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The Twilight of the Italian Social Club

By ReadWorks

During the 1800s and 1900s, immigrants from all over the world began moving to New York City in large numbers. They were coming to seek a better life for their families. Often, immigrants of a certain ethnicity lived in the same neighborhood. In New York, many Italians lived in neighborhoods like Little Italy, in Manhattan. Many of the families lived in cramped apartment buildings, called "tenements." Because the tenements were so small, people spent a lot of time outside. Some ethnic groups formed organizations called social clubs. These social clubs were housed in small clubhouses where people, particularly men, could hang out and talk.

The social clubs became the centers of many neighborhoods. They were places where men could gather after work and where families could gather on special occasions. During holidays, many of the social clubs threw parties. If a family in the neighborhood needed help, the social club might get together to help them. Membership in these clubs was a privilege. A member was required to pay dues to the club. When a neighborhood boy was allowed to join his local social club, it was like a rite of passage for him. It meant that he was one step closer to becoming a man.

Perhaps the group of people with more social clubs than anyone was the Italians. Italians had social

clubs not just in Little Italy, but in many other neighborhoods, like Bensonhurst and Carroll Gardens, in Brooklyn. The Italians saw these clubs as an important way of maintaining their native heritage. Sometimes, members of some of the clubs would be from the same region of Italy. While the members of the clubs were all Americans, they still celebrated certain Italian holidays. Many of the clubs would play Italian music and cook Italian food. Local politicians would often drop by the clubs at election time, to try and get votes.

However, as New York has changed, many of these Italian clubs have disappeared. Italians have moved out of Manhattan and Brooklyn to other areas, such as the borough of Staten Island and the state of New Jersey. As other groups have moved into these ethnic neighborhoods, the membership of many of the clubs has declined. As members have gotten older or died, fewer younger Italians have taken their place. This has led to many of the social clubs closing. While New York used to have dozens of Italian social clubs, only a handful are now left.

Today, however, some of these social clubs are still going strong. For example, the Van Westerhout Cittadini Molesi, in Brooklyn's Carroll Gardens neighborhood, still has several hundred members. The club was founded by men who had emigrated from a small town in Italy, Mola di Bari. Now, most of the members are from other places, but they are still of Italian descent. While many of them still live in Carroll Gardens, some live in other neighborhoods but still drop by the club to see their old friends and neighbors.

The clubs that remain continue to be important parts of the neighborhoods. Every July 4, one of the clubs in Carroll Gardens holds a party to which everyone in the neighborhood, Italians and non-Italians alike, is invited. The social club fills a pool in the parking lot and serves pasta and cannoli, an Italian dessert. This is a nice way for people in the neighborhood to get to know each other more over Italian food.

The neighborhoods around the remaining Italian social clubs are more diverse now. You can find people not just from Italy, but also from dozens of countries, each with different ideas and rituals. These clubs have evolved to help unite people from many different cultures, but they continue to preserve a specific ethnic tradition.

Standing on the Roof of Africa

By ReadWorks

The first thing Natalie Ingle did when she reached the Uhuru Peak on Mount Kilimanjaro was cry. It had been a hard and tiring trek up the mountain. After eight long days on the trail, she was both mentally and physically exhausted. She posed for a few photos in the thin air and looked around her. She watched the sun rise over the glaciers below and shivered as she tried to put the lens on her camera to take more pictures. She had just reached the summit of the highest mountain in Africa, and the tallest free-standing mountain in the world.

Mount Kilimanjaro is located in Tanzania, a country on the east coast of Africa, and it stands over 19,000 feet above sea level. It is a volcanic mountain with three volcanic cones: Kibo, Mawenzi, and Shira. Mawenzi and Shira are extinct volcanoes, while Kibo, the tallest cone, is dormant. This means that the volcano could erupt again. However, the last eruption took place more than 150,000 years ago.

Natalie, who is a freelance photographer, decided to climb Mount Kilimanjaro for a simple reason: she wanted to raise money to help victims of domestic abuse in both the United States and Tanzania. She joined a team of five other women, and together they raised $10,000 toward this cause. In addition to asking her friends and family to donate to the fund, she held a fundraiser at her apartment in Brooklyn. She sold several photographs and even offered to shave her head if people donated $1,000. Fortunately for her hair, she didn't reach this goal, and in the pictures of her

standing on the summit, her ponytail is tucked beneath a wool hat.

