

How To Be American: A Podcast by the Tenement Museum  
Season 2, Episode 1: Our Game

*[Succession of homeruns—the sounds of a baseball cracking at bat. Successions fade up one after the other.]*

*Man, MLB Announcer 1:*

*“This ball is crushed.”*

*Man, MLB Announcer 2:*

*“There he is with the 2-0 pitch. This is ball smacked!”*

*Man, MLB Announcer 3:*

*“Ozuna, left center field, this way, way out of here!”*

*Man [singing “Take Me Out To the Ball Game” by Edward Meeker, September 1908 recording. Edison Record. Original 1908 lyrics.]: “Take me out to the ball game. Take me out to the ball.”*

*[“Take Me Out To The Ball Game” continues to play, fades when Host introduces the episode’s story.]*

*[Woman’s voice fades up, host of How To Be American: Amanda Adler Brennan begins her intro.]*

Amanda Adler Brennan:

That's the unmistakable sound of an American pass time, baseball. Baseball has always had a special place in our nation's history.

*[Reflective and Dramatic, high energy music fades up softly as Amanda speaks.]*

*[Instrumentation: Acoustic Guitar, Banjo, and Cajon.]*

It's a common symbol of America's values, identity, and rural past.

You might even say it's as American as Apple pie. I mean who could forget greats like Babe Ruth, Jackie Robinson and Roberto Clemente.

The game has inspired great works of art, film and literature. And even evoked the nostalgia of poets. At the end of the American Civil War, poet Walt Whitman once called baseball "Our game. It's America's game. The sum total of our historic life." And I think Whitman has a point, no game has ever come close to being as distinctly ours as baseball.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

And it would be tough to argue that baseball's most historic moments don't also reflect some of the best and worst of American history.

*[Reflective and dramatic music fades out.]*

From racial segregation to integration. From deep prejudice to diversification.

Ballplayers have often challenged notions of what it means to be American. By facing all kinds of social barriers and questions of identity, for the love of the game and a whole lot more.

But challenges like these weren't only hashed out on the field. Beyond the ballpark, there's a grittier version of our game. Played in the streets and in immigrant neighborhoods. In cities big and small. And for many kids, this urban pass time has

played a crucial role in their understanding of what it means to be, and to become American.

*[Amanda pauses, fade up stems of How To Be American Musical Theme. Mid-Energy and optimistic Groove Music plays. Instrumentation: Electric Guitar and Volda Syn]*

Amanda Adler Brennan:

This episode is about block rivalries, family bonds, and breaking your mother's broomstick. It's a story about the legacy of baseball's urban cousin, a street game called stickball.

A warm welcome back to season two of How To Be American. Where from New York's Lower East Side, we explore the history of immigration and migration in America.

We share the stories of migrants and refugees and everyone in between. It's the past, present, and future of becoming American. From the Tenement Museum, I'm your host, Amanda Adler Brennan, and this is a brand new season of How To Be American.

*[Fade out stems of How To Be American Musical Theme.]*

*[Fade up, Guest 1: Jose Saez Velez on the phone.]*

Jose Saez Velez:

Yeah, like there was no other place to go. Our parents didn't have vehicles. And we didn't have friends. But remember we all stayed local. We never went out far. That wasn't like "Today's Thursday. We're going to the movies."

None of that happened years back. And a lot of parents since the apartments were hot. What they would do, is come in front of the building. They'd just sit there watching their kids.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

This is Jose Saez Velez.

A former resident of 103 Orchard Street. A building that's now part of the Tenement Museum. Today, Jose lives in his native Puerto Rico, and he's in his 70's. Jose grew up on the Lower East Side. So I called him to talk about what the neighborhood was like when street games still ruled.

Jose Saez Velez:

Years back the parents, especially my mother I recall, because she's my mother. Because she has to eyeball you. She has to see you. If you said you were going to be in front of the building, that's where you're going to be. You'd be playing marbles there or whatever you were playing, but it has to be where she sees you.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Jose's mother, Romanita Saez Velez, came to the continental United States in 1955, with Jose and his older brother, Andy. They were about six or seven years old when they moved to New York City.

Jose Saez Velez:

It wasn't true because they'll look out the stairs window or if their windows faced the street, you will always have to play in front of the house, the building. You know what I mean? If you look up some areas, you might see people sitting on the fire escape.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

What Jose's describing was a common scene on the city streets. Vigilant parents. Mothers in particular, would eyeball their kids by hanging on fire escapes and out fifth floor windows. Because crowded tenements of the late 19th and early 20th century, really weren't ideal places for children.

