A Wicket Grows in Brooklyn
The demographics—and difficulty—of sports

*HEN JULIUS SPIEGEL TOOK* over as Parks Commissioner for Brooklyn, New York, organized field sports had been on a long, trajectory that tended to reflect community demographics. Baseball, in particular, dominated the assignment of playing fields in the borough’s finite number of parks. As Hispanic immigrants swelled Brooklyn’s population in the 1980s, soccer became an additional staple of parks and recreation programming. As the Canadian-born Spiegel observes, new sports tend to come in under the radar.

“There’s been a huge shift,” Spiegel says. “Other than in certain Spanish neighborhoods, baseball I find is on the decline. Even in those places where there are still league activities, it’s still concentrated in the spring. Very few places even have Little League in the summer. Early on in my time there was a huge shift toward soccer, and that has stabilized.

TALKING POINT

One of 7 low-income, preschool-aged children is obese.

—Centers for Disease Control
baseball field, especially if they are affiliated with a local police precinct.

The city constantly keeps an eye out for land to acquire, and recently bought some waterfront property in the Williamsburg/Green Point area. A significant opportunity came Brooklyn’s way five years ago when proffers on a mixed-use project required the donation of open space by the developer. The developer originally figured on a Little League ball field.

“This is where I came in,” Spiegel says. “Many of the elected officials encouraged them to create the baseball field, and I made an impassioned plea for cricket. Some people looked at me cross-eyed. But it didn’t take a genius to figure it out—all you had to do was drive around and see the changing demographics.

“Cricket guys would set up a game on any and every patch of land. There were probably a dozen sandlot cricket fields. So I convinced them to build a cricket field. It was the first dedicated cricket field in New York City—that is, where city funds were used to build a ball field.

“And that got me into the cricket hal of fame [USA Cricket Association],” Spiegel laughs, with pride, but confessing. “I still don’t quite get the game.”

Spiegel describes maintaining a cricket pitch (the real name for a cricket field) as “financially challenging.” “It’s tough. Cricket requires a highly manicured field and that’s hard for a small department like ours to do. But, thankfully, most of the cricket guys take care of their own pitches.”

In tracing the beginning of cricket in Brooklyn, Spiegel describes it as a quiet evolution. “It wasn’t so much that demands were placed on me—as is typical of some groups. They just don’t know how to work with government. When I started in parks and recreation, there weren’t any elected West Indians in government—now there are quite a few. Back then, they didn’t know you could fight City Hall on this kind of stuff.”

Within the last two years, New York City has seen cricket enter its public high schools as a sport and the New York Police Department has established a youth cricket team, of which the members are mostly Muslim kids. The city is in its fourth year of sponsoring the Mayor’s Cricket Cup, and for the 2010 edition, it has landed its first sponsor, Moët Hennessy USA, whose CEO is passionate about the sport.

Will other demographically driven sports catch on in New York? Spiegel is not betting on it. Cost is the main factor.

“I’m Canadian, and I wish we could build a curling rink,” he laments. “But that’s just not going to happen.”

—Phil Hayward