

Legendary 'Battlegrounds' Basketball Courts Are Being Renovated, City Says



By [Gustavo Solis](#) | March 2, 2015 3:41pm

[@journogoose](#)



HAMILTON HEIGHTS — The basketball courts where Kareem Abdul-Jabbar learned to play the game is getting a much needed renovation.

In the 1950's and 60's, spectators would flock to the park watch pickup basketball games at [Carmansville Playground](#) — better known as the 'Battlegrounds' — on 151st Street and Amsterdam Avenues.

"Everybody from all over the city came to play at the Battlegrounds," said Jim Couch, 84, a basketball coach and fixture on the city's outdoor courts. "We used to show up to the court at 8 a.m. and we would be there all day."

The courts were so famous that players from the Knicks like [Nathaniel "Sweetwater" Clifton](#), [Ray Felix](#) and [Freddie Crawford](#) would show up to play. Many of the kids who learned to play the game there went on to play in college and the pros, said Couch.

In its heyday the courts even attracted professional athletes from other sports, Couch added.

"Willie Mays used to play here when he was with the New York Giants," said [Couch](#). "He used to have a day game at the Polo Grounds and after the game was over he would come out and play stickball and basketball with the kids."

Today the Battlegrounds are known more for the cracks on the floor and net-less basketball hoops. But the Parks Department hopes to change that by giving the historic park a facelift.

Although they are still finalizing the design, the upgrades are expected to include regulation size courts for high school games and adding a plaque in honor of the famous players who learned to play the game there, spokeswoman Meghan Lalor said.

"I think it's going to be great for the kids," said Couch, who played in the Battlegrounds nearly every weekend after he came back from the Korean War.

You had to be tough to play. Kids learned how to shoot well because nobody was given easy shots, Couch said.

"The reason they called it the Battlegrounds was because you couldn't shoot a layup," Couch said. "If you came down the lane you would get punched in the chest."

Locals wouldn't go easy on the superstars like "Sweetwater" Clifton, he said.

"The guys used to try to rough him up but he wouldn't take any of that," Couch said. "People would leave the court with bloody lips."

Regulars included Felix, the first overall pick of the 1953 draft, Crawford, who played for the Knicks, and [Ed Warner](#), who was named the MVP of the NCAA tournament but was barred from the NBA because of a match fixing scandal.

Perhaps the best-known player to come out of there was Lew Alcindor, who changed his name to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and went on to score the most points in NBA history.

The renovations will also include new playing equipment and a spray shower. There will also be new benches, game tables, drinking fountains and trash cans, according to the Parks Department.

The design process is expected to finish this year with renovations starting in 2016 and finishing in 2017, Lalor said.

