



Out of the Archives

Ep. 5 Redux: “Play Ball: Sports and Athletics in Public Housing”

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Written and produced by The National Public Housing Museum

Host Narration [Mark Jaeschke]: Presented and produced by the National Public Housing Museum, this is *Out of the Archives*, an oral history podcast created from interviews with public housing residents from across the United States. I’m your host this episode, Mark Jaeschke. The stories in this episode span from 1943 to 1993. For a full list of sources, please check out the episode notes in your podcast platform.

As a part of the Museum’s mission to amplify the stories of public housing residents from across the country, we’ve decided to revisit some of our earlier episodes, sharing greater historical context to cultivate deeper understandings of the experiences of people who live in publicly-funded housing. This episode, “Play Ball: Sports and Athletics in Public Housing,” originally aired on August 27, 2020.

Sports have been a site of competition for thousands of years across the globe, with some athletes practicing and training all of their lives for their big moment in the spotlight, and others enjoying their sports at a more casual level. In the United States, we gravitate towards solitary legends like Muhammad Ali, whose work also included career training for Chicago public housing residents, Michael Jordan, Babe Ruth, —athletic powerhouses with larger than life personas, and athletic prowess that makes their fame feel like a given. But sports is about more than just independent excellence. In this episode of *Out of the Archives*, we acknowledge and celebrate the cultural and personal economic impacts of playing sports on a professional level, while also uplifting the community building that others facilitated through recreational sports and athletics.

Our first narrator is Tanisha Wright. Tanisha has had a brilliant career—she was a first round draft pick in the 2005 WNBA season by the Seattle Storm, going on to help them win their second franchise championship in 2010. She continued playing with the New York Liberty and the Minnesota Lynx before turning to coaching, eventually becoming the Head Coach of the Atlanta Dream in 2021. At the time of her NPHM oral history recording in 2019, she had just finished her playing career and was establishing herself as a coach with the University at North Carolina at Charlotte Division-I women’s basketball team. But before all of these career-defining successes, Tanisha grew up playing basketball in the Mon View Heights projects in West Mifflin, Pennsylvania.

Tanisha Wright: Basketball is the one mainstay that everybody has and that everybody connects with. So we all play basketball, whether you were good at it or not, you know what I mean? You kinda connected through basketball and other sports as well, but i think the main sport definitely was basketball, because as a kid I played football with my friends, kickball. But really, we all played basketball and either you grew from there or you didn't, you know? And that was just something fun, like me and my friends would just play basketball all day every day, before school, after school.

Shakira Johnson (Oral Historian): Definitely all day!

Wright: Yeah, and any chance that we could get. So my love really grew you know, as a kid, growing up in New York, obviously basketball is huge, so, you know. Going outside, that's all you see, that's all you really know. So it was around for me since I can remember.

If you wanted to play, you had to play with the bigger kids, with the older kids...I mean, I was playing with kids when I was in eighth grade, probably even younger than that, sixth, seventh grade...that were already in high school. You know what I mean, and that's just if you wanted to play, and play for real, that's what you had to do. But you know, my friends and I, we'd get our 5 together and we would travel to other places that we knew people played basketball too, so it wasn't just like we were in Whitaker all the time, no. We would take our 5 or 6 or however many we had, and then we would go to Homeville, and play people in Homeville, or go to other parts of Whitaker and play people down there and different stuff like that. So, I mean, basketball was just...our mainstay, that was what we knew, you know what I mean? That was an everyday...that was a lifestyle for us, it wasn't just something...it was a lifestyle.

Host: Our next narrator is named Gil Walker, who was the Director of Residential Programs for the Chicago Housing Authority during the '90s, a decade marked by neoliberal promises and policies, courtesy of the city's Democratic political machine. This, alongside even older systemic inequities helped to create an increasingly visible unequal and segregated city. It would also mark the city's last decade when "traditional public housing" —namely groups of high rise apartment complexes, would be the primary source of government funded low-income housing. The city's Plan for Transformation, which was introduced in 2000, solidified the city's movement to continue demolishing public housing that had begun in the 1990s. This policy would reshape the map of public housing, leveling almost all of its high rise buildings, including Cabrini-Green, the Robert Taylor Homes, and the Stateway Gardens.

In the decade prior to demolition, buildings were in a state of disrepair, which led to an increase in crime. At the time, thanks in part to the Clinton administration's Housing Opportunity Program Extension Act of 1996, a national "one-strike, you're out" policy was created. The outcome essentially "ensured that public housing residents who engage in illegal drug use or other criminal activities on or off public housing property face swift and certain eviction," essentially barring anyone with a past record from entering public housing, and creating a pitfall for residents at the time.

