

The Story of the Spaldeen

East side...West Side...Uptown...Downtown...all around town...on the sidewalks, streets, and playgrounds of New York City, the high bouncing Spaldeen ball provided for creative innovative games and childhood fun in our Chinatown community of the ages.

This story is about a ball, probably...the most wonderful ball ever invented:

It is better than a baseball, basketball or football. It's better than any ball you can name. It was gone for 20 years (1979-1999), but the Spaldeen ball is back now.

The ball is known as a Spaldeen, which might not mean anything to you, unless you grew up on the East Coast, preferably in New York City before 1979. We grew up in Chinatown on the rough Lower East Side of Manhattan in the late 1940's, 1950's and even the 1960's, which means many of our childhood memories and recreational fun-free-past times were filled with Spaldeens and many distinctly related City created games with the ball.

Starting in the 1920s, the Spalding Co. manufactured tennis balls at its home base in Chicopee, Mass. But overruns would occur, so there wasn't enough of the fuzzy stuff for the outside of the tennis balls.

Some anonymous genius -- and we use that word "genius" with reverence -- got the idea to market the bright pink, unused rubber cores as the "Spalding High-Bounce Ball."

Because New York City folks have their own distinct naturally tough accent, they pronounced Spalding as "Spaldeen"-- as in, "Hey, Joey, you wanna play? I got a Spaldeen."

Spalding would box the Spaldeens and ship them down to New York City, where kids would buy them for a quarter each.

And, when you bought a brand new Spaldeen, the aroma alone would cause ecstasy; it was the wonderful smell of Bazooka bubble gum and Spring-Summer-Autumn memories of childhood fun & past-time games filled with friends and the simple things of life.

Then you would go out and play. All those legendary New York City street games began and ended with Spaldeens.

We are talking about games you've heard about but might never have played -- stickball, punchball, stoopball, slapball, handball, & even Chinese handball, against-the-wall, hit the penny and a million others.

When it came to inventing games with a Spaldeen, the only limit was your imagination where even the back yards of buildings with its limited space provided an opportunity to create yet another game with a new set of rules.

We didn't have baseball fields or any other kinds of fields. We played ball on playgrounds -- really slabs of concrete surrounded by cyclone fences -- or we played in the street, using sewer covers as bases—or even on the sidewalks—or even in building hallways—or even in a caged in outdoor open--air rooftop gym like the one at PS 130 in Little Italy during recess or gym period.

The virtue of a Spaldeen, besides the fact that you could whack it a mile, was that it didn't break things. You hit Mr. Chu's Olds 88 with a Spaldeen, no big deal. No broken glass. No broken mirror. No broken nothin'.

Of course, Mr. Chu would come running down his steps, screaming, "I'm gonna tell your mutha." We apologize, Mr. Chu wherever you are.

We played most of the time by the PS 23 playground at Columbus Park; at Bridge Park by the Manhattan Bridge; & on the streets by the Court Houses; at Transfiguration Church & the old Chinese School court yards; and at Mariners Temple & True Light Church gyms.

And every kid would come to the playground with a Spaldeen in his back pocket. If someone had a stick, we'd play stickball. The stick was an old broom handle or a dowel from the closet. We'd draw a box on the wall and pitch to it, and if the batter hit it over the fence, it was a home run.

We'd play handball with the Spaldeen, and sometimes we'd go to a friend's house for stoopball. A kid would throw the ball at the steps in front of someone's house, and as the ball sailed back, you'd try to catch it on a fly. If it bounced once, it was a single, twice a double, and so on.

But the King of Spaldeen games all over New York City was punchball. You'd toss the ball over your head. You'd swing down overhand as if you were serving a tennis ball. And then you'd punch it with your closed fist.

Guys could hit it 200 feet, long fly balls that seemed to never come down. The puncher would be running around the bases-- painted squares on the playground's grimy concrete -- while the outfielders ran like mad after the Spaldeen.

Those were the fun and carefree times we enjoyed as kids and thought they would never end among our friends and neighbors until the phenomenon of "boy meets girl" or "girl meets boy" took center stage. Even as kids, we started to learn that life has unintended consequences and now we were entering another recreational domain, as in socializing and dating which was a little more complicated than the Spaldeen simpler times of fun and games.

To recap...the Spaldeen played a major part in our lives in Chinatown and provided fond memories of our growing up years by playing with a \$0.25 cents ball in available public or private spaces/facilities around Chinatown with friends. To many of us, it is truly the most wonderful ball ever invented for our childhood fun & games in the big City.

Fast forwarding to March 29-April 2, 2020 and the 10th Chinatown Reunion to be held in Las Vegas NV., easily known as our adult playground with many games of chance and meeting with old friends again. Our "Thanks" to Dick Chu and his planning committee for making this reunion event a reality for all our Chinatown attendees from coast to coast.

All the Best...Stay Sharp...and be in Good Health...Our most Precious Asset...
Daniel (Danny) Lee,
1/25/2020, Happy Chinese New Year of the Clever Mouse, 4718
Nashua, New Hampshire..."Live Free or Die"