Natalie is a runner, so to train for her hike up the mountain, she signed up for two half-marathons to keep herself motivated. "I also tried to teach myself to drink lots more water regularly," she says. In higher altitudes, dehydration is more likely to occur because water vapor is lost from the lungs at a higher rate. Also, because climbers lose a lot of sweat from hiking many hours each day, it's important that they hydrate frequently to prevent illnesses related to dehydration.

People climbing Mount Kilimanjaro and other high peaks also face the risk of developing altitude sickness. Altitude sickness may occur in heights above 8,000 feet and is a reaction to high altitudes. In higher altitudes, the amount of oxygen available decreases. This makes it harder to function mentally and physically. In very extreme cases, altitude sickness can be fatal. Some symptoms include headaches, dizziness, nausea, and weakness. To avoid getting altitude sickness, it is important to ascend the mountain very slowly to give your body time to get used to the decreased amount of oxygen available.

Natalie says that she seems "to have been the luckiest one out of our team." She explains that although "we all came from sea-level homes, I've spent more time off-and-on in the mountains." And she *was* lucky. Most of the other women on her team had stomachaches and headaches throughout the trek. One of her teammates vomited when she reached the top. But Natalie only experienced a headache when she reached the summit—over 10,000 feet higher than when most altitude-related symptoms begin to occur.

She was never scared on the trek, even though "one of the most dangerous parts involved using all four limbs to climb a nearly vertical cliff they call the Barranco Wall." For her, the most memorable part of the climb was the unforgettable landscapes. She trekked through rainforests and across deserts and glaciers. And, she says, "one of the most stunning things I've ever seen in my life was at sunset on day two. An ocean of clouds stretched out below us, slowly streaming over the peak of a shorter mountain nearby. It looked exactly like a white, slow-motion waterfall."

But it wasn't just the climb or the fact that she stood atop the "Roof of Africa" that Natalie loved about her time in Tanzania. She returned knowing that her climb would help those in need.

Desert Racing

By ReadWorks

When South African runner Ryan Sandes showed up for his first race in the 4 Deserts series in 2008, he was not expected to win. The then 27-year-old had only been running for three years. He was fit and had won a few South African races, but he was an unknown in the global and competitive world of ultrarunning. In March of 2008, Sandes entered the 4 Deserts Gobi March, a 155-mile trek in and around the Chinese areas of the Gobi Desert. His surprise victory raised his profile overnight and gave him the incentive to push himself harder. Sandes entered and won another race in the series, the Sahara Race, in the same year. In early 2010, he entered the Atacama Crossing in Chile, his third race in the series. He won once again.

Sandes's performance in those races scored him an invitation to compete in the racing series' most extreme leg—the Last Desert race in Antarctica. Sandes, with his eye on winning all four of the races in the series, trained for the Antarctic conditions by running in a large freezer. Temperatures in the freezer could be set as low as minus 20 degrees Celsius (minus 4 degrees Fahrenheit). A fan was adjusted to simulate the wind chill Sandes would experience during the race.

His preparation scheme worked. Sandes placed first in the Antarctic contest. By the end of 2010 Sandes had become the first runner to win all four races in the grueling 4 Deserts race series.

The races in the series are multi-day self-supported races of 250 kilometers (155 miles). Each race lasts one week and is made up of six stages. Self-supported races mean runners have to bring along all the food and gear they will need. Meals are not provided. Runners wear backpacks. Water and emergency medical care are provided by race organizers as well as nightly lodgings. Runners must arrive at the camp where they sleep in communal tents each night.

Competing in these races is not only about being a fast runner. It is also a test of a competitor's ability to survive extreme conditions. The races are set in some of the world's harshest environments. Each poses unique challenges.

One of the races of the yearly 4 Deserts series is held in Chile's Atacama Desert. The Atacama

Desert is a plateau in South America wedged between the Pacific Ocean and the Andes Mountains. It is the driest place in the world. The race here starts at an elevation of more than 3,000 meters (9,850 feet) and takes runners on several ascents and descents. Runners not only face loose rocky terrain, but they must battle the energy demands of high-altitude conditions.

The Gobi Desert is the fifth largest desert in the world and the largest desert in Asia. It lies in China and Mongolia and comprises several distinct ecological and geographic regions. The 4 Deserts Gobi March race sticks to the grasslands of the Chinese province of Xinjiang.

