

Back To The Streets: Public NYC Wall Ball Courts Provide Girls With An Equal Athletic Opportunity - MAY 2016

By Ashley Jankowski

Springtime at Harlem's very own Thomas Jefferson Park normally brings images of green, grassy picnics and light, peaceful strolls. But for two Brooklyn girls, the idea of spring is a bit more concrete. 19-year-old twins Jessenia and Melanie Garate, pro-division wall ball players, worked as a team to defeat pair after pair of their grown men competitors, barely breaking a sweat.

The girls played each match with focus, confidence, and an undeniable swagger; to an outsider, the sisters looked to be the work of years of professional training. Little did they know that skills like these were built solely on the streets.

"We learned by playing in the parks," Melanie Garate said. "We didn't join clubs until we were older. Our mom played a lot, we went to the courts with her, so that's how we learned the game."

The Garate twins are just two of the thousands of New Yorkers who take advantage of the 1,700 parks scattered across the city. City parks often become the low-income community's only medium of physical activity and begin serving as a gym membership, a child's play space, and a social hub. These parks become incubators for young talent, as grit, pride, and reputation replace age groups, social class, and gender.

"They used to expect us to lose. They'd say, 'Oh they're going to lose because they've got a girl on their team,' but now they see us and know that we're gonna show up and kill them on the court," Jessenia Garate said.



(JESSENIA AND MELANIE SCORING AGAINST A MALE DOUBLE)

Female professional athletes like soccer player Abby Wambach of the US Women's National Team have spent the last year demanding equal treatment and pay from the sport's governing organizations in comparison to male counterparts. In this worldwide fight for equality, these two athletes, who often compete in and win co-ed wall ball tournaments, are becoming lead icons for girls in New York City.

But a difficult question arises as to how we as a city can develop young girls into successful athletes. Through the efforts of Title IX and organized youth sports teams, female athletes are finally making it onto their own stage. However, it's simply not enough. The problem becomes consistent and widespread access to these athletic opportunities. Travel club athletic teams like the Women's New York Rush Soccer Club has annual registration fees of

approximately \$3000 per athlete, which doesn't include tournament, travel, and uniform costs. According to the 2009-2013 ACS Profile, 27.2 percent of New York City's family households make less than \$25,000 a year. These families cannot afford to place their children into these programs, nor can they make the immense time commitment.

New York parents are forgetting that opportunity lies just beyond their doorstep. This is where the sport of wall ball comes into play. One wall. One ball. These are the only two things needed to change the lives of New York City's inner-city girls.

"Wall ball is the sport that is most accessible to these lower income families. Kids will gravitate towards the sport naturally," said Jasmine Ray, president and CEO of The United States Wallball Association.

Ray, a Brooklyn native, founded the USWA in 2010. This non-profit organization was designed with the goal of creating an accessible athletic program for inner-city children to help them resist drug abuse, stay in school, and build self confidence.

"Our mission is to utilize the sport of wall ball as a vehicle for inspiring and empowering people's lives," Ray wrote on the organization's Facebook page, which has accumulated over 2000 followers.



(USWA STAFF)

Street games like wall ball eliminate the ever increasing cost of travel club teams with no required uniform or extensive equipment needed. It can be played for free at any of the 2000 wall ball courts within the five boroughs, which are at most a brief subway ride away. Oftentimes the courts are reserved for organized youth wall ball events such as “Prep for Success”, “Prince and Princess of the Court” and most recently, USWA’s third appearance at the “Street Games” held in Harlem on Saturday, April 30.

It was here that dozens of volunteers gathered at Thomas Jefferson Park to guide over 3000 young athletes in their free classic games, which included street hockey, double dutch jump rope, and, of course, wall ball. The wall ball clinic consisted of four courts reserved solely for one on one instruction from USWA Staff and even Red Bull professional wall ball athlete Timbo Gonzalez.

“The most important part of teaching a child to play is patience,” USWA Executive Assistant Maybelline Torres, 19, said after five straight hours of tirelessly showing kids the basics of the sport. “It’s difficult to get a child to understand how to even hit the ball with their hand in the first place.”

Torres, an 11-year wall ball veteran and active member of the wall ball community, was thrilled to see an equal amount of young girls and boys at the wall ball clinic.

“Right now there are definitely more male ranked wall ball players. I think this is because girls aren’t as exposed to the sport. They aren’t taught to be athletic from a young age, many choose activities like dance over wall ball. That’s why clinics like the Street Games are so important,” she said.

The NYC Parks’ annual “Street Games” has only been around for the past nine years. Parents like Emory Barrette leaned on the surrounding chain linked fence, wondering how their daughters got so lucky.

“We never had anything like this when I was her age. As a young girl I never had the exposure to these sports” Barrette, 55, said. “Every year we come to this free event, and every year my daughter learns another new sport.”

The area of East Harlem surrounding Thomas Jefferson Park where Barrette and her daughter Adreanna, 7, live, is home to 17.7 percent of families who make less than \$10,000 a year, leaving children with limited athletic opportunity.

“We’ve always had this wall in our backyard, and now she knows how to use it to develop skills first on her own, without the intimidation of rowdy boys. Giving her this opportunity is free to us today, but priceless in the long run,” Barrette said.

And she's right. According to a study conducted by Betsey Stevenson of the University of Pennsylvania, the ability for young girls to participate in sports is directly related to a 20% increase in education attainment and a 40% rise in female employment rates.

The Garate twins, who are accustomed to balancing school and athletics schedules simultaneously, can attest to this. "Playing wall ball definitely made me more disciplined in my schoolwork. You had to keep your grades up to stay on the team," Melanie Garate said.

"Girls are naturally weaker when it comes to physical strength, so to compete we were forced to learn other mental skills to win, we learned to be mentally stronger," Jessenia Garate added.

Without wall ball, these sisters may never have developed self-discipline, problem solving, and teamwork, all of which are invaluable skills in today's workplace.

"We're working to make wall ball the foundation of any sport, and, as we start from the ground up at elementary schools, the foundation of these kids' lives," Ray said.

The development of successful female athletes and ultimately successful female professionals cannot just come from high income suburban areas, and no longer has to if we as New Yorkers stop trying to get our kids off the street, but rather think about getting our kids back on them.



(JESSENIA CHEERING WITH MELANIE)