

Local

Field wars: Organized league clashes with pickup players in a gentrifying neighborhood

By **Rachel Chason** July 21

There was more dirt than grass on the field at Harriet Tubman Elementary School when Rene Lopez started playing pickup soccer there 20 years ago.

Games started about 6 p.m. on weeknights. Anyone was welcome. Almost all of the players were black and Latino, and many were immigrants.

They didn't pay to reserve the field in the District's Columbia Heights neighborhood because no one else wanted it.

"It looked like that," Lopez said the other day, pointing at the gravel and dirt on the other side of the chain-link fence that borders the field on 11th Street NW. "But it didn't matter. We played in winter, in snow, in rain, whenever."

Then, as home prices soared and the neighborhood became yet another flash point in the District's gentrification wars, organized sports leagues arrived, willing to pay \$95 per hour for permits for the field, which by now had been remade with artificial turf.

There was soccer, with official teams and T-shirts, on Sundays. A bocce ball league claimed Tuesdays. And on a recent Wednesday, teams from the ZogSports league showed up for soccer, wielding a permit and telling the pickup players they had bought the rights to play there Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays.

A fair amount of chaos ensued. One of the pickup players cut down a soccer net, which he said he and his buddies pooled their money to pay for. One of the league participants called police.

The pickup players then stormed a local Advisory Neighborhood Commission meeting and waited nearly four hours to voice their concerns.

City officials were sympathetic. At a meeting a week later, they offered a solution, which the pickup players say isn't really a solution at all.

"It feels unfair," said Lopez, who brings his three children to the field for pickup. "We want to share the field. But we just don't have any day to play."

Open to all

Lopez was one of more than 60 pickup players and neighbors who showed up at the field Wednesday to discuss the situation with city officials and neighborhood leaders. All they want, they said, is a space where anyone can play for free.

They arrived before 7 p.m., when league play begins, so the field was temporarily empty. Pickup players of all ages swarmed over it in a sea of colorful jerseys, which quickly grew damp in the 90-degree heat. A man in a purple El Salvador jersey and pink cleats chugged water. A boy in a green "2016 Petworth Champions" shirt scored a goal. Players shouted across the field in a mixture of Spanish and English.

"This is the diversity that the neighborhood is all about," said Omar Gonzalez, 30, who grew up in Logan Circle, now lives in Columbia Heights and learned how to play soccer on the field. "It's people from El Salvador, Honduras, people of African descent — it's everyone."

When the league players arrived in their matching uniforms at 7 p.m., the pickup players moved to the blacktop near the school for their meeting.

Jackie Stanley, community outreach coordinator at the city's Department of General Services, told them that the D.C. government is determined to work with D.C. Public Schools, ZogSports and the pickup players to find a solution.

And she had an idea. What if the city could get the group a permit to play on Wednesdays, before 6:30 p.m. and on Fridays and Saturdays?

The players listened, Gonzalez translated, and then they shook their heads in frustration.

The men work and can't get to the field before 6:30 p.m. during the week, they said. Outdoor movies are shown on Friday nights. That leaves Saturday, and they said even then there is sometimes league play.

Beyond the logistical issues, the city's tentative solution missed the point, the players said. They don't want a permit of their own — they want everyone to be allowed to play.

"Every time that anyone here has taken the field, it's been open to the community," Gonzalez said. "That's all we want."

The group presented Stanley with a petition that has hundreds of signatures and calls for the Tubman field not to be “rented or dedicated to groups or individuals for organized sports.”

Stanley said the proposed solution would be reexamined and discussed with members from both sides.

A different kind of community

This season was the first that ZogSports DC, a league that has branches in Atlanta, Los Angeles, New York and New Jersey, received permits to play at the Tubman field, said Kendra Hansen, the league’s general manager.

Their request was approved by the elementary school and processed by the Department of General Services, under a 1982 law that allows the city to lease public school property like the field without seeking neighborhood input.

The law was written when D.C.’s population — and its tax base — were shrinking and public schools needed additional revenue. Today, with the population and revenue booming, proceeds from the permits go into the city’s general fund, Stanley said.

“It’s a 35-year-old law that no longer benefits the community,” said Kent Boese, an ANC commissioner for the Columbia Heights area. He said he would like D.C. Public Schools to consider adopting the model used by the city’s Department of Parks and Recreation, in which a group that wants to use a property must receive a letter of support from the local ANC. Tubman Principal Amanda Delabar did not respond to a request for comment.

Alex Bearman, executive director of District Sports, which pays about \$1,000 per week to use the Tubman field from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sundays, said he knew there were pickup games on the field on weeknights, which is why he didn’t consider requesting a permit for those nights. “It didn’t seem right to show up and try to displace something,” he said.

The way Bearman sees it, the proliferation of sports leagues is inevitable in a quickly changing city. Similar battles have played out in other cities, including San Francisco. He’s watched people play on the same team for years, and meet their husbands, wives and best friends.

“There are more people of means in the city, which means more bars and restaurants in neighborhoods like Shaw, and more people wanting to play kickball,” Bearman said.

At the meeting Wednesday, the pickup players were supported by neighborhood old-timers as well as newcomers, including Will McAuliffe, 32, who moved in a year ago and thrilled his 5-year-old nephew this summer by bringing him to the field to play pickup with other little boys.

“You can’t schedule time for community to happen,” said McAuliffe, who was wearing dress pants and a white button-down shirt. “You can’t have a permit for people to meet each other.”

Again, Gonzalez translated. This time, the pickup players cheered.

By Friday, after the local blog [DCist](#) published a story about the controversy, the online petition had more than 1,500 signatures. And ZogSports made a decision to stop using Tubman field.

“When we applied for the permit, we didn’t know it would come at the expense of residents’ opportunity to play,” Hansen wrote in an email. “We believe strongly in the idea that everyone deserves a space to play, and we’re sorry for the disruption caused by our league.”

The league had not found another field as of Friday. Players were offered refunds or the option to transfer to another league.

Gonzalez said the pickup players would welcome the league players if they opted to join them.

“We’re thankful,” he said. “We wanted to make clear that it wasn’t us versus them. It’s about being fair to everyone.”

Rachel graduated from Duke University in 2017 and is a reporting intern covering local politics.

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