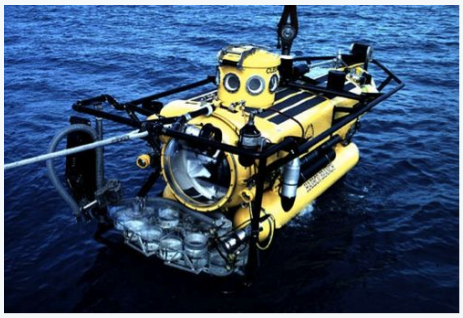
No desert race series would be complete without an event in the iconic Sahara Desert, the world's largest hot desert, where sand dunes can reach a height of 180 meters (590 feet). (The Sahara is the world's third largest desert, coming in after the Antarctic and the Arctic Polar Regions.) Dehydration and heat exhaustion are two of the biggest health concerns for runners in this race.

These three races are open to all competitors. Only the Last Desert race is reserved for qualifying runners. The Antarctic race is the only staged event held on the "frozen continent." This race is staged on the Antarctic Peninsula and its surrounding islands. Weather conditions are erratic, so planning the racecourse is put off until the last moment. Competitors and crew are housed in a ship that transports runners to the start of each stage every morning.

In the year when Ryan Sandes raced the Antarctic course, he ran across volcanic craters, black sand, and snow. He even encountered a penguin colony. Towards the end of the run, he was neck and neck with Italian runner Emanuele Gallo, but Sandes eventually won and went on to become the face of South African ultrarunning.

A Club for Explorers

By W.M. Akers



What's at the bottom of the ocean? People have wondered that for a long time. To find out what lay far beneath the waves, scientists developed diving equipment, like flippers, goggles and scuba tanks. They built scientific submarines to go even farther underwater, where they found fish and plant life that had never been exposed to the sunlight. But no matter how advanced their technology, no one could go all the way to the bottom of the deepest part of the sea—the Mariana Trench—which is in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

At 36,000 feet below sea level, the deepest part of the trench, known as the Challenger Deep, is deeper than Everest is tall. In 1960, two men attempted to get to the bottom of it. In a cramped submarine called the *Trieste*, Jacques Piccard and Don Walsh descended slowly to the bottom. They made the trip safely. When they landed on the ocean's floor—farther down than anyone had ever gone—they kicked up so much dirt, they couldn't see what was out there.

It was fifty years before anyone attempted to make the trip again. In 2012, film director James Cameron—best known for movies like *Avatar* and *Titanic*—became the first man to make a solo dive to the bottom of Challenger Deep. It took 90 minutes for his tiny, torpedo-shaped submarine to reach the bottom. Like any good filmmaker, he made sure to bring a camera. In fact, he brought a lot of them—3D cameras that captured the bottom of the sea in detail that Piccard and Walsh could never have dreamed of. The footage, said the expedition's chief scientist Doug Bartlett, is "so, so beautiful."

"It's unlike anything that you'll have seen from other subs or other remotely operated vehicles," he said.

Besides the cameras, Cameron's submarine carried a flag: a red, white and blue banner with an “E” and “C” on it. It's the official emblem of the Explorers Club, an international organization dedicated to promoting exploration worldwide. For over a century, they have helped lead the charge into the unknown. And no matter how deep mankind goes, they will never be finished.

What Does the Club Do?

Founded in 1904, the Explorers Club was started by a group of men who had previously belonged to the Arctic Club of America. In those days, polar exploration was the cutting edge of science, but the men who had conquered the North and South Pole wanted to broaden their horizons. They welcomed jungle explorers, mountain climbers, and the deep sea divers who paved the way for Piccard, Walsh and Cameron.

"It was meant to bring together explorers, to promote exploration and to promote knowledge of it to the public," said Mary French, the archivist at the Explorers Club, who spoke to us recently by phone. French is responsible for documenting the history of the club, whose membership rolls have included some of the greatest explorers of all time. Those explorers include Roald Amundsen, who led the expedition that first reached the South Pole, and Neil Armstrong, the first man to walk on the moon.

Whenever its members go on an expedition, French explained, they bring along an Explorers Club flag. Many of these flags have a long history of their own. The one that Cameron took to the bottom of Challenger Deep, for example, had previously been to the top of Mount Everest—meaning that it had been both to the top of the world and the bottom.