Enter Mr. Walker, who, during his tenure with the Chicago Housing Authority, made his name by being “the city’s unofficial youth basketball boss” from 1990 to 1998. His role as the head of CHA’s Midnight Basketball League perfectly coincided with the Chicago’s Bulls’ double-three peat golden era, during which basketball turned into a true global phenomenon with Michael Jordan, the Bulls, and Chicago at center stage. Using basketball as a catalyst for bringing youth off the streets and out of trouble, the Midnight Basketball League became an institution of its own— a popular late night activity for players and their friends, family, and the public housing community at large.

Gil Walker: Vince Lane, who was the Executive Director of the Chicago Housing Authority at the time happened to be in New York on a particular occasion and Vince saw this program called the Midnight Basketball League and came back to Chicago and asked me to investigate the program. He thought it was a program we could use here in Chicago, the reason being because um, at that time there were instances now, there were a lot of violence and anti-social behavior going on with young men between the age of 17 and 26. And so we were trying to look for some type of programs, if you will, that could service and deal with those guys on a positive level. So we were investigating all type of things to do.

So I went to New York and went to Glenarden, Maryland to take a look to see what (*indiscernible*) was doing. And I thought it was a wonderful program...however, however. It wasn’t a program on the level that I thought could benefit Chicago. Now, we used the same components as he did because he saw that crime was really prevalent between the hours of 10 to 2, why 10 to 2? Because young men, and then he saw that young men committing the crimes in Glenarden, Maryland, which by the way, was a close-knit republican community. So, the profile show that between 10 and 2 young men in between the age of 17 and 26 were committing crimes and that type of thing. Point being, because between the ages of 17 and 26, young men, and young women too, should be in the house studying, if you will. But most are out partying, having a good time. But some were doing negative things. I submit to you that if in fact, you don’t have anything positive to do between the hours of 10 and 2, you’re gonna be doing something negative.

So, (*indiscernible*) used basketball to get guys off of the streets, into the gym and they saw a dip in crime in Glenarden, Maryland. So now, looking at all those components and statistics that he used, how is that program gonna work in Chicago? First and foremost, we are very very arrogant in Chicago when it comes to basketball. At that time, Michael Jordan was just getting into his groove in the city of Chicago. We had the Chicago Public League, we had all type of leagues, and we think that we play basketball better than anybody, any place in the world, we’re that cocky, we’re that arrogant. So just using his model in Glenarden and trying to bring it to Chicago would not work.

You see, I cannot give a grown man between the ages of 17 and 26 a t-shirt and tell him come on to the gym and play. There’s all kinds of leagues in Chicago, so why is he gonna come to the Midnight Basketball League? So we sat down with Dr. Cara Adams and her staff and me and Vince Lane and we came up with a proposal. And the proposal was the Chicago Housing Authority Midnight Basketball League: the best basketball league in the entire country!

So what we decided to do was, if in fact we gonna pull these guys off the streets, into the gym, we gotta bait our hook better than anybody (indiscernible). We gave these guys brand new shoes, we gave them socks, warm-ups, jockstraps, top of the line uniforms. We did everything and we said that we used the National Basketball, the NBA, as a model. Not because we was trying to put any ideas into these guys heads that if you get your game together, you going to the NBA. But the NBA represents the very best, and they understand the NBA which means that we gonna use the same rules, regulations, and guidelines, that the NBA used particularly when it comes to proper protocol and decorum of following rules, regulations and the guidelines. You say, if you mess up in the NBA, you out. If you get caught with drugs in the NBA, you gone. If in fact you commit a crime in the NBA, you gone. If in fact you mouth off to the coach, you fired, you gone. So we put all those standards into the Midnight Basketball League and adopted our rules, regulations, and guidelines, and gave each one of them ball players a contract. They had to sign those contracts. They signed the contract that said they would do everything possible to be a good citizen, they'd have provide for their family, go look for jobs, they'd go do this, they'd go do that. We put all that in the contract. And we put all the things we'd do in the contract. We're going to provide uniforms, we're going to provide coaches, we're going to provide instructions, we're going to provide guidance.

