



The Democratization of Sport
on the Streets of New York

HE'S • GOT
HANDS

PHOTOS ALESSANDRO SIMONETTI
TEXT CHLOE OLEWITZ





A Snapshot of Handball at The West 4th Street Cage

Winter won't end in New York City. Four nor'easter storms in two weeks blanket the first day of spring in snow. On a Saturday midmorning in downtown Manhattan, I grip the fence of the legendary West 4th Street ball courts with gloved fingers. Tears stream down my face from the wind, freezing hard on my skin before they make it to my chin. But on the courts, a crew of handball players stop for nothing.

“This ain't cold,” they shout up to the street.

They call the courts at West 4th Street “The Cage”. Players call this place Mecca, and many of them call these courts Home. West 4th is known worldwide for its basketball talent, perhaps because the rest of the world knows basketball in a way it doesn't know handball. But on both sides of the fence, the styles of The Cage are unique to New York City. Handball is adored here because it was bred here, so infused with the flavor of these streets that it couldn't possibly have come up anywhere else.

This usual crowd of weekend players braving the weather at West 4th Street are from Brooklyn, mostly. They're from stoop-sitting Brooklyn, from a time before the hipsters and the yuppies moved in. Listening to their stories reminds me of the New York my father grew up in—Brooklyn in the 40s and the 50s, when the side of any building was a playground and you paused game play for traffic to pass in the street you'd made your court. Stickball Brooklyn. Stickball, stoopball, handball.

“You can't grow up in The City and not play handball.”

New York City street games represent a deliberate democratization of sport. Anyone can play, so everyone does. No expensive equipment, memberships, or pedigree training are required. Players are as likely to be schoolteachers as they are to be street hustlers, investment bankers play electricians, students play retirees. They represent as many racial groups as age groups, from 20-year-old punks with big heads to old school septuagenarians who've been around long enough to know better.

Handball's level playing field shines in the category of athletic ability— the sport is simultaneously physically challenging and physically accepting. You don't have to be NBA tall to stand out in handball. You don't have to have the longest reach or the most powerful swing to be exceptional. One of New York's top-ranked professional handball players is a champion many times over, was the first handball pro to receive Red Bull sponsorship, and is also five foot four and grew up with asthma. Handball is a full body workout, from cardio and core strengthening to power in the legs and swing in the arms, but in theory, anyone who can keep up stands a chance to win.

“How many guys are going to be shortstops for the Yankees? In handball, that happens.”



Tiers of play emerge clearly—there's no hiding your handball standing from a well-trained eye. High-ranked handball players, the A Players, are treated by competitors with either reverence and awe or with a thinly disguised desire to destroy. Players lower on the food chain aspire to that A-level greatness or they hunger to unseat A-level power. Feeding an entirely different hunger, hustlers hide their skill and fudge their rankings for the sake of easy wins against lower-ranked players or against suckers with big egos, quick tempers, and deep pockets.

At The Cage, one of the three handball courts is always a money court. You can play for fun or for glory on the other two courts, but if you're playing for cash, there is protocol involved. Pay your debts, play by the rules, if you're on the sidelines and you're not an official line ref, keep your mouth shut. Five-dollar games are common, but so are fifty-dollar games and hundred-dollar games, depending who you ask. Side bets beef up the stakes and turn handball into a lively spectator sport as action unfolds on the well-juiced sidelines in tandem with points on the courts.

"My heart is at West 4th Street."

Rules at The Cage are unspoken and sacred. Players shush cursing when passersby make their way over from the basketball side—they want handball to shine in front of kids and tourists. Some players want to ban cell phones from The Cage completely, others complain about smokers on the sidelines: "when it's a hundred degrees out you need all the oxygen you can get," says one of the old guard players who's been a legend on the New York City scene for decades. "There's no etiquette anymore."

Old school players are frustrated by the young up-and-com-

ers who threaten convention. They're talented but cocky, they want it all without wanting to pay their dues, and they don't always pay out when they lose. But the same loud-mouthed young stars talking trash to hook a big fish opponent or boost their egos in front of a crowd swoon over the old guard when they think no one else is listening. Even subconsciously, they see the generational cycle of the New York City courts—The Cage, Coney Island, Grand Street, the Bronx—and they sense the future evolution of their role, should they last that long.

"We're a family. We're concerned for each other's livelihood."

The afternoon sun reaches high enough over the West Village brownstones all around us to blanket The Cage in light and blind players on the southern-most court—waiting for a new serve, looking for the next shot. The bench warms up with coffee and booze and cigarettes and lunch. When players get through catching up on handball news—the latest tournament results from across the country, new players, shocking losses, upsetting wins, a bit of industry gossip—the chat evolves. They catch up on the neighborhood rumor mill and trade stories from family and friends. They debate politics. They share about their lives.

A 72-year-old member of the West 4th Street weekend crew just found out he's going to be a grandfather. A benched player takes a call from his dentist before he gets shushed off the court—no phone calls in The Cage—and another disappears for a couple of hours to finish filing his taxes. Someone shows off his stomach scars to a crew of old guard players at the other end of The Cage—he recently donated a kidney to his estranged sister. One of those old guard players just landed a role as an extra on *The Deuce*.







“People say, ‘oh, we’re so dedicated.’ But handball is an addiction.”

There’s something about handball that hooks its players deep. Many of the older players in the weekend crew have been coming out to The Cage since they were the young bulls on the circuit. Whether they’re play handball for a full-body workout or they thirst for the thrill of competition, whether they’re looking to score tournament wins or bring home a different kind of score, life at The Cage is as much an addiction as the sports played within its walls.

Handball is built into these players’ bodies and it courses through their veins. Game play built into the muscles, street-born pacing seeped into the blood. For such a simple game, it can be surprising to watch such heart laid bare within the walls of the Cage. But handball is about more than a rubber ball bouncing against the peeling paint of New York City cement. With no sporting intermediary, no racket, paddle, or equipment to thank or blame for the outcome, handball is wrenchingly pure. Ball and hand, a physical exchange entirely, allegedly, in your control.

“It’s all a mental game, once your head goes, you’re done.”

This purity proves tricky. Naturally, there are other factors at play beyond the ball-hand connection that influence that isolated moment. Style comes into play, as does technique: who can slice the ball unexpectedly for a surprise attack, or drop it in an unbeatable corner shot? “You have to make it look easy,” the players tell me, the fire behind their eyes

betraying that it’s anything but. Handball is a battle for mental fortitude in this sense. Trash talk is practically an official element of game play at The Cage. Block out the taunting and the jeers, forget your tournament scores, leave your reputation on the bench. At all costs, keep your head in the game. There’s not much else to fall back on.

What is stripped away by handball’s democratization is the bluster that serves, in most mainstream sports, as armor. Designer gear glitters and distracts, label-made uniforms homogenize and cutting edge technology molds into mass-manufactured equipment for elite athletes and anyone with the cash to burn. Are these tools of the trade, or are they a crutch? If ball, wall, and hand are the only requirements for a sport like this, perhaps the athletic ability on display here is physical talent in its purest form. Much of the talent at The Cage is certainly untrained. It’s instinctive and raw. It is a compulsion born of the New York City streets and playing out on the New York City streets, every day, come rain, snow, or shine.

And in the end, it’s all about your hands.



