



Paul Volponi before doing battle at Flushing Meadows Park in Queens.

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Proving to Athletes What They've Learned

By Paul Volponi

The game of basketball has been everything to me. My place of refuge, place I've always gone where I needed comfort and peace. It's been the site of intense pain and the most intense feelings of joy and satisfaction. It's a relationship that has evolved over time, given me the greatest respect and love for the game.” --Michael Jordan, six-time NBA Champion,

During the summer of my 17th year, the thing I wanted most in life was to be recognized as a legitimate New York City street basketball player. Other seventeen-year-olds were busy with part-time jobs, saving up money for their first car, and prepping for the SAT. Not me. I was captivated by streetball, and it became a huge part of my identity. My new young adult non-fiction book, aimed at grades 6 through 12, is entitled ***Streetball is Life: Lessons Earned on the Asphalt*** (published by Rowman & Littlefield). The narrative details my summer-long participation in streetball society. It also highlights all that I ultimately gained from the experience in the form of essential societal skills that benefit me to this day. Why will this story captivate your young readers? Because athletes very much have a shared experience—one of passionate motivation, failures and successes. So “my” journey more accurately translates to “our” journey.

I fell in love with the game at 16. Not with watching it on TV or the desire to be seen wearing a numbered jersey with my name arching across the back shoulders. I'm talking about the actual game. Becoming part of the rhythm and flow of ten players searching for their place in something that lives and breathes. Something that strives to move with one mind. One goal. One passion. To be a member of the winning squad and stay on the court, sending the losers to the end of a long line of fresh opponents waiting for next game. Other than those players waiting to get onto the court, there was no crowd. No spectators. Only the occasional passerby who'd put down their grocery bags for a moment to stare at the intense conflict on the other side of a chain-link fence. The lack of cheers and adulation didn't matter, though. It was never the motivation. Streetball is strictly fueled by pride and desire. And those undocumented battles were mostly contested with the same ferocity as the NBA Finals. When the game seduced me, LeBron James hadn't been born yet, Kobe Bryant was still in diapers, and nobody wanted to be like Mike because Michael Jordan was about to be cut from his high school's varsity basketball team, and sent to the JV squad.

Streetball basketball gives its teen and pre-teen participants an opportunity to take part in a rather unique segmented or tribal society. Don't be fooled by the game's often loose and disorganized appearance. It doesn't

matter that the participants are usually un-uniformed, or at the bare bones of playing shirts vs. skins. If you look with a more discerning eye you'll discover that the game's inner-workings and social tenets are highly-structured. Because streetball is played without referees or authority figures, it is the players themselves who govern the on-court action, as well as what happens on the sidelines. They hold complete domain over what goes on inside the painted lines of an asphalt court. They establish their local constitution or "park rules" in various ways—sometimes through democratic consensus and other times through the singular force of will by a dominant player. Many of the skills you need to thrive and survive in a streetball yard have little to do with rebounding, ball-handling or shooting. Instead, they consist of advanced societal skills. Your ability to communicate, negotiate, problem-solve and de-escalate potential conflicts are continually being polished. Almost every baller can confidently look back at their time on a court and point to something in their current life—a job, a relationship, an achievement—that they've gained through the skills honed while playing streetball.

Personally, that experience helped provide me with the focus to write 14 books for young adults, the confidence to teach teens on Rikers Island (at the time, the world's biggest jail) for six years, and to speak in front of large audiences.

So the next time someone scowls at you and asks, "Are you going to waste your time again playing ball today?" Your uplifting reply can be, "Waste my time? No. I'm about to participate in and become part of a complex society of ever-shifting tribes (teams) while I sharpen a wide array of skills to enhance my future."

How do teens and preteens know they're ready to enter such a society? It's fairly simple—the game will beckon them. They'll start to eat, drink and sleep basketball. Their parents and teachers will easily recognize the intense pull, watching them make phantom moves with an invisible ball while walking down a hallway.

You begin by playing against your friends. They're kids from your immediate neighborhood. Kids who truly believe they have a love for the game. Over time, however, you realize that you're different. Your team almost always wins. And when it comes time to choose up sides, you're usually picked first. Soon you find yourself alone on a court, shooting baskets long after the sun goes down. You're playing on the one bent rim in the park because it's the only hoop illuminated by a streetlight. Or maybe

you've talked a relative into bringing their car up to the fence and turning on the headlights. You're hungry for a game. But your friends are all off doing something else. That's when you realize you're ready for the next step. You need to leave the comfort zone of your neighborhood yard and test yourself against better players.

The park in which I wanted to make my streetball reputation was simply referred to as "The Proving Ground." It was a famed yard in Queens, New York where blue-collar working adults mixed on the court with teens, often leveraging their considerable strength and weight against them. That's a polite way of saying the pick-up games there were brutally rough.