"Among our retired flags is one that in 2007 was taken on an expedition to the true North Pole," said French. "Team members went under the ice in a submarine to find the magnetic North Pole, not over the ice, because that isn't true north. They went on a deep-sea dive under the ice."

A Famous Trip across the Water

Perhaps the most famous Explorers Club expedition was made in 1947, by a Norwegian adventurer named Thor Heyerdahl. Heyerdahl had a theory that ancient South Americans could have traveled across the Pacific Ocean and settled in islands in Polynesia—a journey of over 4,000 miles, across some of the most dangerous water on Earth. To prove his theory, Heyerdahl used centuries-old technology to build an open-air raft called *Kon-Tiki*. In this primitive raft, six Scandinavian explorers set out on the journey of a lifetime.

"It's a very classic adventure story," said French. "A story that's kind of timeless."

For three months, the little boat drifted westward, carried by the tides and the faint Pacific winds. They ate coconuts, sweet potatoes and fish they caught themselves. As they endured the elements, people back home followed their every movement, hoping that the brave Scandinavians would arrive safely.

"That was a very popular expedition at the time," said French. "It was kind of like a reality show. It was in the newspaper every day."

When they finally made it across the sea—passing not too far from the Mariana Trench—they were greeted by a tribe of native Polynesians, who threw them a big party. For their daring, Heyerdahl and his crew became some of the most famous people in the world, and the Explorers Club flag they took with them became one of the most famous in French's collection.

Can You Be an Explorer?

French said that if she could choose any Explorers Club expedition to have gone on, she would have picked *Kon-Tiki*. She called it "a classic example" of the explorer's mentality. What does it take to be an explorer?

"The rebelliousness that's required to go against people who are saying that it's not possible," she said. "Questioning authority, and not just authority, but standard knowledge. Having your own ideas, and exploring those ideas for your own knowledge, and not just to impress other people."

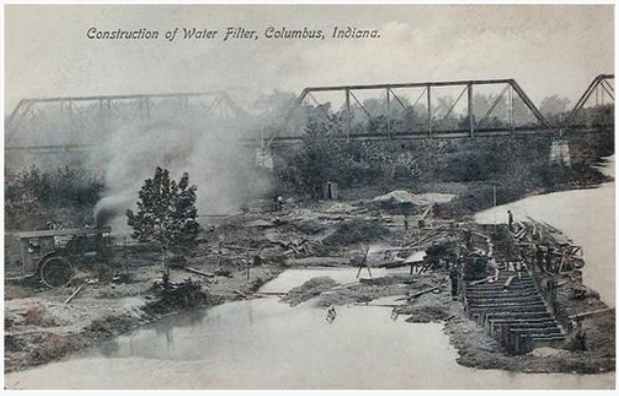
At a recent Explorers Club dinner, James Cameron was given an award for his trip to Challenger Deep. French said that he called exploration "curiosity in action."

"It could be something as humble as going out and hiking a trail," she said. "Or it could be much bigger—like becoming an astronaut."

As long as you're "seeking the answers to questions," she concluded, you can be an explorer.

The Postcard Collectors

By ReadWorks



When you go on vacation, it is often customary to send friends and families postcards from the places you visit. The postcards not only let them know where you are and how you're doing, but they provide them with a keepsake from your vacation. Today, the ritual of sending postcards has been somewhat supplanted by posting vacation pictures on Facebook, Instagram, and other social media sites. Not long ago, however, it was not uncommon for people to amass many hundreds of postcards received from acquaintances. As these collections grew, a hunger for more postcards arose, and some people became amateur postcard collectors.

As postcard collecting became more popular, many collectors sought out one another to buy, sell, and trade cards. Some of them formed clubs, which gathered regularly. In New York City, the oldest and largest such club is the Metropolitan Postcard Club of New York. The club meets every month, usually in a small conference room in a hotel, where members can examine one another's collections. Most of the members of the club are middle-aged or elderly, but there are some young collectors as well. They bring their card collections in shoeboxes. The collectors sit at folding tables and spend many hours flipping through cards, pulling out the ones they like.

