

Bocce Bonds

Johnny DeCarlo (April 07, 2010)



Ciccarone Park in the Bronx

Bocce is a part of the nationality

The first recollection I have of bocce ball is from Inwood Terrace Park in Fort Lee, just a few blocks from where I grew up on Thirteenth Street in Palisades Park. My grandparents used to take me there, and while I was more interested in climbing on the jungle-gym and going on the swings, I was also



fascinated with the two courts that were there—which were always full of players. Unfortunately, those courts were removed from that park about five years ago, but whenever I drive by there, I think of those times and wish that I had learned the game as a little bambino and actually played it.

Growing up in a household where baseball was constantly played by my father (in local over-40 leagues), and later my brother who yearns to play professionally, and also watched religiously (Yankees of course), that was the sport that was emphasized most. It's indeed true that sports can bond family members and give you a lifetime of memories—I have plenty of stories I could tell about the simple act of fielding ground balls on a warm summer day from my youth—but a certain cultural tug at my heart is also there from the rolling of bocce balls... When I talk about the cultural connection I have with the game of bocce, it comes down to a very special correlation between my growing from childhood into adulthood—where I've been and where I will be—all with paisan pride at the forefront. See, if you have parents or grandparents directly from the boot or really any bit of Italian blood in your lineage, then you should have a warm place for this game.

Bocce is a part of the nationality just like any other custom that one should learn about and practice to keep the cultural branch of your family tree alive. A couple of years ago, my pal Tony wrote a short screenplay which won the Guild of Italian-American Actors (GIAA) Heritage Award, titled "Bocce," which is all about those bonds that this game brings—and how they span across all ages. I hope we are able to eventually develop that into a film, which is particularly personal to me, as it is one that truly captures Italian-Americana and the importance of never forgetting where you come from. Family memories are very important, but it's a shame that lots of this stuff is just memories.

See, in this day and age, too many of us get too caught up in our work-a-day lives to really take a moment to stop and smell the basil. To some it may sound silly, but when I walk into an Italian deli and see the hanging dried sausages and pepperonis, good feelings wash over me. It reminds me of getting sandwiches and going to the park with my family. We always got extra bread for the ducks and Canadian geese in the pond. When I pass by Corrado's Wine Center, I remember the aroma of my grandfather's cellar and making vino every fall in the garage with his homemade equipment. Since he passed away, we haven't made wine again, but whenever I sip a glass of red, more of those fond days return.

These are only a few examples of the many steady cultural constants that I truly appreciate in life. I know I am a rare commodity, being nearly 29 years old and more interested in perpetuating old-school exercises as an homage to my grandparents, as opposed to being preoccupied with going out clubbing or bungee jumping or doing the latest fad of today's youth—whatever that may be. Although it is true that in some WASP circles, bocce is starting to be considered some sort of chic pastime. But to me, that's like a lot of these nouveau chefs who try and make Italian-American comfort food (or "peasant food") dishes like Nonna always made into some sort of new, cool trend. As Pat Cooper said, WE are the ones that started all this!

And don't get me wrong, I am modern in a lot of ways and no matter how hard I wish for it, I can never have life be the way it was for my parents and grandparents. Too many things change—some for the good—some for the bad. But for me, it's keeping up at least some of these practices that allows me to retain a semblance of the simplicity and happiness I experienced as a youth, and a feeling I want my kids to experience (even if it is diluted somewhat). It is impossible to prevent some dilution of all this stuff, but it is very possible to prevent total extinction, especially if it means enough to you. But see, it's my duty to work extra hard to not allow that line to be crossed.

For my grandfather, this season was all about starting his garden—what a magnificent garden he had. Lettuce, eggplant, the reddest, most juiciest tomatoes in the world, basi-nee-gole (that would be basil), peppers, cucumbers, oh maddone, I miss it—more specifically, him in general. He was meticulous about his fig tree and his lawn, and I'll tell you, it was better than any professional



landscaper could have ever done. Me and my cousins would kick the soccer ball across the wide open grass, of course always with caution, so it wouldn't hit the tomato plants.

My parents' backyard is pretty spectacular as well, I must say. In '96 when my family relocated to Hasbrouck Heights, my father had a miniature bocce court built in our new backyard. When my little brother made his Communion, we had an amazing party back there. We barbecued, and had jugs of Grandpa's red with fresh peaches, and everyone played bocce to the sounds of Dean Martin—playing from the speakers my dad had hooked up around our portico—right next to the Madonna statue. And even though I didn't get a chance to play the game much with my grandfather besides that day, I think of him whenever I see a group of gents aiming for a pallino, speaking their broken English and puffing on their DeNobilis and Avantis. I especially think of him if one of the fellas is wearing an old-school snap-button short-brimmed ivy cappello (usually all of them are). Grandpa always wore that cap, long before LL Cool J endorsed his Kangol version.

Ciccarone Park in the Bronx put in some new bocce courts not too long ago, and I can't wait to get over to my favorite deli to pick up some veal and pepper sandwiches and play there this summer. Although Belmont has also changed a lot, what's there is still the real deal and a throwback to days gone by (before the "McDonaldization" of America). It's so refreshing to enjoy the simple delight of walking up and down 187th Street and Arthur Ave. and passing by the Mount Carmel Church and all the cafés, bakeries, cheese shops, fish stands, pork stores and pizzerias.

Every item in every place there is special and great just like your family would make—because all the joints are family-run. Hanging out over there is what it's all about.

The green, white and red flag transcends age and gender, and all of the centuries-old ideals and practices are the ties that connect us together—no matter what part of The Old Country your ancestry hails from, or how far you trace it back. While I am alive, I want to do my best to keep up and revive some of these wonderful activities, and also create new ones too. These rituals are part of the fabric of my childhood—and part of the fabric of my warmest, fondest memories that I want to continue and make sure continue long after I am gone. As long as you keep the traditions rolling, you are making those ancestors proud—whether they are here with you now, or watching from that big bocce court in the sky.

Oh, I'd like to play, a few rounds today...

Of Bocce! Bocce!

From Ciccarone Park to the Naples Bay, it's...

Bocce! Bocce!

Go light a DeNobili, and let me show ya, just the way we do it now...



It's a game of skill, and it's a game of chance, just listen to that sound!

One-two, one-two, three-four, three-four...

Roll the green and the red, and you're ready for more!

Oh, I'd like to play, a few rounds today...

Of Bocce! Bocce!

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