

Prompt: Write an Ode

The Power of the Pink Spaldeen and Other Sports Stories By Constance H. Gemson

When my rural neighborhood became suburban, the Spaldeen ball became the source of play found in both city and country adventures. I remembered the Spaldeen used by my Grandpa Irving, a Brooklyn high school basketball and handball coach. After he had a stroke, he developed strength and agility by squeezing this small ball. He regained the use of his right hand. His physical therapists were impressed.

This ball was pink like the breast cancer survivor ribbons worn by survivors' generations later. With its small and adaptable size, it was compact enough to fit in anyone's hand. The ball was used differently by boys and girls. With boys, this ball became a force to throw or hit for your team.

Young girls used the Spaldeen ball to chant our rhythm to the beat and create quick lyrics: *A my name is Alice, and my husband's name is Al. We come from Alabama to sell you Apples.* We entered the name of a new female, a different husband, and a new product for sale for each new letter. When and where did this girl's game start? No one knew its history, but we all followed the pattern of bouncing the ball on the sidewalk. If a girl faltered or forgot the following letter of this mini-script, she gave her friend the ball. We took turns politely until one of us reached the promised land of Z. We played this game carefully with no arguments about foul balls, over the line, or bad calls. The two-person game was easy with low stakes little competition. Little talent was necessary with no celebration of victory for the winner. The end of the game meant the girls would pause, then continue the game.

Boys played stickball with the same pink ball and broom handles. Utility covers served as bases. This street-based sport was not for the affluent. Players did not need a green expanse of a golf court. On Riverdale Road, the street where I grew up, stickball became a popular place for boys' casual play and competitive zeal. Each team carefully kept score.

Football players were hometown heroes. My high school did not have the grounds to play the game. The boys played football at the local Fireman's Field in Valley Stream, which seemed huge. Cheerleaders served as the opening act, applauded during the half-time break. The girls wore red jumpers and white shirts. They were acclaimed for their looks; their talent devalued. Being a cheerleader meant brief female success, visibility, and recognition. The marching band was present for each football game and included boys and girls. A male drum major with his bold, high hat, silver / red uniform, and a gray feather led the band.

My expectations were limited. I never thought of auditioning as a cheerleader or playing in the band, but I did play basketball. During this time, we girls played during gym periods. We never played with other teams in other high schools. We never achieved fame outside of our small gym. Our athletic zeal was limited to a small space in the confines of the small gym.

In my early days of basketball, most girls played an abbreviated game. As a roving guard, I played the full court. I usually missed the basket. I was not the fastest runner on my team. I was not the

shooting star. I felt destined forever to be the “little one” at five foot one. I loved my role of playing defense, getting the ball away from the other team, moving fast, racing with speed. I discovered mastery in this role. My teacher gave me my most unusual compliment ever, “Connie; you stick to people like mosquitoes.” I never imagined girls would be serious athletes visible on TV.

My city-born and raised niece was the captain of her city high school volleyball team. This team became the New York State champions. She looked like a ballerina, thin and delicate. Maya was a dynamic powerhouse on the court. With her direction, she led the team with commitment and grace. Maya loved the collaboration of working together with others. My niece knew her strength as she claimed a final victory in a game’s series. She loved the massive white ball she spiked over the net with all her might. Maya knew how to play the game. She and her team were fierce competitors. Unlike generations before her, she never knew the diminutive pink ball.