At 97 Orchard for example, each apartment is about 325 square feet. That's roughly the size of two parking spaces.

There was generally a shared yard, and open green spaces were really hard to come by. In the early 1900s, as the urban sprawl of New York City continued to expand, playgrounds and public parks weren't always within reach of low-income neighborhoods.

It wasn't until 1903 when Seward Park opened to the public, that people on the Lower East Side finally had access to green spaces. This was the first city funded playground in the United States.

*[Quizzical, mid-energy music fades up. Instrumentation:*

*[Sound effects of inaudible children's voices and people walking and playing in a park.]*

The urban park movement was a way to get kids off the streets, and to keep them away from the dangers posed by youth street gangs.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

But for over 100 years, children still played in front of their homes in Eldridge, Rivington, Stickball, and Allen streets.

These streets were the birthplace of children's games that turned whole blocks, stoops and even sidewalks into playgrounds.

And because there were so few green spaces, an organization called the Police Athletic League or P.A.L for short, created something that would change the lives of kids living in the city for generations. Kids including Jose.

In 1914, P.A.L established the first play street in New York. It was on Eldridge Street between Rivington and Stickball streets on the Lower East side. Every afternoon, save for Sunday, play streets were closed to traffic. And it was on play streets that children's games really came to life.

*[Energetic, Quizzical Music fades up]*

Amanda Adler Brennan:

And kids got incredibly creative here. They weren't just playing hopscotch or marbles or cards.

They'd play games of mysterious origins like Scully, which involved flicking bottle caps across boards sketched on the pavement, typically in chalk. Or Stoop Ball, ACE King and queen and kick the can. A version of hide and seek played with, well, a can. You can learn more about these games in our show notes.

Many of these vintage games have long been forgotten, but the legacy of stickball remains strong.

Jose Saez Velez:

We just, really, we played stickball in the summertime, the Saturdays afternoon. Like I said, there's no traffic an that area. And we were playing with the Italian guys, and you had people from Czechoslovakia. There was a lot of Chinese. They would hang out with us. It was good. Everybody played it.

Whenever you walk down the street and you look at the garbage cans that they used to put outside, and you see a stick, you take it, because you could use that as a stickball bat.

Anything that could become a bat. Remember, we didn't have that kind of money to buy the better stuff.

You got to deal with what you have.

*[Fade down Jose Saez Velez]*

*[Fade up quizzical jazz music, electric guitar]*

Amanda Adler Brennan:

There was an undeniable lure to stickball. All you needed was a dime store ball and a stick.

*[Sound effects of handball being hit by a stickball bat fades up quickly. In the background, kids voices overlap, shouting and clapping in excitement.]*

Cars, fire hydrants and manhole cover served as bases. No expensive cleats, uniforms or gloves required.

More than just a street game. It was a way for kids with few resources to participate in a distinctly American pastime.

In the 1940s and 50s, it was the only street game of its kind that closely resembled and paralleled baseball. I was eager to learn more about how stickball was played at the height of its popularity, which lasted up until about the 1980s. So, I reached out to stickball aficionado and member of a stickball league based in the South Bronx, birthplace of hip hop and home to the New York Yankees.

Meet Ricardo, Richie for short.

*[Fade up quizzical jazz music, electric guitar]*

Ricardo Marrero:

My name is Ricardo Marrero Jr. I am the co-president of and the New York Emperors Stickball League.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Richie was playing stickball in the 1970s and 80s. He's now 54. He's got short buzzed dark hair, and a neatly trimmed salt and pepper beard. Richie served as the president of the Emperor's from 2004 to 2006.

Established in 1985, the Emperors are carrying on the long tradition of stickball. And Richie hopes that his work will bring the game to a wider audience. One outside of the U.S. But before I could really understand why that mission is so important, I asked Richie to explain how the game is actually played.

Ricardo Marrero:

How does one play stickball? Okay, stickball, it's a very simple game, which is basically like baseball. The only difference is, that we use our bare hands and we use a rubber ball and a stick. But you run the bases like baseball. There's a home for a second and third. There's out fielders. In fielders. There's no pitcher. You hit by yourself. That's the Bronx style of stickball.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

A basic stickball game calls for eight players on the field. When there aren't enough, the game is played against the wall. In a school yard, have you ever seen a spray-painted box with a big 'X' in the middle? This is a version of stickball that allows a handful of players to pick up the game. The box is the strike zone.

