

# MURRAY PARK

CAN HEAVEN STILL BE FOUND ON A PLAYGROUND?

PART 5 | LATE-JULY

# A good guy hopes against hope

The action is hot at Sherman Park, while the playground director at Murray Park tries to provide kids with a fun, safe zone — but is surrounded by lost souls whose threatening presence is everywhere

By RICK TELANDER  
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**I**t's too hot at Murray Park. The games have paused until the blazing sun lowers in the copper sky. I drive aimlessly north, weaving slowly through the blasted neighborhoods, looking for action, like a fisherman casting from a canoe. At Sherman Park north of Garfield on Racine the players are out. The heat index is over 100 degrees, but when you gotta ball, you gotta ball. Some strategically placed trees make it possible.

Technically, this is just beyond the Englewood/West Englewood border. Sherman Park itself is vast, with picnic areas and willow trees circling the lagoon in the middle of the acreage. But looks are deceptive.

I have asked a number of the players here if any of them have been to Murray Park down on 73rd, and none of them has. They all live nearby, and you don't travel to places you don't know. Then, too, the best high school players increasingly work with AAU teams in the summer and do almost all their practicing at indoor gyms. Playgrounds are great places for competition. But you can get killed in the wrong one. And the wrong one can be anywhere.

It's hard to get the full dynamics as games take place on the two pale green and gray courts. Most of the players are high school kids with a smattering of junior college players, old vets,

and playground rats. There are observers, and as so often happens, there is a smart-ass who comments from the sideline on everything he sees before him. This one is an older guy with his shirt open and a White Sox cap on sideways. Whether he is a thug or a comedian is unclear, maybe both.

"You play ball like a fat baby!" he yells at a heavyset teen.

"Luol Deng!" he screams when a skinny player grabs a rebound.

A loose ball rolls out of bounds, pursued by a player who can't quite reach it.

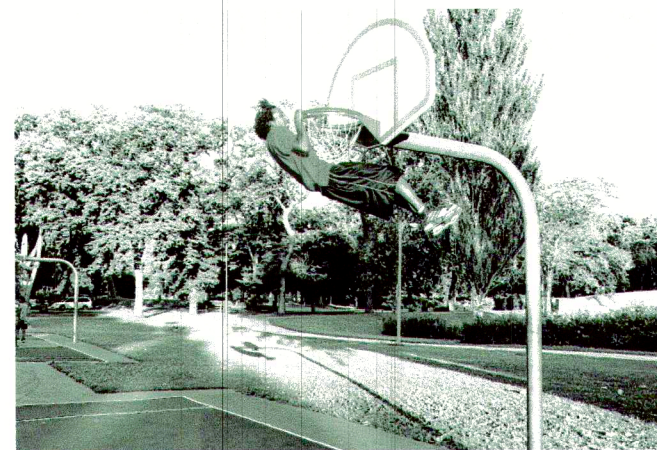
"Get the ball, n—r!" the M.C. shouts in disgust.

This kind of sideline trash-talking has assuredly been around in some form since the game started, but it first gained real notoriety on the playgrounds of New York City, as street ball and entertainment merged and microphones sometimes became available at those hot summer games. The Rucker Park tournament in Harlem refined the practice to art, and when I was there at a game in 1997, two M.C.s nicknamed Tango and Cash got under the skin of a coach to such an extent that the man, a reputed high-level drug-dealer wearing alligator-skin shoes, linen pants, linen shirt and copious gold jewelry, snarled quietly at them, "Do you know who you're f—ing with?"

Apparently, they did, because



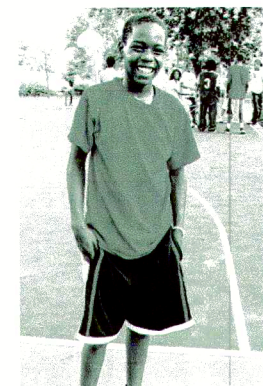
Residents from around Sherman Park near Englewood come out to watch the action. | RICK TELANDER-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS



they said not one more word about him.

People forget about the Sherman Park wise guy for now, because a close game is cranking up. Played to 34 — by threes

and twos — it features a swift, skinny guard in black trunks whose braids are done up in a knot atop his head like a shock of wheat. His name is Donya Williams, and he's 17 years old, 5-8,



Donya Williams (far left) celebrates a victory at Sherman Park, and little Carl Jackson (left) can't wipe the grin off his face after winning another game with a three-pointer.