We put in the end of every basketball game, you gotta go to a mandatory workshop. In that workshop, people would come in and give you information about how to help you become a successful person. Any case, now we get ready to do the program, and we wanted to put a pilot together first, rather than go to all 21 housing developments. You know, you had 21 family housing developments from Cabrini-Green on the Northside to Altgeld Gardens on the Southside and all that in between. So we wanted to put a program in each one of those developments, but we couldn't all do it all at one time, because I had to do a pilot program to work out all the kinks to make sure that the program was successful. Now we could kinda do a cookie cutter approach in each one of those developments.

Host: Gil's dedication to Midnight Basketball garnered him national recognition—he even made his way into a feature in *Sports Illustrated*. Although the Midnight Basketball League couldn't solve the underlying, systemic issues that public housing residents faced on a daily basis, it offered more than just a fun escape. The League offered enrichment programs that players participated in which focused on drug education and career counseling as well as partial scholarships to vocational schools. Despite all of its grassroots success, city and outside funding dried out by 1998, shuttering the league.

In addition to highly structured groups like the Midnight Basketball League, public housing complexes oftentimes contained Boys and Girls Clubs. These clubs were community centers that offered a range of organized activities for youth, from dances to sports leagues, creating an environment where residents could foster hobbies and grow as young people. Our next two narrators, Tommy Woods of the Lathrop Homes and Byron Dickens of the Jane Addams Homes, share their experiences with the Clubs and their importance of community building through play, in good times and in bad.

Tommy Woods: Everything while growing up, we attended Lathrop Boys and Girls Club. There we engage in lots of fun; pool, ping pong, board games, wood shop, arts and crafts. lots Lots

games in the neighborhood; ledge, marble, fast pitching, flag football, boxing, box car races, sledding on the Diversey bridge hill, pinball, gurus at the Diversey River Bowling Alley, and growing up was something very special. Whereas it meant that we, my brothers, my family, my friends, we saw growing up as a melting pot of a major dream of fun.

So the boys club enriched my mind with sportsmanship. Doing the best that you can do, it's not about winning or losing, it's about doing the best you can do. And with that, that helped me become an avid marathoner where I completed 16 marathons, first marathon in 1979 at 3:02 that qualified me for Boston. And it helped me be the person I can be to show others that with a lot of effort, a lot of commitment, you too can become a person that is dedicated to get something done. So running marathons is one thing, but it entailed me with the ability, if I set myself up to say I want to be a programmer, with some schooling, some education, I became a programmer. So the Boys and Girls Club at Lathrop Homes was the foundation, whereas it provided a lot of fun things, a lot of guidance, and a lot of friendships to cherish.

Byron Dickens: So sometimes they went over to Commissioner [Deverra] Beverly LAC's meeting, to talk about what's needed for the youth. You know, what's gonna keep them out of trouble. Because, you know, I can work with them all day long, but if the community is not supporting them, and then you know, we limited. Remember I was doing this, I started in my house. And then we went to the Boy's Club, they closed that down. We went to Fosco, the small Fosco. They closed that down, and to build a new one. So we went to the YMCA, they shut that down, tore it down. So we wasn't invited Fosco first, because what happened when it opened, [Hurricane] Katrina just happened. So they had some people from Katrina in there. So we couldn't use it. But then, so I went to Newberry. Now we was at Fosco when a new supervisor came in, and he was one of those, 'I'd rather see them in here than to see them out there'. You know, so he allowed them to throw parties. He allowed me to have a male's meeting. You know mean? So also mostly it was, you know, mostly it was me talking to him, you know, 'what's going on and community? How can we do some different to do community events', you know what I mean? A lot of times we, you know, we took them out to eat, we took them, you know. They was part of Fosco when UIC had a game at the Pavilion, some of them went, you know. We'd play, you know, the basketball tournaments. So it was more sports, we just got active in different things in the community. So, you know, off what's going on now, you know, those guys that they blaming for the crime now, you know, I had those guys just didn't have the resources.

Host: These foundational ideas of community through play are central to NPHM's current Artist as Instigator, Marisa Morán Jahn. Her work and creative practice is deeply rooted in community care, solidarity, and self-determination, focusing on redress for structural discrimination and injustice. Her work with the NPHM follows suit, with the creation of a coloring book/creative wallpaper that invites users to create a vivid world to turn pages to, a project that takes inspiration from oral histories in the NPHM archive about the Edgar Miller Animal Court sculptures at the former Jane Addams Homes, the Museum's permanent location. Another of Jahn's projects called *HOOPS* will bring Jahn, residents, and other local stakeholders together to imagine and design a creative interpretation of a basketball court. This [interactive installation] will occupy the lot behind the Museum, which will be shared with residents of a new mixed-income housing development.

