

The Unknown Hall of Famer

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Illustration by Nishan Patel

New York City is famous for many things: 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 there have been four professional major league baseball teams, including the Yankees, that have made their homes in New York City since the beginning of the 20th century.

So many kids in New York have always wanted to play baseball. However, playing baseball can be difficult in such an urban setting if the game is going to look like the real thing. There needs to be a large grass field with a dirt diamond. The players need bases, bats, balls, and gloves to play with. In order to get a game of baseball going without having all of the required items, many New York City boys created their own version of baseball, one that would be played on the hard concrete streets. They would call it “stickball” because it could be played with a simple broomstick handle instead of a large, heavy bat. They’d use small, pink rubber balls instead of expensive hardballs made of leather and twine. Those kids, who were good, would incredibly one day find themselves in an actual Hall of Fame. George “Lolin” Osorio is one of those players.

Osorio's family moved to Manhattan from his home in Puerto Rico when the ink on World War II peace treaties was still wet. In Puerto Rico, he was given his nickname because, as a very young boy, he was known to chase after a girl named Lola, so neighbors took to calling him the masculine form "Lolin" since the two always seemed to be together. At nine years old in New York City, he did not hesitate to immerse himself in the king of the street games—as long as his homework and chores were done. He and the other kids on his block would take to the streets in t-shirts and cut-off shorts 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 prove themselves against.

"We'd play for a little money, five cents a game or a quarter when I was about ten years old," Osorio says, recalling that if his team won, they'd often use their money to see a movie. Sometimes kids would save their winnings to buy two-dollar Puma sneakers, which were more desired than one-dollar Converse because they were better for running; plus, everyone knew they were twice as expensive.

"But really we played for bragging rights," Osorio insists. "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, the curator of New York City's Stickball Hall of Fame, of which Osorio is an esteemed member. "He was also very clutch and reliable. He could get a hit just about any time," Diaz adds.

Osorio and his friends, who were all of Puerto Rican descent, would play stickball for hours; that is, until the Irish cops would show up. Though there were few cars driving through the city streets in those days and the rubber balls with which they played were as harmful to windows as a summer wind, many of the police officers would discover games and immediately order the kids to hand over their makeshift bats.

"I could never understand why they'd break up our stickball games," Osorio says. "We played to stay out of trouble."

For a time, Osorio remembers the cops slipping the sticks down into the sewer. But after the officer had moved along and the boys had faked disappointment long enough, one of the smaller kids would climb beneath street level into the muck and come up with the bat, covered in

sludge. There was always an open fire hydrant somewhere they'd use to clean off the grime from both the bat and the brave boy.

"Then the cops got smart," Osorio says. "They started taking our bats, hold them halfway down in the sewer's grating and snap them in two."

Still unafraid, Osorio and his block mates continued to play throughout their adolescence, traveling farther away from their neighborhood with each passing year, challenging players in various neighborhoods and having tons of fun.

A frequent teammate of Osorio's, Alfred Jackson, another Stickball Hall of Fame member, remembers one particularly incredible shot struck by a rival of theirs named 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 who caught it for an out. The ball was in fair territory the whole time!"

As Osorio's clan got older, more and more money was bet on their games. They can recall games played for upwards of three to five thousand dollars, with the victorious team getting a cut. Some players depended on winnings as a sort of additional income, so some teams felt pressured to win for their players' financial stability. Fans who had their own best interests in mind heckled batters trying hard to focus on a potentially game-changing pitch.

Still, money was not as important as the feelings of self-respect and community, which truly compelled Osorio to go outside and play each and every Sunday, even 24 hours after his wedding. "I got married on a Saturday," Osorio 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, adding with a shake of his finger, "My wife wasn't very happy about that."

In the late 1950s and throughout the '60s, Osorio made a living building clock radios—and, briefly, delivering zippers—but always found time to participate in the first organized stickball leagues that were emerging throughout Manhattan and beyond. Though he has continued to play, Osorio and his friends have seen the game nearly completely disappear.

"Not as many guys play anymore," says Carlos Diaz, who has tried for many years to revitalize 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.” Diaz’s efforts include opening a gallery this past winter, giving the Stickball Hall of Fame a more permanent home.

No matter what, Osorio still finds himself out on the streets of New York City every Sunday playing the game he loves, around the guys that he loves, all of whom have respected, and even honored him, for decades.