There were no simple fouls in this particular version of streetball, just hits delivered so hard that they resembled felonies. If you made a sweet jumper inside the gates of the Proving Ground, you didn't dare smile or celebrate too loudly. If you did, someone was coming to knock you down. But if you canned a second shot in a row, you might as well celebrate. Because opposing players were going to physically punish you anyway. The park's culture resembled that of the Roman Coliseum as much as it did Madison Square Garden. And despite the bone-jarring nature of its overly-competitive contests, the basketball played there was nothing but pure. The Proving Ground was a difficult place to cultivate friendships and an easy place to make enemies, at least until new sides were chosen at the end of every game. But if you could earn the respect of the players there, you could hold your head up high and walk with confidence anywhere.

While attempting to stake my claim at the Proving Ground, along with a few other teens who were new to the park that summer, I had to go up against one of the legendary streetballers in New York City, a cleaner of commercial storefronts nicknamed Pirate. He was aptly named because of his cutthroat approach to the game, as well as his sharp elbows, which drew blood from many an opponent.

His teammates were calling him "Pirate," almost genuflecting in his presence. He ran a hand back through his uncombed red hair before he popped some dental work out of his mouth and stuffed it into his pocket...Pirate walked across the court toward us and flashed a jack-o-lantern grin, with an open space of five or six teeth missing across the top front. Suddenly, I remembered him. It had to be six or seven years ago. I was at the courts in my neighborhood...There was just three of us in the yard—two guys in their late teens playing one-on-one against each other, and me. I'd asked a bunch of times for them to let me into the game, but I was being

ignored. That's when Pirate walked in, not that I'd ever asked his name. He marched up to those guys and demanded to play. "I'll take the kid on my side," he'd told them, pointing to me and displaying that near toothless smile. "And it's still not going to be a game you can win." Pirate only let me touch the ball to check it out of bounds. He took every shot and scored every basket on his own, with me standing around as decoration. At one point, both guys were guarding Pirate, understanding that he wouldn't pass me the rock. That's when he laid down the greatest move I'd ever seen. He blew past the first dude, and then put the second on his hip. In one lightning-quick motion, Pirate hid the ball behind his back while simultaneously slapping the defender on his backside, making him believe the ball had been passed away. The guy frantically turned around to find me. Only Pirate still had the rock and swished it into the hoop. "I don't even think that's legal," complained the defender. "You can't touch me like that." One play later, Pirate purposely elbowed him in the ribs so hard that the dude lost his breath and could barely finish. I think we won that game by a score of 15 to 2. "That'll teach those bums a lesson," Pirate had told me, before he left the park. "And it could have been worse for them." Standing on the court alone, I couldn't decide if Pirate was some kind of streetball superhero or if he belonged locked up behind bars.

Now, as an older teen, it was my turn to stand up to Pirate, who clearly had anger issues. I was being asked to guard him. To try and take away what he valued most—his reputation as an unstoppable force on the court. Early in the contest, with his team trailing by several points to a bunch of young upstarts, I made a good defensive play and slapped the ball away from him. That's when Pirate lost control of his temper. He was probably more upset at his own teammates than me, but I somehow became the focal point of his anger. He lowered his shoulder and charged at me. Taken by total surprise, it was too late to sidestep him, so I lowered my own shoulder and prayed for the best. When we collided, the Pirate dislocated his collarbone with a loud *pop*. With his remaining good arm, he grabbed a piece of splintered wood from a trash can and tried to attack me with it. That's when several wiser adults wrestled him to the ground before driving him to the local hospital. On the way out of the Proving Ground, Pirate screamed at me, "I'll even things up with you!"

During that following week, I was counseled by nearly a dozen other players not to show up at the proving ground on the next Saturday morning. But there was no way to get what I desired most—to become a legitimate NYC streetball player—by getting run out of that yard. So I made up my

mind to be the first one there that coming Saturday, even if it was pouring rain outside.

