

East Falls Past -- Halfball Tournament Celebrates History and Community

by Steve Fillmore

As an Italian immigrant in East Falls in the 1950s, Emilio Straface learned many things about his new country, but nothing was as much fun as halfball. Day after day, Emilio and his friends played in front of his family's corner store at Dobson and Fisk Streets. Like kids all over Philadelphia, they used broomsticks as bats and played with half of a rubber ball. But the similarities with other neighborhoods ended there. The physical characteristics of Dobson Street — its lampposts, fire hydrants, and manhole covers — marked the boundaries of the playing field. It defined the game as much as the vacant lots on Calumet Street or the factory on Indian Queen Lane did for the kids in those areas of the East Falls community.



Batters on Dobson Street didn't have to worry about empty lots or factory walls. They worried about Emilio's pitching. He threw with either hand and could make the halfball curve, slide, rise, or dip suddenly into the strike zone, leaving batters swinging at air. Although batters bragged about many stats, no one bragged about batting averages because, according to Emilio, "if you were hitting .100, you were doing pretty good."

And the misses could be humbling. Occasionally, batters swung so hard that the bat flew out of their hands and shattered a nearby window—one of the hazards of a game played in narrow city streets. When Emilio's father stormed out on the porch to yell, another common hazard, it broke up the game for a little while. But Emilio and his friends were back at it the very next day.

Some things have changed since Emilio's family first arrived in the 1950s — the corner store owned by Emilio's father is now Frank's Pizza; the field on Dobson Street is no longer in the shadow of the Schuylkill Falls high-rises; and, the Strafaces built a house on Dobson Street. But the field and the game remain the same. AND – they're coming to life again!

Emilio Straface, owner of Frank's Pizza, created a half ball tournament last year to celebrate the game of his youth and reunite with friends from his old neighborhood. It was so successful, he's doing it again!

The tournament will be held on the last Saturday of September and is open to all ages. If you ever wanted to hit half of a rubber ball with a broomstick, or just enjoy good food and drinks while watching others try, then Frank's Pizza Halfball Tournament is for you. For more information, or to sign up, call Frank's Pizza at 215-848-6433.

When they take the "field" at Fisk Avenue and Dobson Street on September 29th, Emilio (pictured) and his friends will still talk trash and try to hit one past the fire hydrant. There will be

good food and drinks with plenty of stories and, just like in the old neighborhood, new (younger) players will be eager to compete, so they'll play until dark—with bragging rights still on the line!