplayers like World B. Free or park workers like Daryl Glenn or, with a break, maybe lawyers or doctors.

But they all will remember the Brownsville Jets. They all will remember what it was like to have been young and played the game. Back in the day. ■

Mark Kriegel is a Daily News staff writer.

The fallen Earl "Goat" Manigault (top); in Brownsville, Jamatic Davis aspires.

The Biggest Ballgame In Town

THINK OF IT AS A BASKETBALL ORGY, AN UNADULTERATED celebration of this city's game.

Seventy courts, 850 teams, 3,500 ballplayers getting busy in the shadow of the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan. A symphony for any basketball junkie. Lose twice and you're gone. Keep on winning and you play the winning squads from LA, Chicago and Atlanta. Get out of that alive and it's cake. All you gotta do is face a few more guys — Pat Ewing, James Worthy, Dominique Wilkins.

So it will be Sept. 22-24 at the Daily News/Budweiser Three-on-Three Challenge. Teams will be broken down into divisions based on age, height and experience. Please, no kiddies. This is three-on-three, a game old ballplayers still can play. There also will be women's and wheelchair divisions.

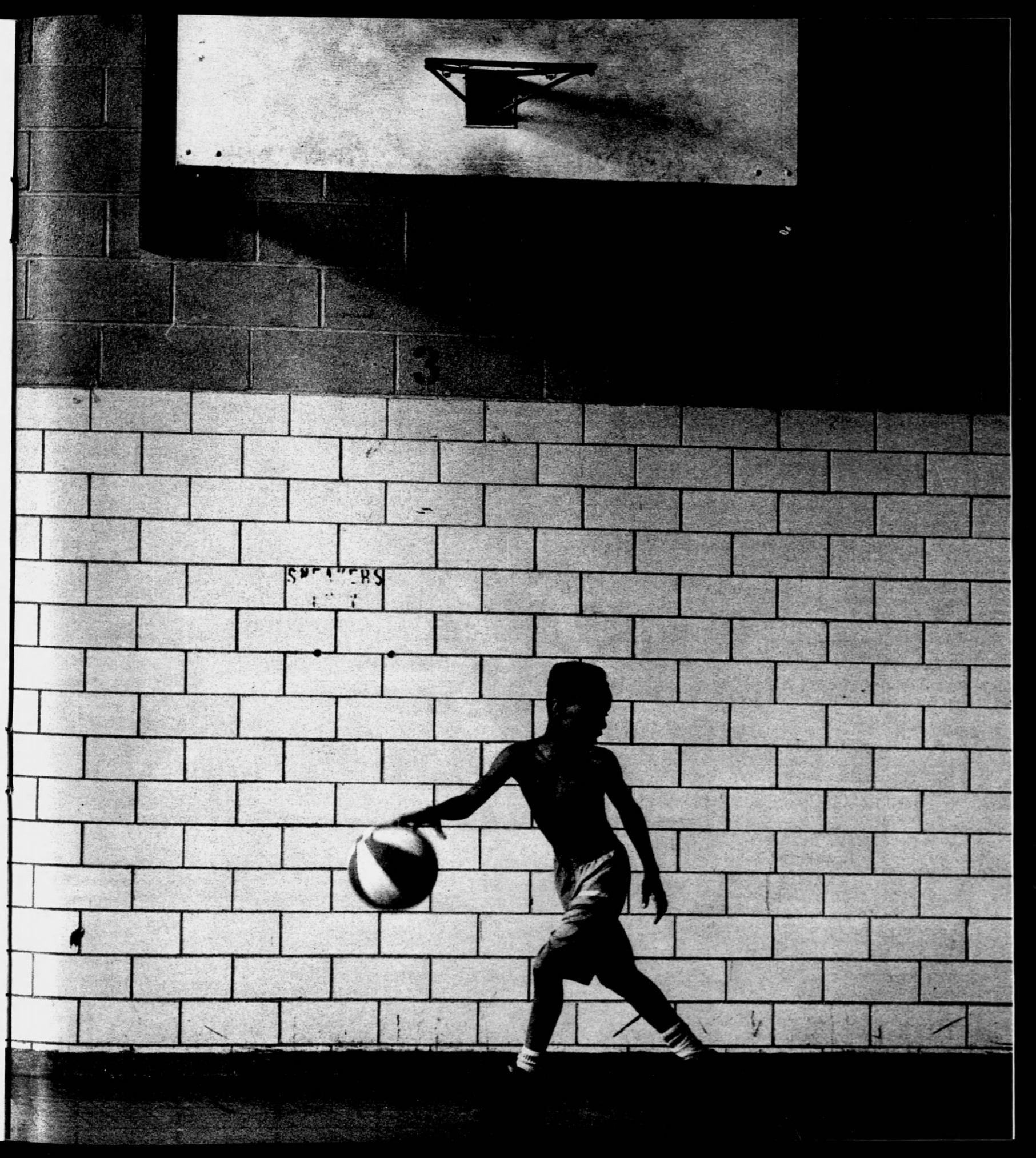
Oh, yeah, there's a three-point line for those of you with a serious outside game. It's call your own foul, so don't cry. Plenty of high-school refs and Police Athletic League officials will be there so that you don't get out of line.