Ricardo Marrero:

So what they did was, if they have four or five guys in the winter, they hit the ball against the wall and then the other guys catch it, a single double triple. And then they run the bases. And when I was growing up, we had pitching in. Which was a box you marked up on a wall, and then you pitch the rubber ball and you hit it with a stick. And you had two or three guys. And then there is the Manhattan style of stickball which is pitching in. Which is a pitch on the bounce and then you hit the ball.

Amanda Adler Brennan [*Amanda asks Ricardo*]:

So you make the distinction even between the Bronx stickball and the Manhattan stickball?

Ricardo Marrero:

Well for right now, like in Manhattan, they still play pitching in, once in a while. But it's a longer game. It could take a while. So in tournaments for the most part, either California, Puerto Rico or Florida, they play hitting by yourself. Because it's a faster game and you have a lot of games to get in.

Amanda Adler Brennan [*Amanda asks Ricardo*]:

Was stickball organized in the 1940s? When children's games were more popular on the streets of New York?

Ricardo Marrero:

Well in the 1940s they didn't play organized stickball. They just played stickball in the street. They either played... A bunch of friends got together and played the game for fun, or back then it was block on block. Like, let's pay for \$40. \$50. And it was like a family of the block. So you hung out with each other. You became a family. So it kept everybody close, and it kept the fighting and the arguments to a minimum because they had stickball to play. "Let's just hash this out on a stickball field. Let's take care of it that way."

Amanda Adler Brennan [*Cuts to narration.*]:

Block on block rivalries were deeply ingrained in the game throughout Richie's younger days. But what was also common, stickball smack talk.

Ricardo Marrero:

If you sit down and watch a good stickball game and then sit down and watch a good baseball game, you're going to see way more action in stickball. Stickball is a talking game. Like, while you...I'm standing on third. I used to be a bit taller back then. If I say, "You aren't going to hit the ball. You suck. What are you going to do?" We were rivals. We want to beat each other. But at the end of the day, 98% of the time after the games, we're a big family.

Amanda Adler Brennan [*Amanda asks Ricardo.*]:

Do you remember your first stickball game?

Ricardo Marrero:

Yes. It was in, I believe 88 or 89. State ball Boulevard. I was playing with the New York Emperors at that time. Me and my brother Ralph Martinez, and for me it was horrible. Like when I first started, I used to go to a whole thing. I used to like bounce the ball five times. And then after a while...

*[Ricardo's voice fades down and Amanda fades up in narration.]*

Amanda Adler Brennan *[Cuts to narration]*:

Richie thought he would dive right in with no problem. He tried every which way of hitting the ball of standing at bat. He thought it would be easy.

*[Ricardo's voice fades up.]*

Ricardo Marrero:

I used to go through a whole routine about hitting the ball.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Because I think from an outside perspective you would look at it and think, Oh well baseball is a "professional game, and this is a street game. So clearly baseball must be more difficult." But in what ways would you say that's just not true?

Ricardo Marrero:

Stickball...I feel is a little bit more difficult. One in baseball you have four balls, three strikes. And it's a bigger ball and the bat is much bigger, fatter. As I may say. triple, you got a small rubber ball, you have a stick and then once when you got to hit the ball fair. So not only have you got to hit the ball, you got to keep it fair. So it's a technique to it.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

For comparison, a stickball bat's diameter is slightly bigger than the diameter of a quarter. And a baseball bat, at its thickest part, is about as wide as a coffee mug. For our listeners who go by the metric system, that's about 30 millimeters and 70 millimeters respectively. The small rubber ball, Richie mentioned was a Spalding high bounce ball. On the streets, it was known as a Spaldeen. It was pink, smooth and significantly lighter and smaller than a baseball.

Ricardo Marrero:

And then you're talking about a street block that goes straight out. It's not a baseball field that goes wide out. So there's less room to put the ball in play. And when you hit somebody that could hit the ball hard. And it's coming to you at 95, 100 miles an hour, it's not that easy to catch with your bare hands.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Richie had a lot to say about the mechanics of stickball. The different styles, the flare of the game and how it was sometimes even more difficult than baseball itself. I was curious about what drew him to the street game, like Jose before him. How and why did he start working with the New York Emperors to begin with?

As it turns out, in late 1988 Richie was brought into the New York emperors by a man named Herman Pagan, a board member for the league. Players like Richie were invaluable. It wasn't just about playing for fun. Playing was preservation. Ensuring that the game would be passed down to a new generation of younger players.