These dreams of play and sport can be heard in the stories of our next narrators, James Purgatorio and Lee Roy Murphy, who lived in the ABLA and Robert Taylor Homes, respectively. They both share similar stories with different outcomes. As young men, both of the narrators spent a lot of time watching boxing, and while it remained an interest for James in his younger years, Lee Roy had a much different outcome.

James Purgatorio: Probably in sixth or seventh grade, I really spent most of my time with my grammar school friends and what we did, as I said, spent a lot of time playing baseball in the summer. We used to go swimming at the YMCA during the summer. And in the evening, played softball at McKaren(?). We were all pretty close friends. A guy by the name of Jimmy Plascenti, who lived on Bishop Street, was my best friend, and there were a number of other people up and down Bishop Street that we were close with and friends with. And uh, Jimmy and I also, it was an era when professional boxing was very familiar, er, very popular. And Jimmy and I spent a lot of time talking about Rocky Marciano and all the fights and exploits and so on. It was also a time when boxing was so popular, that at the movie theater, you could go watch the event and see the boxing match there. And it was also on the radio, so we used to follow that as well.

Lee Roy Murphy: When I grew up, I used to always watch boxing on TV. I used to watch Victor Galindez, Muhammad Ali, I used to watch boxing, I was thrilled with boxing. And you know, that was my sport. So as I grew older in Robert Taylor and went to [Edward] Hartigan [Elementary School], and going to Hartigan, I ran across lots of bullies. And they would bully me cause I was the new kid on the block, I thought I was tough, you know and they showed me different. So I had a teacher named Mr. Young in fourth grade, he used to leave me the school at 3:10 every day. He'd say "boy, you got 5 minutes to get outta here before they getcha!" So he used to let me leave at 3:10 every day. So one day, the guys, they didn't come to school one day, so we had recess, they didn't...I had no problem. So I got off school that day, he let me out at 3:10, and they cornered me. And I said "ooh, what I'ma do?" I was scared. So I finally broke away these two guys, and went up in the building, came back down, and then another guy a bully named Ross Schpragans [ph.]. This guy wanted to beat me up cause I used to bug him all the time, tell him "you can't beat me". And my friend John came down and said "why you running from them?" I said "well, they'd beat me up"! He said "you could beat him!" I said "I could?" He gave me self esteem that I could beat this boy. So I said "Yeah?" So (indiscernible) I beat 'em. After that I had no problem no more with nobody. Then I had a problem with these other two guys, cats named King and Juicy. So this other guy named Norman said "Look, Lee Roy, these guys can't beat you. You can beat 'em." We didn't get into a fight, it was an argument, that was it. The next day Norman told me, "you know, I'ma take you to my gym in Wentworth Garden." He took me to Wentworth Garden, I was in 6th grade by then when he took me to the gym. And I met the coach over there and I was, it was something different. Cause I'd never been outta, no farther than Hardikin to the building, I never went out the neighborhood cause I was young. So after a while, I start going to the gym and one of the coach's sons was training. And he needed a sparring partner and they let me spar with him. I ain't never boxed a day in my life and I beat him up. Since that day, since I was, I got in eighth grade, freshman in high school, I became a popular person once I got in high school because I was boxing. I was 15, 16, coming up. At the age 16, I won the Chicago Golden Glove as an open fighter. I was one of the youngest fighters in Chicago to win the open title. From there I moved up, I started moving up in weight, and I

became one of the best fighters in the city. They did a story back then, called Chicago Magazine, it did a story about me there and it was...different. And after that I got a part of the Olympic team. First Olympic team I made, I was 17, I was a junior in high school and I made the 1976 Olympic Team. I knocked 4 guys out into the semi finals, and then I ran into a guy named Keith Boone from the United States Airforce, he beat me split decision, after that, I would rank #3 in the world as the best amateur in the United States.

Host: We'll round out this episode with one more excerpt from former CHA Director of Residential Programs, Gil Walker. Hear him talk about the impact of investing in community.

