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Free-Bee' Ball



PHOTO: JUAN CABRERA

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When March Madness comes to an end, and NBA playoff ticket prices go shooting through the roof as our hometown Knicks look to make their first appearance in the NBA Finals in the past 15 seasons without Patrick Ewing, we basketball junkies are left searching for some good, cheap, entertaining b'ball to watch in the Bronx. Whether it's a good hard-nosed, no rules, pick-up game you like, or a fully endorsed, big name tournament that you prefer to watch, there is a ball being bounced somewhere for everyone this summer, all you have to do is listen for it. The trouble is, where do we find it?

Have no fear; your resident basketball man is here. I will direct you to the local hotspots and tell you where to be and when. The following is a list of the top 5 local basketball courts. My basketball rating scale system: 5 basketballs being the best court and 1 basketball being the worst.

1. GUNHILL- (OFF WP CLAIMS ROAD, JUST SOUTH OF GUN HILL)

The Gunhill basketball courts are notoriously famous for being the practice courts where big time NCAA and playground "Legends" warm up for the Rucker Tournament at 155th and 8th Ave., the most famous summer basketball tournament in New York City. The Rucker Tournament was started in 1946 by a young Harlem teacher named Halcombe Rucker. He wanted to give street kids a place to play basketball and get some publicity. Playground heroes such as Earl Manigault (Manigault had a movie made about him, *The Goat*), Herman (Helicopter) Knowings, Joe Hammond, and Jackie Jackson, who used to grab coins off of the top of the backboard, became playground "legends" through playing in the tournament, putting the

Rucker tournament on the map, as they would consistently outshine NBA pro stars.

Gunhill is the place to be to see hotshots showcase their talent in front of large crowds. Anyone who ever has played on these courts has nothing but praise for Gunhill. "Right before a game for the Rucker Tournament, teams will warm up at Gunhill. That is where some of the best basketball of the summer is played," says Dennis Kumnipa, a 1st Team All-Hudson Valley men's basketball player, who plays for our Lehman Lightning. Fellow Lightning teammate Austin Conyers also has this to say about Gunhill: "This is definitely the hottest spot when it comes to local basketball."

People come from all over to watch these players prepare for their games which usually start at 6:00 p.m. over at Rucker. "You've got people from Connecticut, New Jersey, everywhere coming to see the games. Then they all go over to watch the Rucker games," says Barry Grant, also a 1st team All-Hudson Valley player at Lehman. There also are pick-up games played there all summer long, and many local heroes such as current Knick Lavar Postell, a recently drafted New York Knick, and Stephon Marbury, of the New Jersey Nets, frequent the courts.

Rating: 5 Basketballs for popularity and celebrity appearances..

2. DYCKMAN- (207TH AND 208TH, OVER THE BRIDGE)

If you want to go to watch NCAA and some well-known overseas players play summer basketball, head down to the Dyckman basketball courts. "Dyckman's always got big names there: NCAA guys like (Lavar) Postell who went to St. John's, Kareem Reid (former Arkansas Razorback), and "Speedy" (a.k.a. Craig Claxton from Hofstra), NBA players like Allen Iverson, Stephon Marbury, Llyod Daniels (now retired), and playground

"Legends" like "Future" and "Predator." The Dyckman courts are definitely a hot place to be in the summer," says Dennis.

Sandra Torres, a former referee for park basketball tournament says, "I've worked a lot of courts, and I've seen a lot of players, but I think Dyckman is just great. The players are phenomenal and I love watching them play over there. Sometimes when I ref, I don't even feel like I'm working." With players such as those listed above making frequent visits to the Dyckman courts, and with Sandra's seal of approval, it would be a safe bet to make the Dyckman courts my #2 hotspot for local basketball.

Rating: 4 and a half Basketballs for celebrity appearances.

3. VALLEY

The Juniper Valley Park basketball courts may be a great place to watch playground 'ball, but there's a reason for it. "At Valley, there are hundreds of spectators watching you, and you want to look good in front of them. It pumps you up to have such a large crowd," says Austin. Barry adds, "you've got people from Connecticut, New Jersey, everywhere coming to see the games. People are lined up to see them."

The atmosphere at Valley is incredible," says Dennis. "When you go to play there, your best game always comes out, because you're playing against the best, and you want to show everybody what you have." That's no lie. In fact, there are literally hundreds of spectators every day during the summer at Valley, and all of them are there ready to be impressed with the local talent.

Rating: 4 Basketballs for the atmosphere and popularity.

4. MULATTI'S- (165TH STREET AND JEROME AVE.)

If all you are interested in watching is day-long pick-up basketball games, then Mulatti's is the spot for you this summer. From sun up to sun down, there is always a great game being played there. Johnathan

Rojas, a Lehman Lightning and also a 1st team All-Hudson Valley player says, "for pick-up basketball, Mulatti's is definitely the best place to go see a game during the summertime. Other places are better for tournament games, but if you just want to go play in a game, or watch some, go to Mulatti's." The crowds never get out of hand and you will always be able to get in a game or find a seat to watch one, which is not the case for the other parks listed above.

Rating: 3 Basketballs since there are only pick-up games, with few-to-no famous appearances.

5. CHELSEA- (SENTIMENTAL CHOICE)

Mayor Giuliani dedicated the Chelsea Park Basketball Court on West 28th Street between 9th and 10th Avenues in honor of police officer David Willis (1964-1995). Willis joined the 10th precinct on 20th Street in Chelsea and often frequented the Chelsea basketball courts, where he watched and played basketball for hours at a time with youngsters and fellow police officers from the neighborhood. Willis died on September 25th, 1995 after his police car was hit by a truck while on duty.

In 1940, three basketball courts were put up in Chelsea Park, and have since recently been restored. The courts are now home to many of the local youths who find the park to be. It is one of the most popular courts in the city for these younger basketball players who find it difficult to get into games in other parks.

Rating: 3 Basketballs since it is mainly for a younger age group, and since it is a little bit more out of your way.

There you have it, hoops fans. Whether you're a young player trying to make a name for yourself in the city, a hoops fanatic who can't watch enough playground basketball, or just someone who needs to find a good, local pick-up game, there are game everywhere around this summer, and now you know where to find them.