Ricardo Marrero:

You know, I was a baseball player. They needed some young guys out there, and he bought me. And when I got there, it was like baseball, I fell in love with it. Then I brought my brother Ralph Martinez, and we started together. But then me and my brother Ralph, we're always sticklers of learning the game, and anything we played, and learning how to make it better. And then from there we trickled. And there was me, Ralph Martinez, Frank Martinez, and then we got a cousin, Albi Santiago. Then a year later he...

*[Riccardo's voice fades down and Amanda fades up in narration.]*

Amanda Adler Brennan:

I love that Richie's the kind of guy you could talk to all day. While he re-hashes his stickball adventures in the South Bronx, rattling off names of former friends and players, his brothers as he calls them. I feel like I know them. I feel like I'm learning about a family tradition. A pass time that's handed down from one generation to the next.

*[Riccardo's voice fades up.]*

Ricardo Marrero:

I can't thank him enough for everything he's done for me in my life, in stickball, and just for being my brothers. Because I was raised in the projects and I had great parents. They showed me great values, but mid-eighties, it was kind of getting dangerous out there. But then I found stickball and the older guys who started to role model, like Joe Cruz, Acina Hernandez, Herman Pagan, Lou Mercado Sr., Frank Calderoni, Frankie Sanchez Sr. Those guys. They took me and my brother under their wing.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

This is something Richie repeated often. The old timers of the New York Emperors, the people who came before him, those men were his heroes.

Ricardo Marrero:

And then we were like their kids. And they made find a way to say like, "I can do this. And I can achieve something in life. And be a good person." Those are our role models. And Joe Cruz is my mentor. And I owe a lot to that man. He showed me respect, honor, and how to be an organizer.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Joe Cruz was one of those key figures in the league. Inspiring Richie and other players to keep the tradition going. In 1985 Cruz and a band of his old friends got the city to rename a part of Newman Avenue in the Bronx to stickball Boulevard.

Ricardo Marrero:

If I got the story straight, and that comes from Joe Cruz, in 84, a group of guys got together every time and they just started playing. And then it grew to make two teams. So in 85, they got the street name to Stickball Boulevard and they pin against each other every week. And 86 grew to three teams. And 87 grew even more to four teams, and so on. At one point we were up to 16 teams in like the mid-nineties.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

When you talk to Richie about stickball, you don't get the sense that this is a game from some bygone era. As far as he's concerned, this game is alive more than ever in the South Bronx.

And this is what sets stickball apart from other children's games. Its roots are deeper.

In 1948, right before the peak of Puerto Rican migration in the 1950s, Richie's father, Ricardo Marrero Sr., migrated with his family from Puerto Rico to the continental United States. From 1940 to 1960, close to half a million Puerto Ricans migrated to New York. And like Richie's family, they made Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn and the Bronx and Staten Island their home. From the time Ricardo Marrero Sr. arrived in the South Bronx, stickball became an important part of his everyday existence.

Ricardo Marrero:

It wasn't easy, you know. It was new. The new kid on the block. My father was born at 36. So we're talking about 48 49, that's when he came here. Went to school when he got here a couple of years later when he turned in his early teens, about 17, 18, his father passed away. And then my grandmother wanted to move back to Puerto Rico because it was an easier life for her. And he didn't want to go. He wanted to stay here and work.

*[Music fades up, blues guitar]*

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Ricardo Marrero Sr began working at 14. Richie told me he shined shoes as a kid. And it was around this age when Richie's father discovered and began to play stickball. I asked Richie how his father's childhood experience compared to his own growing up in the same borough years later.

Ricardo Marrero:

Well stickball builds a bond. You get a group of guys that just moved, they don't know each other. You know, they come from Island, Puerto Rico or the black guys from Harlem.

Everybody didn't know each other. So when you got together and you lived on that block, you got to know people. Yeah, I mean I, when I came, I moved into the Castle Hill Projects and I didn't know nobody. And I got into playing. And then you met kids. So now when you get into the neighborhood and you have any athletic skills and you start playing, it's like a shoe in. And now you're in. And if you're good, now you really in.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

triple allowed generations of kids, including him and his father, to build family bonds that extended beyond the game, the block, and even beyond the neighborhood. Stickball was incredibly influential for several reasons. It was easy to play. It was affordable for both parents and kids. And as Richie noted, it was an adaptation of a national pastime.

Ricardo Marrero:

Our parents didn't have \$20 at that time for cleats or gloves. So they took baseball and played it in the street, and named it stickball. And that's how they united, and to keep togetherness, and just make it their game.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

It was interesting to hear Richie make this distinction between stickball and baseball. That it was taken from baseball and brought to the streets. In the mid-20th century, stickball was much more than just something to do after school or on weekends.