Teams include four players. That's in case you need a sub, a player coach or a human mascot. The applications — along with $80 — *must* be in by Sept. 12. That's Tuesday. That's two days from now.

Other prizes include Knick tickets, trophies and gift certificates at Athlete's Foot.

By the way, if you stick Pat Ewing's shot, you will be very famous, forever remembered as the guy who turned the superstar into stickbait.

Then again, you probably don't want to make him angry. ***M.K.***



COURT OF LAST RESORT

Nobody was ever better than The Fly. But sometimes raw talent alone isn't enough.

THE MAN IS AN AGONIZING stick figure—6 feet, 5 inches of lines and angles. Sunken eyes hide behind cheap sunglasses. There's a wristwatch on each arm, a tooth capped in gold. A beeper hangs on his pocket. At the age of 36, he looks like a praying mantis with a hangover.

It is 3:30 in the afternoon. Early for a man who doesn't gain complete consciousness before twilight. For breakfast, he orders a $1.45 cheeseburger and a pineapple soda. His voice runs slow and thick as cough syrup. "Yo, baby, I'm The Fly."

JAMES "FLY" WILLIAMS. ASK around Brownsville and East New York. Mention Fly and the people all say that, of all the guys who came from around the way, Fly was the best.

Fly Williams, schoolyard legend, the guy who would tell you how silly you were even as he put it in your face, whose name kids would spraypaint on the walls. Fly Williams, the best never to make it. Fly Williams, the one with the buckshot hole in his back, who hangs out in a corridor of a Brownsville building where people do the bad thing.

Fly made it out of James Madison High School, all-city, to Austin Peay University in Tennessee, where he scored whenever he felt like it, and then to the Spirits of St. Louis in the old American Basketball Association. But Fly never could make it out of Brownsville. Fly Williams became failure's living monument, a perverse illustration that the most fantastic talent sometimes isn't nearly enough.

Fly's is a curse of low comedy and high tragedy. You hear the stories: One has it that in the late '70s, after the pros had unofficially declared him a terminal headcase, Fly was playing an Eastern League game in Asbury Park, a bout between has-beens and never-weres. Realizing the bush nature of this contest, the promoters came upon an idea that would have made Primo Carnera blush: Get Fly to wrestle a bear.

"I'm from Brownsville, I'll fight the bear," he remembers saying. "His name was Victor, 8-foot-11, 1,875 pounds. They paid me $300 to fight him. I thought I won. But the bear got on Johnny Carson."

Fly got a one-way ticket back to Brownsville.

AT THE CORNER OF NEW LOTS AND Stone, Fly talks the talk. Some things never change. He knows about Tommy Mickens, the kid who fancied himself the Scarface of southeast Queens and even had a pick-up basketball team whose roster included Knicks guard Mark Jackson. He knows about Mickens' lieutenant, Doc Watson, who ran Scarface's crack operation on Rockaway Boulevard, before he disappeared. And that's just Queens.

In Brooklyn, forget about it. Delroy "Uzi" Edwards. Baby Sam. El-Son. "I know all of them," he says. "I'm from Brownsville."

One of the crew, a guy called Bo, is very interested in how the government got Mickens. Bo drives around Brooklyn in a black Cadillac with Jersey plates. He says he installs car stereos for a living. The car-stereo business is very good. Guys from other neighborhoods come 'round the way, betting five-figure sums on who has the best system. "The people judge," says Bo.