135 pounds, and he'll be a senior at nearby Richards Career Academy on 50th and Laffin. His quick, nifty passing leads his team to a narrow win. Spontaneously, Williams, who has told me his favorite sport is football because "I like to run over

**ABOUT THIS SERIES**


In the early 1970s, Rick Telander wrote *Heaven Is a Playground*, hailed as one of the best sports books of all time, about the lives and dreams of Brooklyn's ghetto hoops legends. This summer, Telander visited Englewood, the downtrodden community on the South Side where Derrick Rose grew up, to see if hope can still flourish on a neighborhood playground. To read Parts 1-5, go to [suntimes.com](http://suntimes.com).



people," sprints to the other end of the court and climbs the net to the rim where he pulls himself up and surveys the landscape in ecstasy.

In the next game a dexterous kid who looks too small and young even to be on the court takes a beating — once being fouled so hard on a layup that he is sent tumbling backwards off the court into the grass (no foul, of course) — yet still plays with grit and fire. He's been doing that all afternoon, with little success. I guess his age at 12.

When he makes an astounding, game-winning three-pointer from the corner, while being shoved once again by somebody nearly twice his size, the kid can't stop smiling.

He shakes everybody's hand. He doesn't talk, and he tries to stop smiling. He almost suppresses the joy. But he can't.

His name is Carl Jackson and he swears he weighs 98 pounds. He's 5-feet tall, he's 15 and will be a freshman at Tilden Career Academy.

How does the game-winner feel? I ask him as everybody takes a break.

"It feels good," he says, beaming. "It tells me I can play with

the big guys."

I dare him to think about that basket and stop smiling. He tries, but he can't.

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It is an interesting development in the world of Chicago gangs that the big, traditional gangs with precise structure like the mafia have devolved in many cases into smaller factions that



**Murray Park director Ivan Lee coaches the park's youth football league team, the Bengals. He tries to provide a good influence to kids growing up in Englewood.**

JOHN J. KIM-SUN-TIMES

**“THE KIDS I HAVE OUT HERE, THE YOUNG ONES, I JUST WANT THEM TO KNOW THEY CAN DO IT. DON'T GIVE UP ON YOURSELF. THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH BEING A GOOD GUY. NOTHING.”**

IVAN LEE, Murray Park playground supervisor

don't much answer to anyone, and thus are more unpredictable, petty, and lethal.

Arsenio Williams, one of Derrick Rose's closest childhood friends from Englewood, had explained the change to me. "A lot of it is kids, in seventh and eighth grade. It's not like in the 90s,

with the GDs (Gangster Disciples) and Mickey Cobras and the others. There's no heads to these crews, nobody controlling it. It's kids being kids with guns."

Back at Murray Park, Ivan Lee, 35, the playground supervisor, is thinking about the goodness of sport and the frightening

evils of poverty and joblessness and gangs.

Lee is a huge man, a former defensive end at state champion Mt. Carmel High School where he was teammates with NFL stars-to-be Simeon Rice and Donovan McNabb. Lee played college ball at Grambling and

learned much from the resolute propriety of legendary coach Eddie Robinson.

"Oh, man, he believed in America," says Lee now as he prepares sports items in the tiny park house, a building so narrow it seems he could reach across its width with his arms. "With Eddie Robinson you did everything right. He had us say the Pledge of Allegiance, with your hand over your heart."

Lee is beloved here by the little kids, whom he treats with kindness and equality. He is preparing to run a first year football program for pee-wees from ages 8 to 10, and over thirty kids have already signed up, including several girls. But he is tormented by the sight of the glaring punks who linger about, who have no fathers, no desire, no direction. He can't confront them, because they might kill him just for thrill of it.

"I had about 25 kids for spring ball, and one day while we're practicing we heard, *Pow! Pow! Pow!*, and they were shooting nearby. The next week a kid drove up on the court in his car and did a donut, while people were registering." Lee shakes his head. "I have to laugh to keep from crying."

At times like this the big fellow can seem weary of the lopsided battle he's engaged in. One day as we talked while seated on the bench by the court, a dice game took place just behind him. Would it turn to violence? Who knew.

"And a lot of the trouble is from girls now," he continues. "Last month a girl broke into the park house. Girls get into fights. But the kids I have out here, the young ones, I just want them to know they can do it. Don't give up on yourself. There's nothing wrong with being a good guy. Nothing."

As he says this a young man wearing a sweat shirt that reads, "MONEY OVER BITCHES—FAMILY OVER EVERYTHING" walks by. Lee seems not to notice.

"It's funny," he says. "My dad's a Vietnam vet, and I've heard more gunfire than he has."

**PART 6 | FRIDAY**

Derrick Rose's old school is one of the safer places in an area where it's almost impossible to stay safe