It was a central fixture of everyday life for immigrant and migrant kids as they socialized outside of their crowded apartments. They became more American simply by association with the game, making friends from a new country and even picking up the English language.

To understand the passion fueled by stickball, we need to go back to the 1920s, and perhaps a little bit further. To look at stickball's origins in baseball and the Lower East Side, I reached out to Stan Green, an archeologist and baseball anthropologists, who can help us dig deeper into stickball's roots.

Stan Green:

Hi, I'm Stan Green. I'm a professor of anthropology at Monmouth University in New Jersey. And one of my research areas is the history of baseball, which I have been studying for the last 25 plus years. When you fly over in a plane, you will see, and I do anyway, a lot of people will notice baseball diamonds all over the place cut into the landscape.

To me, obviously that represents how important baseball is, across this country. Which is pretty... 3000 miles across. But it also is symbolic of how it is physically integrated into the world that we live in.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Stan's academic interests are varied. But since the early 1990s, he's been studying the anthropology of baseball. He's written several papers on the subject and he's even featured in a Ted Talk called Play Ball, the anthropology of baseball.

We'll link to it in our show notes. I needed to talk to Stan because we can't really understand the history of an urban pastime like stickball without talking about its more refined and much more well known cousin baseball.

Historically, baseball is often referred to as America's quintessential pass time. But I was curious if the game still holds that mantle to this day.

Stan Green:

There are people that say that America's pastime is no longer America's pastime. I vehemently disagree and that's a whole other podcast, but I will give you the short version of that. It was played from the settlement. It was brought in as a form of baseball.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

But just like Apple pie, and so many things that are considered quintessentially American, its roots are in fact from somewhere else.

Stan Green:

Baseball was developed in Europe, maybe 1600s, maybe before, as a child's game. In fact, another thing that intrigues me about this is that, there are books published from the 1600s and 1700s. They're a book of children's games. You still have those now a little bit.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

The book that Stan is referring to is called *A Little Pretty Pocket Book*. An English children's book published in 1744. It was the first printed reference of baseball. On the page, there's an illustration of a pitcher with a ball, surrounded by boys using posts as bases. The accompanying poem ends like this, "Away flies the boy, to the next destined post, and then home with joy."

Stan Green:

The end of the parable, a little poem, it said the ultimate goal of baseball was to make it back home. And a home plate is just very incredibly symbolic. And that I think, ties a lot into the issue of immigrants and baseball, making a new home. Making it home was basically, I think, a metaphor for becoming American.

So baseball has been a way of finding home, I think. And baseball was played throughout American history, like no other game. And it's always been integrated into the American history. American past. American culture.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

And while the game described in this poem has changed over the years, certain elements have remained constant. The journey home is one of those. But how exactly did we come to know baseball as the game it is today?

Stan Green:

As a game, it was imported as a children's game. But as a professional sport as we know it, it was invented here. Probably in New Jersey in Hoboken, a place called at Elysian fields.

Where a New York team called the Knickerbockers actually went over to Jersey because there was a field over there, and they made it into a baseball diamond. And the first games were played there. So, in baseball it's always evolving.

We think of baseball in terms of the modern game, with the diamond and so forth. And that's American. I often say baseball reflects and changes American culture. The aspect of baseball and American immigration and assimilation, are one and the same, and you don't have that in any other game.

I would, just a little bit of an aside, but, Will Whitman loved the game of baseball. He's considered America's poet. And in the early 20th century you'll see that some Jewish players coming in, Italian, Irish players--DiMaggio, Rizutto, Campanella who is African American but his father was Italian. All those great Italian players. All coming in as immigrants.

Amanda Adler Brennan [*Amanda asks Stan*]:

And so for immigrant and migrant kids, or even first-generation adults living in neighborhoods like the Lower East Side, when they start to see players like Lou Gehrig or Sandy Kofax or Willie Mays or Jackie Robinson, how does that affect these kids?

Stan Green:

Well, tremendous pride. And that's another aspect of the ethnicity of baseball and is tied to immigrants. Various ethnic groups have tremendous pride in their stars.

DiMaggio for the Italians just as an example.

The other aspect of it, is that these baseball players backside lived in the neighborhoods and they interacted in the neighborhoods. And they didn't make so much money as they didn't have to work in the summer. They had jobs in the neighborhoods.