Every collector looks for something different. Some collectors look for cards from a specific place. Often, people like to collect postcards from the place where they were born or grew up. Others like to collect cards showing certain buildings. One man claims to have 200 different postcards of the Empire State Building. Some collectors like postcards with photos on the front, while others prefer illustrations. A lot of the collectors specialize in postcards from New York, but many have

postcards from all over the world. Some organize their collections by state, while those with lots of foreign postcards organize them by country.

While we may typically think of postcards as showing places, old postcards can actually show many different subjects. In particular, there is a specific type of postcard called a "real photo postcard" that is particularly valuable to collectors. These postcards, popular in the early part of the 20th century, were produced by amateur photographers, mostly residents of small towns. The photographers would take photos and produce them as postcards in very small quantities, usually only several hundred cards per photo. Instead of advertising a place, the postcards show scenes from small town life. There are photos of celebrations, disasters, and visits from famous people, as well as portraits of the photographers' friends and family. These cards give a sense of what American life was like during that time.

Every six months, the club holds a big show in which many collectors gather together to talk about postcards and view each other's collections. In October of 2012, the convention was held in the ballroom of the New Yorker Hotel. Dozens of collectors had brought their collections with them. Some were very broad, while others were very specialized. One collector had only postcards of animals, while another had only ones of famous people. The collectors who were there to buy cards would sometimes walk up to the collectors selling cards and ask them if they had a particular type of card.

"Excuse me," an old woman asked a man. "Do you have any postcards of a hotel?"

"I do," said the man. "From where?"

"Miami Beach," said the woman.

"Darn," said the man, throwing up his hands. "I'm all out."

The woman scowled.

All the collectors said they were drawn to collect postcards for different reasons. Some said they liked collecting postcards as a way of understanding American history. Others said they had started out collecting stamps, but then they had grown more interested in the cards the stamps were attached to. A few said they collected all kinds of photographs, but that real photo postcards offered scenes they couldn't find anywhere else. A couple of collectors said they didn't have any

special interest in postcards. They were buying cards as an investment, like some people buy financial stocks or pieces of art.

One collector, named Lisa, explained that she got into postcard collecting when she was very young. As a child, her father liked to wake her before dawn and schlep her from their home in Old Bridge, New Jersey, to the sprawling flea market in Englishtown, to forage for old postcards. For three decades, his collection grew. When he died, he left behind more than 100,000 cards, cached at random in a jumble of albums, envelopes, and shoe boxes, all crammed into a special annex to the garage, built explicitly for their preservation.

Several years ago, doctors told Lisa, then a spritely 48-year-old, that a tumor was growing in the pituitary gland of her brain. One night, unable to sleep, she went out to the garage, gathered up the postcards, and spread them across her dining room table. For the next 18 months, the family ate dinners in the kitchen while Lisa organized the cards, first by geographic region, then by topic.

"My brother said, 'Of course you have a brain tumor,'" Lisa recalled. "'No sane person would do this.'"

Her brain tumor having been safely removed, Lisa brought a small portion of her collection—a mere 10,000 cards—to the hotel with her. All day, she had been trading with other collectors. Lisa liked to collect postcards with cats, as well as cards that related to Halloween. She loved the postcard show, but she was worried because the crowd was smaller than in previous years. Young people were not as interested in collecting postcards as their elders, and those who were tended to buy and sell their cards on the Internet rather than in person.

"I think it's a shame," said Lisa. "Part of the fun of collecting is all the people you meet. The cards all have their own history, but so do the collectors."

The Unknown Hall of Famer

By Michael Stahl

Illustration Credit: Nishan Patel

New York City is famous for many things: pizza, Broadway shows, skyscrapers, and baseball. The New York Yankees are possibly the best-known sports team in the world. Baseball has been so popular in New York City that there have been four professional major league baseball teams, including the Yankees, that have made their homes in New York City since the beginning of the 20th century.

So many kids in New York have always wanted to play baseball. However, playing baseball can be difficult in such an urban setting if the game is going to look like the real thing. There needs to be a large grass field with a dirt diamond. The players need bases, bats, balls, and gloves to play with. In order to get a game of baseball going without having all of the required items, many New York City boys created their own version of baseball, one that would be played on the hard concrete streets. They would call it "stickball" because it could be played with a simple broomstick handle instead of a large, heavy bat. They'd use small, pink rubber balls instead of expensive hardballs made of leather and twine. Those kids, who were good, would incredibly one day find themselves in an actual Hall of Fame. George "Lolin" Osorio is one of those players.