I didn't get much sleep that (Friday) night, and even shadow-boxed my bedroom wall a few times. The next morning, I decided to leave for the Proving Ground early, at around 7:25 AM. (An adult player) had asked me if I wanted a ride. I guess he was concerned about me getting caught there alone. But I'd turned him down. I took a basketball with me, and before I left the house, I wrote my name on it in capital letters with Mom's indelible laundry marker—PAUL VOLPONI. Then I dribbled the rock all the way there, to get myself in a good rhythm and occupy my mind. Walking through the gates of the Proving Ground, my ears were tuned to the sound of two things—the sound of the rock pounding the pavement and the loud beating of my heart. For nearly 15 minutes, I shot the ball alone on the court. Then beyond the chain-link fence, I heard the sound of a car pulling up. It was Pirate's. I held the rock close to my chest and watched him walk into the park with his left arm in a sling. "Come over here, you prick," he said, in a tone that probably could have sounded a lot more threatening. "Look at what you did. You think this stopped me? I worked my regular route cleaning windows all week with a busted wing." I wasn't sure what to say. But what came from my mouth was, "I'm sorry you got hurt." "This is nothing. I've broken lots of bones playing ball," he said, before he swiped the rock from my grasp with his good arm. Pirate dribbled halfway down the court and sank a long one-handed set-shot. Then he walked back to the bench and began to lace up his kicks—a black pair of Chuck Taylor high-tops with a small section of canvas cut out to avoid blisters on his little toe. "You go to school or something?" Pirate asked. "I start college in September," I answered. "So you're good at reading, with books and things," he said, before I nodded my head. "There's nothing wrong with that. Keep studying. Don't be in a hurry to work. That's what I tell my daughter, and she's older than you." "Thanks. I will," I said, breathing much easier. There was a long pause, as if Pirate was finished with me. So I walked off to retrieve the rock...None of the Proving Ground regulars seemed surprised that Pirate was about to play with a dislocated collarbone. Then Pirate popped out his upper teeth and strode onto the court. He played an amazing game with only one good arm, scoring a bunch of baskets and even throwing a few elbows at people. I don't really remember who won or who lost that morning. Probably because it didn't matter much...I was even Pirate's teammate once or twice. That meant, for a while at least, I had his back and

he had mine. And when the games finished, I left there feeling more like a legitimate streetballer than I ever had before.

I developed a fairly close relationship with Pirate over the course of that summer. That's when I discovered that despite acquiring a driver's license (he'd memorized the road signs and questions in the driver's manual), he could barely read. Somewhere over the next few weeks, I summoned the courage to pull him aside from the crowd and hand him a flyer put out by our local library announcing adult education classes. It could have severely irked his anger at me again. But it didn't. Instead, Pirate seemed to really appreciate my concern. And I have always looked back on that moment as one of the inspirations for why I ultimately became an educator.

Here's a partial list of the societal skills sharpened by your students who play streetball:

Communication is an essential skill mastered by individuals who advance in almost any kind of society. You can hardly get into a streetball game without communicating, "Hey, can I play? What are the sides? Who are you going to guard? How many points wins?" Ballers also communicate with each other during the middle of a contest, constantly talking on defense in order to make switches and play through picks. In fact, Doc Rivers, who coached the Boston Celtics to the NBA Championship in 2008, said, "If you're not talking, you're not playing defense." Competing and communicating at the same time, that accomplished societal skill is called **multi-tasking**.

Conflict-resolution is a highly valued societal skill. Not every intense disagreement, either on the court or the sideline, ends in a brawl. Because if it did, there would be very little basketball played. Nearly every game would have to be halted before the final score, and most of the players would leave totally dissatisfied. Hence, streetballers learn how to defuse tense situations. In the midst of this physical and often aggressive game, ballers learn to use their words. They generally know how to both listen and speak, using their tone of voice and keeping an appropriate distance from someone who is angered as a means of cooling a confrontation.

An important feature of any society is **self-expression**, allowing for personal freedom within the context of a group. When most people think about self-expression, disciplines like music, dance, painting, writing and even fashion designing probably come to mind before sports. But streetball

players thrive on the concept of self-expression. It's something they live and breathe. Ballers often give birth to moves that are created in-the-moment, possibly to never be duplicated again, and sometimes even surprising their originators. In most societies, self-expression is closely associated with valued qualities such as **courage**, **self-assurance**, **independence** and **creativity**.

We need to reexamine our usage of the term student/athlete. Most people simply see student/athletes as those participating for their school teams. That view, however, is way too narrow. It leaves out the millions of teens and preteens who consider themselves to be athletes, but for whatever reasons don't play organized sports for a coach at their school. Instead, they passionately compete in the streets, playgrounds, public parks and rec centers.

I served as an assistant coach on a New York City high school team for two seasons. I used to tell kids who didn't make the team, "No one's shutting the door to this game on you. You can only close that door yourself. Pick up a ball and go play somewhere. What goes on in this gym isn't any more important than what's going on in the playground." As educators, we need to understand that they are building a future for themselves—not through the pipedream of turning pro or even acquiring an athletic scholarship—but rather from the societal skills they are building every day they choose to don a pair of kicks and walk onto a court. I think they need to be recognized and supported in this growth.

I played street basketball regularly, well into my 50's. Most of that time I played at the Proving Ground, always looking to remind young adult players of what there was to gain. I hope you will read ***Streetball is Life: Lessons Earned on the Asphalt***. Share it and encourage students to check it out of your library. They'll absolutely see themselves in this non-fiction narrative. It will open their eyes, reinforce that their time playing all sports is never wasted, and hopefully inspire them to be proud of their journey.

"Even when I'm old and grey, I won't be able to play it, but I'll still love the game." —Michael Jordan