They might have been the person who delivered something to you, or maybe they worked as a mechanic or in a factory of some sort. So they all had jobs because baseball didn't pay all that well. They walked to the stadium through the neighborhoods.

With regard to stickball. Willie Mays used to play stickball with the kids in Harlem after the games at the polo grounds. He would go out and there are iconic photos of Willie Mays playing stickball with the neighborhood kids. They were both, like Greek gods and like regular people that the integration was full.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

What Stan said about Greek gods and greats like Willy Mays playing stickball in the streets of New York with kids, I thought back to Richie and his role models from the 1980s. Those old timers. The everyday guys who kept stickball alive for him and generations to come. Stan went on to explain how baseball greats influenced kids at the '20s, '30s and '40s and so on.

Stan Green:

Everybody wanted to emulate somebody. They were role models. And they were a way of learning about the country too, because in how would a kid know.... A kid from Brooklyn or a kid from the lower East side, know about Chicago or eventually St. Louis or even Philadelphia. But you had these teams that represented them. So you had your own team, but they played teams from other places. So it opened up the world. And baseball of course, is a part of that. It's part of the migration pattern, and moving out West, which of course was especially occurred in the '50s. So you learned about America through baseball. You learned that these incredible people were immigrants as well. And immigrants saw people that saw the disgrace of discrimination too. His stories are everywhere.

Stan Green:

Of course, we all know the story of Jackie Robinson, but Hank Greenberg was called all kinds of names. It was horrible. Especially when he was playing the rise of Nazi-ism. And there were Nazi parades in New York. And it was Nazi rallies at Madison square garden. So you saw that side of being Jewish in America. You saw the struggle, but

also you saw, especially when you're a kid, you're not really paying attention to that so much. You saw the beautiful success of it.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

A game like baseball opened up worlds of possibilities for immigrant and migrant children. The likes of Joe DiMaggio and Sandy Kofax, became American heroes. And children sought to emulate them.

Sometimes these players were the first positive image that they saw of people like themselves in America and for so many kids in the mid 20th century, stickball turns stoops, sidewalks and streets into their very own field of dreams. If you could whack a Spaldine across three manhole covers, you are a home run hitter.

*[Fade up SFX of children playing stickball in the street]*

*[Sound of spaldeen being hit by a stickball bat, children cheering in the background]*

*[SFX] Child's voice: "Yeah. All right. Quick run. Let's go. Let's come home nice and easy."*

*[Fade down SFX of children playing stickball in the street]*

Amanda Adler Brennan:

It was rumored that even Willie Mays himself could hit a Spaldine as far as four manhole covers. Each of them about 100 feet apart. That distance is almost as long as the Washington monument laying on its side. As Stan told me, the earliest beginnings of baseball date back to the 18th century, as a children's game called rounders or town ball. Many of our popular activities start out as children's games, and both baseball and stickball are really no different.

Stan Green:

Whereas baseball, the origins of baseball were largely played on big fields, and town ball was the earliest version of baseball in the U.S. Probably, was played in the open fields. triple was the urban variety event. And that's kind of the incredible symmetry of it. So I played it all the time. I can tell you many stories. When I was 10-ish, we played stickball constantly. We kept statistics every day of the school year when we could. When it wasn't snow, and especially during the summer, we played till it was too dark to even see.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

What separates Stan, Jose and Richie are decades. Yet each of them have incredible ties to stickball. Thinking back to Jose, stickball put him in the heart of the action. In a game that attracted people of different cultures and languages. And for Richie it is, but more than just family bonds in the South Bronx, he's dedicated much of his life to it. And for Stan stickball has had a significant impact on his career in research. There's something special about your name. Can you tell us about it?

Stan Green:

Oh my name. Yes. My name is Stanton Green. I go by Stan, but Stanton... My father was born on Rivington street and I was named after Stanton street. I always say that among the possibilities I could have been Rivington, Eldridge Delancey, Houston, but I ended up being Stanton.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Stan's personal ties to the lower East side and to stickball go far beyond the average American, even the average new Yorker. I mean you don't get much more New York than being called Stanton. Stanton street is just two blocks North of the Tenement

museum. Stan's family immigrated to the lower East side between 1915 and 1917. What they saw and experienced was the history that we tell at the museum.

Stan Green:

So you had, in that part of the area, both Jewish families, RS families and Italian families. And my father was the first member of the family who was born in the U.S. My grandparents had brought his older brother actually from Germany, and back then the ethnic cultures, the ethnic communities, were really trying to become American. All my sister and brother both have very American kinds of names and Stanton, they thought of, as a very American kind of name. So hiding the ethnicity back in the days when discrimination was high was, the first step really was to change your name or change your children's name.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Stan's research into his own immigrant heritage began in the early nineties and what inspired him was a photograph he found while cleaning out some old boxes. During our conversation, I passed a printed copy of the photograph to Stan.

