



TAKING IT TO THE

STREET

STREETBALL IS BIG BUSINESS, AND PLAYGROUND LEGENDS SUCH AS HOT SAUCE, THE PROFESSOR AND ESCALADE MIGHT JUST BE THE NEXT BIG NAMES AMONG HOOPS COLLECTORS. BY KEN TURETZKY

Many of the half-remembered legends of street basketball, among them guys named Joe Hammond, Pee Wee Kirkland, Swea' Pea Daniels and The Goat, lived, dunked and died at New York City's Rucker Park and on lesser-known courts in the nation's urban centers. Most never got rich, or even traveled far beyond their home blacktop. But those tales are Old School, better left to the schoolyard.

The outlook has improved for the new playground stars, now reaping the rewards of a streetball marketing bonanza led by AND 1, the suburban Philadelphia shoe and apparel company that has successfully tied its fortunes to the city game. AND 1 built its own legend around a video featuring the sensational street handles of Rafer "Skip 2 My Lou" Alston, then a playground genius and now a solid NBA pro.

The company had found its niche with that video, delivered in 1998 by Ron Naclerio, Alston's coach at Cardozo High School in Bayside, Queens. Impressed, AND 1 signed Skip to a shoe contract, although he'd

yet to play pro ball and was little-known away from Rucker. Building on its new asset, AND 1 added a hip-hop soundtrack to the Alston footage and distributed 250,000 copies of Mix Tape Volume 1, primarily through mall retailer Footaction.

From there followed a series of streetball exhibitions, endorsement deals with media-friendly streetball personalities Main Event, Hot Sauce, Shane the Dribbling Machine, Half Man Half Amazing and others; more mix tapes; a national tour that just finished its fifth season; and even a reality series on ESPN2. AND 1 pegs much of its growth — from \$1 million in revenues in 1993 to \$175 million in 2003 — to the streetball phenomenon.

“Five years ago, when we were looking at this, we wanted a good marketing initiative that would allow AND 1 to claim territory that our competitors might have overlooked,” says Errin Cecil-Smith, the company’s vice president of marketing. “How do we deliver the AND 1 brand message directly to the kids? We’re not Nike. We don’t have their budget.

“Playground basketball was completely off their radar. It was primarily a New York phenomenon. We thought it would be a good way

to reach kids directly and pretty inexpensively. We’ve been able to capitalize on Rafer’s legitimacy, and it was a perfect fit for the attitude we’re trying to achieve for our brand.”

Facing hand-picked competition at the biggest arenas in each town, AND 1 took the Mix Tape Tour to 30 cities this summer. Along the way, it picked up new talent for the traveling squad of opposing players, dropped others, and taped the whole process for the 10-episode Streetball reality series. The regular players vote “Survivor”-style at the end of the season, choosing one new teammate who will receive an AND 1 endorsement deal.

Michael Mills liked the attitude and the brand, and wanted to earn a nickname like Skip. A Walgreen’s manager in Irving, Tex., with a solid Arkansas prep and small college basketball background, Mills, 23, survived the Open Run elimination process at American Airlines Center in Dallas and won a spot on the home team. For today, the 6-3 guard would be known as “Elevator.”

Mills was playing high-school ball in Batesville, Tex. when his best friend showed him one of the AND 1 mix tapes. “He thought he was Skip 2 My Lou,” Mills says. “That’s



THE 411 ON STREETBALL CARDS

Although AND 1 has been contacted by card manufacturers in the past about doing a set of inserts featuring the Mix Tape Tour players, it’s yet to strike a deal.

The sheet of cards inserted into this month’s issue of *Beckett Basketball* are the first Mix Tape Tour trading cards ever produced and will be listed in the Beckett database.

They’re likely not the last sets of streetballers you’ll see, however. Look for AND 1 to partner with one of the manufacturers in the future.

Beckett is pleased, however, to be the first to bring you cards of these hoops icons.

how I caught on about it. I went and scooped the mix tapes every time they came out at the mall. Copped volumes one through six.”

Last year, he met the tour in Memphis and made the cut for the main game. His priorities are well-placed for a guy his age. “Basketball and music, they kind of go hand-in-hand with me,” Mills says. “Basketball is smooth, just like music. I play basketball, I listen to music. I mean, I can’t do either one without both.”