Prince, an affable, self-described five-percenter who did some state time for robbery, is unimpressed with all the gangster talk. He displays the assortment of scars on his belly and limbs with a curious mixture of pride and contempt. It seems that Prince had a run-in with Uzi Edwards' crew and soaked up five.

Then there's basketball. Remember the Dapper Dan Tournament in D.C.? Fly does. "I told Moses [Malone] I was gonna score 60 on him. But I messed up. I scored 63."

Bo compares Fly's game with the city's latest sensation to flirt with death, Lloyd Daniels. "Lloyd's got the same shit you got," says Bo, who has played extensively with both gentlemen. "But Lloyd couldn't shoot like you, Fly."

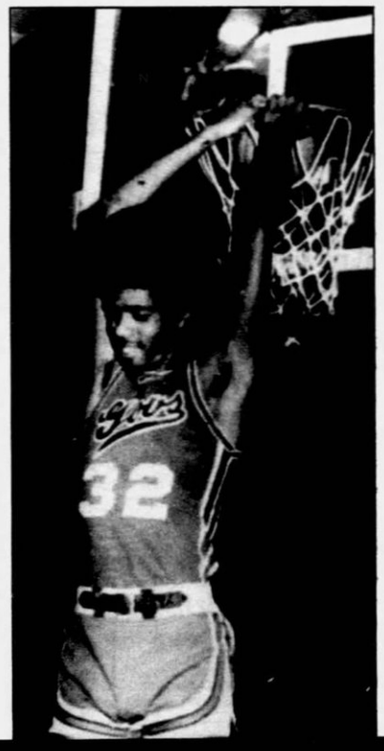
Then again, no one could.

It wasn't until this past season that Chris Jackson of LSU broke Fly's freshman scoring record—29.4 points per game for a NCAA Division I college.

The difference between Fly and a guy like Jackson is that Fly would take you apart, then would tell you about it. In an ultimate blasphemy, Fly even teased Julius Erving. Of course, the Doc dunked on him, and just about everybody in Brownsville has a picture of this to prove it. But not many guys had the *cojones* to bust on Doc.

Moments later, the Fly's thumb and forefinger rest in a gentle caress on the bridge of his nose. The eyes close. He remains motionless for the better part of a minute, oblivious to any conversation, the noise of traffic, the screams of teenagers immersed in a low-stakes game of celo. Back when heroin was the thing, this was known as a nod.

Schoolyard legend Fly Williams was the country's highest scoring college freshman in '73. Now a stick figure (left), he haunts his old domain as a spectator.



AP

He breaks his trance with i-cee pops, cold and sweet, from the deli, gets in his old Mercury Marquis and heads for Rucker Park, where Bo's Brownsville crew has a game.

At the Rucker—they call it The Entertainers Tournament today—Fly sits in the stands, disappears for a while and returns fumbling for his lighter.

The legend is resigned to life as a spectator. The court at the Rucker is too long for him. "I got half my lungs," Fly explains, displaying an ugly crater on the left half of his back. A shotgun will do that to you. If you're lucky.

According to police, Fly was involved in an ill-fated attempt to kidnap and rob a former friend, James Ryans, following a basketball game at Starrett City in 1987. Things never go smoothly for Fly. Before the caper was over, an off-duty court officer who overheard the plot to rip off Ryans had practically blown Fly away. He almost died at Booth Medical Center. He finished his convalescence at Rikers Island.

"It wasn't my time," Fly notes.

He spends his days in that corridor of the Noble Drew Ali Plaza where outsiders and cops are forbidden. Fly is known to keep buzzing for days, then sleep until dusk. "I get hiiighhh as a kite," squeals the former superstar. "Wouldn't you?"

The buckshot ended even his schoolyard career. "I miss the kids, the kids are the heroes," says Fly, once known to place $100 bills in the cribs of newborn babes.

Even Jocko Jackson, who runs the Brownsville Jets, says, "No matter how bad Fly gets, if I ask him to do something for the kids, he does it."

Recently, Fly returned to 66 Park, the asphalt theater where his high-wire act made its debut. The touch is still there, instinctive. "All I need is oxygen," he gloats. Passersby are flabbergasted to see the Fly on the court.

"Yo, Fly," calls one. "What you selling? Games or dreams?"

Dreams. ***Mark Kriegel***