Gil Walker: So we started off in Henry Horner and Rockwell Gardens. Now, we were gonna do 8 teams in Henry Horner and 8 teams in Rockwell. We were gonna only do 10 guys on each team? Why 10? Because this is a basketball program and it's not based on ability, it's based on guys who want to come out and be engaged with the program. So only 8 guys on a team, I'm sorry, 8 teams and 10 guys on the team. Only 10 because the first 5 play the first quarter. Then they sit down. Then the second 5 comes in to play the second quarter, then they sit down. The third and fourth quarter the coach could do whatever he wants to do, but you gotta be able to let everyone participate in the program. Unlike other programs you'll have guys benched the whole game, that type of stuff, and they lose interest. Now, we put fliers out in all the communities, all over the city. We're gonna start this program in Henry Horner and Rockwell, okay? And you have to be a resident of Chicago Housing Authority. So, you could come from Altgeld Gardens, up to Cabrini-Green, and play the Midnight Basketball League. Everyone said that ain't gonna happen, because of the gang factions. No guys gonna be coming from Robert Taylor, coming to Henry Horner. Well, we put out those fliers out and something strange happened. I looked around, I had about 400 guys in the gym. 400. Guys who are unemployed, underemployed, disenfranchised. Some guys in gangs, some guys not in gangs. Some guys graduated high school, graduated from college. I had lawyers, I had attorneys. Guys between the ages of 17 and 26 who wanted to play. So now, how do you get down to 80 guys? Well. We did it the same way pro teams do, we took 'em through a boot camp. And girl, by the time I got them through running, and making guys do jump jacks, and situps, and so forth, some of 'em just said "I ain't goin, this man is crazy". I called a practice session at 5 o'clock in the morning, but you gotta be on time. If you're not on time, you got a mark against your name. Do that twice and, well [*clap*], you know. Now, through attrition, we get down to maybe about 100, 110 guys. Now we start assessing basketball ability. Because you don't wanna put all the good guys on one team, okay? And what when you want to have parity throughout the league, so we had a draft, okay? And the draft—just think about the NBA, everything the NBA do, we do. Gave 'em caps with their name on it. I used authentic NBA uniforms, so now when you see the Chicago Bulls, when you see the Golden State Warriors, Chicago Housing Golden State Warriors, we got their actual uniforms on. And what I'm gonna do is make sure that I donate some of those uniforms to the Museum, cause I got some. Any case, I did everything, even the basketball that we developed, okay? We had our own brand of basketball, and I assumed the title Commissioner Gil Walker, so my name is even printed on the basketball. We wanted to make sure these guys took ownership of this particular program, and by taking ownership of the program, you protect the program. You make sure that it works. So now we get ready, and we get ready to open up our Midnight

Basketball League. And so, I wanted to have a grand opening, I wanted to have all 160 teams under one roof, I wanted to introduce this program to the public, if you will. So we didn't have it over at Horner or Rockwell, we had it at Malcolm X College. We invited the media, we wanted everybody to come out, that type of thing. And girl, it was jam packed. And it just so happens on that particular day, um, uh that's my phone I'm sorry. On that particular day, Kemp, okay, was the head, the Regional Director, I mean he was the head of the housing authority, Secretary of Housing. 60 Minutes was following Jack Kemp, okay, profiling him and he happened to be in Chicago on that day. So Mayor Daley invited Jack Kemp to come to the opening of the Midnight Basketball League, okay, along with Vince Lane and other elected officials and that type of stuff. So now we got national TV there! And girl, that next morning, I was on Good Morning America, I was on the Today Show, I mean it took off! It really truly did, simply because we finally found something. That young men between the ages of 17 and 26, you know, I submit to you, that if in fact I don't have anything to do, and I'm between 17 and 26, I'm hangin' out in the community, I'm just standing outside on a hot summer day, not doin' anything, I might get into some trouble, okay? But now, if I'm going see to a Midnight Basketball League game, I could take my girl there, sure, I could take my kid there, we had to stop the guys from bringing their little kids there, cause we said, "wait a minute, okay? They gotta go to school the next morning!" But mothers and fathers was coming out to cheer for their kids and that type of things. I had parents telling me, and even ball players tell me, "Coach, Commissioner. This is the first time my mama has ever cheered for me." I don't care how, if you can play basketball or not, okay? You've got a spot on the Midnight Basketball League. We took team pictures of all the guys, we got a yearbook of all the guys in the yearbook, all that. Just think about that, a first class college program. We convinced the powers that be at the Chicago Housing Authority, "Let's invest this type of resources into these young men." And it paid off!

Host Narration [6]: This episode of *Out of the Archives* was curated, written, and edited by Mark Jaeschke and Liú Chen. The episode was mixed and mastered by Seth Engel. The theme song for *Out of the Archives* is titled "Born in the Blues," written, performed, and recorded by former Stateway Gardens resident, Keith Hudson. *Out of the Archives* is made possible through the generous support of the Illinois Arts Council Agency, the Kresge Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events.

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