The Dallas Open Run began with 150 players and ended with two — Mills and Lance Jackson, 19, a.k.a. “High Flier.” The new players’ nicknames reflected the staff’s dubious regard for their future as streetball stars: A third local, Kevin Graves, who made the team by winning the U.S. Army’s “4th Man Challenge,” earned the perfunctory title “KG.”

As the game began, emcee Duke Tango, of King Towers and Rucker Park fame, literally followed the action on the floor, wearing a Harpo wig under a turned-around Dallas Mavericks cap and bellowing into a wireless microphone. Hovering just inches away, Duke

STREETBALL MUST HAVES

Looking to start a collection of streetball memorabilia. Here are few cool collectibles to get you started:

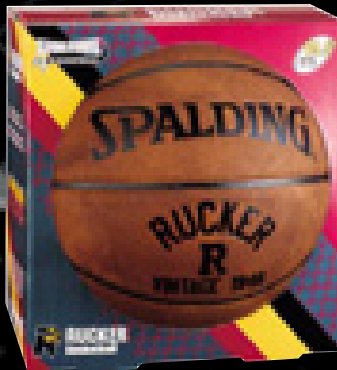
Spalding Rucker Vintage 1946 Basketball (\$25)/Official Rucker Game Ball (\$35) — NYC’s Rucker Park is the world’s most famous streetball court. Capitalizing on the streetball craze, Spalding has issued a collectible basketball (packaged complete with a peach basket) commemorating the first year of play at the park. It’s also started to merchandise a replica of the official game ball.

Nike “Ball of Fall” Battlegrounds DVD (\$19.99) — This DVD contains the entire first season of the MTV reality series, which searches for the nation’s top (non-AND 1) streetball player.

AND 1 Mix Tape Volume 6 DVD (\$19.99) — The mix tape that started it all — now in its sixth edition. All six seasons are still available via retail.

Professor Authentic Game Jersey (\$65.00) — If you’re a fan of the professor (and we aren’t talking *Gilligan’s Island*), then you may want to grab one of these authentic Mix Tape Tour gamers.

Mixtape Tour Game Used Jerseys — These don’t pop up online often, but when they do, they sell quickly. This Escalade jersey, recently sold online for \$150.



taunted a Dallas defender who cautiously challenged Hot Sauce (Philip Champion), AND 1's ballhandling wizard, out on the wing. "Hot Sauce! I'll give you \$10 if you can take the ball away from him!" Hot Sauce settled for a jumper, and missed.

Later, Hot Sauce worked the perimeter, dribbled the ball off the face of a defender named Ballaholic, then lost the handle. "I got like a million signature moves," Hot Sauce told one newspaper. "More signatures than the Constitution."

The highlights continued. Escalade (Troy Jackson), 6-10 and a self-confessed "almost 400 pounds," posted up a defender, wagged a warning finger at the man, backed him down, and jammed. After a steal, Professor (Grayson Boucher) dished through the legs to Go Get It (Tony Jones) for a high-flying dunk. Soon, AND 1 was alley-ooping at will, with Dallas mostly sitting back and watching the action.

If the Mix Tape Tour is more theater than competition, well, the crowd loves the show. AND 1's Mandy Murphy said paid attendance almost doubled this year, averaging 5,000 to 7,000 fans per stop, with a season-best 10,000 watching in Oakland. Last fall, AND 1 visited five cities in Europe, and this year, the team will tour the Asia-Pacific region.

Others are mining the rich streetball vein that AND 1 exposed. Nike is offering its Battlegrounds 2004 World Tournament. The Entertainer's Basketball Classic (EBC), which has played 24 seasons at Rucker Park, mounted its first nationwide tournament this summer. MTV also telecasts EBC summer-league games.

For the streetballers, recognition has been hard-won, and they'll meet all the media, sign all the autographs, greet all the corporate sponsors the job demands. Most are in their late 20s or older. "Streetball is my job," Prime Objective (Lonnie Harrell) told Houston radio, cradling a press room phone and working up enthusiasm for the next stop before the Dallas game had even begun. "Oh, man, I can't wait to get to H-town. I'm on my way right now."