Osorio's family moved to Manhattan from his home in Puerto Rico when the ink on World War II peace treaties was still wet. In Puerto Rico, he was given his nickname because, as a very young boy, he was known to chase after a girl named Lola, so neighbors took to calling him the masculine form "Lolin" since the two always seemed to be together. At nine years old in New York City, he did not hesitate to immerse himself in the king of the street games—as long as his homework and chores were done. He and the other kids on his block would take to the streets in t-shirts and cut-off shorts to enjoy the "cheap game." All they needed was one broomstick, a few rubber balls, and nine or so other guys from another block to prove themselves against.

"We'd play for a little money, five cents a game or a quarter when I was about ten years old," Osorio says, recalling that if his team won, they'd often use their money to see a movie. Sometimes kids would save their winnings to buy two-dollar Puma sneakers, which were more desired than

one-dollar Converses because they were better for running; plus, everyone knew they were twice as expensive.

"But really we played for bragging rights," Osorio insists. "You were on the team from your block. You played for pride."

"Lolin was one of the best because he always hit the ball hard on the ground, and was so fast that nobody could throw him out," remembers Carlos Diaz, the curator of New York City's Stickball Hall of Fame, of which Osorio is an esteemed member. "He was also very clutch and reliable. He could get a hit just about any time," Diaz adds.

Osorio and his friends, who were all of Puerto Rican descent, would play stickball for hours; that is, until the Irish cops would show up. Though there were few cars driving through the city streets in those days and the rubber balls with which they played were as harmful to windows as a summer wind, many of the police officers would discover games and immediately order the kids to hand over their makeshift bats.

"I could never understand why they'd break up our stickball games," Osorio says. "We played to stay out of trouble."

For a time, Osorio remembers the cops slipping the sticks down into the sewer. But after the officer had moved along and the boys had faked disappointment long enough, one of the smaller kids would climb beneath street level into the muck and come up with the bat, covered in sludge. There was always an open fire hydrant somewhere they'd use to clean off the grime from both the bat and the brave boy.

"Then the cops got smart," Osorio says. "They started taking our bats, hold them halfway down in the sewer's grating and snap them in two."

Still unafraid, Osorio and his block mates continued to play throughout their adolescence, traveling farther away from their neighborhood with each passing year, challenging players in various neighborhoods and having tons of fun.

A frequent teammate of Osorio's, Alfred Jackson, another Stickball Hall of Fame member, remembers one particularly incredible shot struck by a rival of theirs named Tony Taylor. "He crushed the ball," Jackson begins. "He hit it so hard that it went off the third-floor siding of a

building, came down, bounced off a car, hit the building again. Then it hit a lamppost and ricocheted to one of our outfielders who caught it for an out. The ball was in fair territory the whole time!"

As Osorio's clan got older, more and more money was bet on their games. They can recall games played for upwards of three to five thousand dollars, with the victorious team getting a cut. Some players depended on winnings as a sort of additional income, so some teams felt pressured to win for their players' financial stability. Fans who had their own best interests in mind heckled batters trying hard to focus on a potentially game-changing pitch.

Still, money was not as important as the feelings of self-respect and community, which truly compelled Osorio to go outside and play each and every Sunday, even 24 hours after his wedding. "I got married on a Saturday," Osorio says. "We had a bunch of leftovers from the wedding in the refrigerator. The players' wives always made food for all of us, so I woke up and packed the leftovers to bring to the game," he laughs, adding with a shake of his finger, "My wife wasn't very happy about that."

In the late 1950s and throughout the '60s, Osorio made a living building clock radios—and, briefly, delivering zippers—but always found time to participate in the first organized stickball leagues that were emerging throughout Manhattan and beyond. Though he has continued to play, Osorio and his friends have seen the game nearly completely disappear.

"Not as many guys play anymore," says Carlos Diaz, who has tried for many years to revitalize stickball in New York City. "And most of the young ones that do play are sons and grandsons of the guys who played fifty or sixty years ago." Diaz's efforts include opening a gallery this past winter, giving the Stickball Hall of Fame a more permanent home.

No matter what, Osorio still finds himself out on the streets of New York City every Sunday playing the game he loves, around the guys that he loves, all of whom have respected, and even honored him, for decades.