Stan Green:

I have a picture in front of me and my father, who's the catcher. It's out in the streets. I'm right in front of a tenement building. My mother is the young lady, I guess she's probably around 17 who's sitting all awake in the center of the left of a group of women, who are sitting outside watching the game. There's actually an empire. It is a batter. It's an action photo. I think it was around 1940 would have made my father maybe 17, and he looked like he could have been out a West side story. [inaudible 00:29:16] the others that cigarettes rolled up in their sleeves like people did. And stickball, I think, and baseball to him was very important part of his assimilation.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Although stickball was born in cities like New York as immigrants and migrants pushed further out of urban neighborhoods, these games moved with them.

Stan Green:

When we moved out to Plain View in Long Island, and being Jewish, my parents sent me to Hebrew school, and that right after regular school. But that's when the stickball games were scheduled. So we used to just basically knock on doors and a new kid moved in the neighborhood, you'd recruit them on the stickball team. That was a really great way for both the community to welcome people and for new kids on the block, so to speak, to become part of the community. Become part of the block. That happened all the time, and I remember numbers of occasions when I was growing up with a new kid, and you would see him, "This kid could be pretty good. I want them on my team."

Amanda Adler Brennan [*Amanda asks Stan*]:

What do you think we can learn about American immigration and immigrant relations from looking at the history of stickball and baseball?

Stan Green:

I think a broad lesson is one that comes out of sports and generally, which is that, when you have sports that are so tied to the community and culture, they integrate that culture, they make it more coherent and they integrate it ethnically and ultimately racially. Athletes are known to be, to a greater extent, much more comfortable dealing with people that are different from them, especially professional athletes. Who do you want to have your back on the ball field? So I think that, it's an integrating force. But is such a prideful force. Games are not just the games themselves. There's the socialization aspect, right? This was a child, what an anthropologist would call a Rite of passage. It was a Rite of passage into becoming an American. So it's a tremendously powerful activity. Baseball and stickball really have always been a part of the American experience.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

When Stan reflected more on his own stickball playing and his father's, he told me that he had known about his father's love of these games, because he had watched them with him. And as for stickball's lasting impact, Stan shared this with me.

Stan Green:

The passion for that game. I don't know if it's explainable, but it's real.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

It can be hard to understand why, or even how a children's game that has evolved from a ball and stick, has managed to remain a fixture in New York city for more than 100 years. When it comes to the lower East side, stickball may have vanished from the streets. It certainly isn't played in front of historic tenements like it was when Stan's father was playing, or when Jose was growing up at 103 Orchard Street. But the passion for the game is alive and well, especially in the outer boroughs and beyond New York city. I turned back to Richie one more time, to talk about the work that he's doing with the New York Emperors, to expand the league.

Ricardo Marrero:

Well, every Memorial day, triple League holds a Memorial Day Tournament. Everybody that loves stickball wants to take it global. We want the whole world to know the game and we're doing a good job of that. The goal is to make it bigger than baseball.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

The Emperors have traveled throughout the country. From New York to California, to Florida. There are eight New York teams that participate in the league, but across the

country there are 18 teams playing beyond the streets of New York. They've even brought organized stickball to the Dominican Republic. And to Panama. And as for the kids league, which is sponsored by major league baseball, their games are even sometimes held in front of Yankee stadium. For the more serious players. Major league baseball is often the end goal. So I asked Richie if he's seen kids go from playing stickball to playing baseball professionally. He hinted but like so many ball players before him who refuse to change their lucky socks or always tap the bat twice before swinging. Richie was superstitious and careful not to be too transparent.

Ricardo Marrero:

We have a couple of kids, I don't want to jinx them, but yeah. A couple of kids do play college ball and their dream is to play in the majors. Hopefully with the God willing, they will. And then, major league baseball is not the only one Nike has...

*[Fade down Richie.]*

*[Fade up Amanda in overlay.]*

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Richie has seen four generations of kids grow up playing stickball. Over 30 years of his life has been dedicated to the game. Looking back now to what Stan said, that the passion for this game is real. I asked Richie to share a little bit more about something he had mentioned earlier. He referred to stickball as our game. Just like Whitman had referred to baseball more than 150 years earlier. Richie's passion wasn't coming from a place of nostalgia for stickball as a street game. It was coming from the heart.