Harrell, 30, played at Georgetown and Northeastern and in four minor leagues, drawing no closer to the NBA than the New Jersey Nets' 2001 veterans camp. But he's a legitimate streetball star. "First, you come out there and try to do tricks, you gonna wonder why they not workin', because you don't know how to play the game," he warned the Houston Open Run hopefuls. "You gotta learn how to play the game first, and that's Number One. And then you gotta think, you about to play against the best streetball players in world. So you got to come correct. Exactly."

For some, the Mix Tape Tour resembles an updated Harlem Globetrotters exhibition where, instead of dumping a bucket of confetti, Hot Sauce wraps the ball around his hapless opponent's head before stepping back to knock down a three. And while the players

emphasize their desire to win, Duke Tango reminds, "this is entertainment right here. A lot of people say this a Globetrotters thing. Well, it's entertainment. If that's what they do, that's what we do. We entertain. And that separates us from the Dallas Mavericks. Dallas Mavericks go out there and try to bust their opponent's behind every single night. They *must* win. Ya understand what I'm sayin'?"

This show is Duke's chance to travel. When he works 9-to-5, he's a porter at Estee Lauder in Manhattan. But his claim to fame is naming many of the famous streetballers. "First of all, I'm from the Old School. So it started back 25 years ago. Just to name two from back in the day, Steve Burtt [the former Iona star and NBA veteran who is head coach of AND 1], All Day. Cookie Wilson, MVP. But as far as up to date, I got Main Event, I got Shane the Dribblin' Machine, I got High Octane, Escalade. The Professor. Headache, who's not here anymore. I got Chisel, the Cardiac Kid, Seven and Change. The list goes on and on."

But it's not all a show. There's also a lot of professionalism involved. "You know, we have to work hard to put on a show because none of this is staged," says Burtt. "These guys are playin' for real. I try to tell the guys, they can do any trick they want to out of the fundamentals. And with the fundamentals, you'll be a better basketball player and you'll be a better showman, also."

Showmanship means money to these athletes, and the savvy players, who now license their nicknames and images for shoes, video games and action figures, sought trademark protection. AND 1 presented its first public streetball show with Main Event (Walliyy Dixon) in his hometown of Lynden, New Jersey, back in 1999. A leaper who played at Rutgers and for the Harlem Wizards and Harlem Rockets, Main had staged his own fundraising events before AND 1 came calling. He'd already trademarked the name Duke Tango gave him a decade ago. "Yes, sir. Immediately. I was seein' the near future. I'm not sayin' I saw this level, but I took care of that as far as my own business," he said.

Duke named Escalade after watching the big man roll over an opponent in the lane. Cadillac, which makes the massive luxury SUVs, complained at first; now they pay Escalade to make promotional appearances, and he says he earns six figures from AND 1 and various endorsement deals.

"Why would somebody else own my own name?" he asks. "That's bad business. Wouldn't let you trademark my name." Witness movie action star the Rock, whose nickname reportedly still belongs to his old employers at World Wrestling Entertainment. "Rock's a fool!" Escalade says.

But that's business. Fortunately, business is good. "We're entertainers, and it's just like bein' an actor or a musician. I gotta be able to

**FIVE NYC PLAYGROUND LEGENDS
WHO MADE THE JUMP**

Looking to start a card collection of some of streetball's all-time greats? Unfortunately some legends like Fly Williams, Jumpin Jackie Jackson, Joe the Destroyer, The Goat and Pee Wee Kirkland were never immortalized on cardboard. Luckily, more than a few NYC playground stars eventually crossed over the NBA and were featured on cards. Here are a few of the best:

CONNIE HAWKINS

KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR


EARL MONROE

JULIUS ERVING

STEPHON MARBURY

RAFER ALSTON

SEBASTIAN TELFAIR



sell you. That's the bottom line," Escalade says. "Not necessarily the best basketball players make it, but not necessarily the best basketball players make it to the NBA!"

"We do 20 million viewers a week for our TV show. I mean, they did a survey last year; our core group of guys were more popular than 60 percent of the NBA players. Our popularity is at an all-time high.

"I think if you have a passion for doing something you love, then people will appreciate it, no matter what it is," Escalade says. "And America, corporate America, suburban America is so in love with our culture, whether it be hip-hop music or street basketball, that whatever we do becomes popular culture. So I knew that what we were doing was viable; I knew there was an audience for it. I just didn't know how we would get to 'em. And AND 1 afforded us that opportunity."