

## Childhood: When the Street Was the Center of Our World

*By Irv Sternberg*

Belmont Terrace was only one block long, connecting two much longer avenues on Newark's south side. My parents rented the first floor apartment of a two-family building. Another family rented the second floor. We knew everyone on the tree-lined block. Neighbors were friendly. Their doors were always open. This was the street that was the center of my world in the Forties when I was still in grade school.

Immediately after school was out, all the boys in the neighborhood would gather near my house to decide what games were going to play. All the games were played in the street, we had so many choices that it was sometimes difficult to decide which to select. We usually let the season decide. In the summer time we played softball, using a garbage can cover for home plate, the fire hydrant for first base, the manhole cover for second base and the left front fender of Sandy Jaffee's father's car, which was parked at the curb, for third base.

We also played something called "stoop ball." One of the houses had a brick staircase leading to the front entrance. When you threw a tennis ball at a step, it would bounce back into the street for a single, double or triple. A ball that came off the exact edge of the step could fly clear across the street to the opposite sidewalk. That was automatically a home run.

The fall was reserved for football. I was the smallest kid in the neighborhood, but one of the fastest. So I always played in the backfield, where I could run the ball behind the bigger boys who provided the blocking. We also used an alleyway between two houses to punch a hard rubber ball against a wall while a second player tried to punch it back.

Even bad weather seldom interfered with our determination to play outside. On rainy days, we sat on my porch or someone else's and played "baseball in a jar." The jar contained little bits of paper bearing notes that read: single, double, triple, home run, stolen base, fly out, ground out, strike out, base on balls, etc. A player picked one of the notes to determine his "at bat." It was recorded on a score sheet, just like a real game.

These sports consumed countless hours of our childhood. They were safe, harmless and best of all, from a parent's viewpoint, always within their view and shouting distance. As we got older and more adventurous, we would take the games to the city park. My mother didn't mind. "Just be home for supper," she'd say.

The girls on our block had their own games. Hop-scotch, jump rope and jacks were popular.

The boys paid little attention to them until much later, when we discovered some of them were very pretty and were beginning to grow hips and little breasts. It wasn't long before we had less interest in playing our street games.