Ricardo Marrero:

As our emigrant game, our game that we, because of this game, our game, it's a bond between son and father, that it's unspeakable. The bond that Steve Mercado has with his father, that's why he wrote him that poem.

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Steve Mercado of Irish and Puerto Rican descent, was one of the stickball greats of the South Bronx. He was stickball royalty. He was also the president of the New York Emperors from 1998 until September 11th, 2001.

Ricardo Marrero:

He was a New York city firefighter and he was stationed in Manhattan. Right after the labor day of 2001, we came back from California. We flew back together on the seventh. We said goodbye at the airport and four days later he was one of the first responders. He came down with [inaudible 00:34:25]

Amanda Adler Brennan: The poem is titled "Our game". We've pulled excerpts from the poem and it goes like this as read by Steve Mercado and dedication to his father and sons.

*[Fade up soft beat, low-energy.]*

Steve Marcado:

He grew up in the Bronx by standards quite poor, but as a father he vowed to give us much more. As a boy I saw the twinkle in his eye, when he reminisced and told tales of days gone by. He spoke of stickball as if it were treasure. One Sunday morning I came out to see, this game that he spoke of with such passion and glee. My only regret is I had not joined him before, for our relationship since has become so much more. He's not only my dad but my best friends as well, and I'd like to thank stickball for this tale I tell. I vow that my children will have much more than I, for I will teach them to reach for the sky. I pray every day that my boys will be fine, and is happy with their dad as I am

with mine. Stickball's the game and each week we play, running, hitting, laughing, enjoying the day. Our families, our friends, we love them the same, look forward to seeing you Sunday to play our game.

*[Fade down soft beat, low-energy.]*

*[Fade up stems of How To Be American Musical Theme. Mid-Energy and optimistic Groove Music plays. Instrumentation: Electric Bass, Electric Guitar and Volda Syn, and Drum Kit.]*

Amanda Adler Brennan:

After hearing so many stories of friendly ribbings, neighborhood rivalries and the strengthening of family bonds, it seems even the simplest games can have a lasting and surprising effect on us throughout our lives. Because really, these games are living history. As for street games, particularly in the case of stickball, it has a lot more to do with who we play with, and how the game makes us feel. And that's something that kids and grownups alike have been tapping into and making their own since the earliest days of American play time. Because for newcomers to this country, the process of becoming American can be complicated, but for so many kids who lived in tenements like ours, that process started in the streets. Richie summed up what I learned on this episode pretty perfectly. In fact, I couldn't put it better myself.

Ricardo Marrero:

Our motto, not just the game, it's tradition, and we're family at the end of the day. When I loose, we'll always be family.

*[Fade up all stems of How To Be American Musical Theme. Mid-Energy and optimistic Groove Music plays. Instrumentation: Electric Bass, and Drum Kit.]*

Amanda Adler Brennan:

Richie invited me to train over the next few months. To play against some of stickball's greatest players. If you'd like us to do a live taping on stickball Boulevard, let me know in the comments. And if you'd like to catch a stickball game this spring, make your way out to stickball Boulevard every Sunday, starting at 9:00 from April until the end of August. And keep on listening. We're letting the tape roll because Richie has some thank you's of his own. Till next time, my name is Amanda Adler Brennan for the Tenement

Museum. Thanks for listening.

Jaz Chana:

Hey listeners, I'm Jaz Chana. The associate director of PR for the Tenement Museum. This episode was produced by Rachel Davila Ramirez. Off the Mic is our podcast team, Angela Sarah Touray, Katie Lopez, Cassandra Penya, Emily Mitzner, Jamie Salen, Katie Heimer, Michelle Moon, David Favaloro, and David [inaudible 00:37:24]. Our music is provided by Title Card Music. Additional music is provided by blue dot sessions. A special thanks to CDM studios, Charles de Montebello, Taco Dalton, and the entire CDM staff. Please rate comment and subscribe wherever you listen to podcasts. And thanks for listening.

Ricardo Marrero:

I just want to thank you both for taking the interest into the game, and for letting me expose and bring it out there to the world, or to this honest podcast. Also I want to give a great thanks to my co president Ty Davis, who's done a tremendous job. Jennifer Lipo, who's doing a great job of Vito Keolis and the kids league. Joel Cruz, [inaudible 00:38:06] and everybody that made this league what it is today. I want to thank y'all from the bottom of my heart. It's been a great 30 years.

*[Episode ends.]*

