

Diversity Newsletter # 7 March Madness and 2 greats you probably don't know:

In the midst of the NCAA tournament I thought it might be appropriate to share some information regarding two basketball legends many of you are not aware of. The first is **Perry Wallace** who was a brilliant renaissance man, someone who turned down big ten schools because they did not value his desire for a true education. Instead, he went to his hometown university, Vanderbilt, where he majored in engineering. As the first black varsity basketball player in the SEC he endured hostile environments on the road as well as on the Vandy campus. Reading his biography, *Strong Inside*, I came to realize how difficult it was to break barriers not just as a player on hostile courts but to also interact with faculty and other students. I had not fully appreciated the psychological and person loneliness of that journey. Perry finished his career as a law professor at American U and passed away in 2017.

The second is **Connie Hawkins**. Falsely accused in a point shaving/gambling investigation, he was denied a college education and was blacklisted by the NBA. Connie Hawkins was Dr. J before Dr. J. At age 27 the NBA allowed him to play with the Suns. I have to admit to a sense of awe when I walked by his office on a visit to the Suns administrative offices. Unfortunately, Connie was not in and I could not meet one of the greatest legends of Brooklyn basketball. He also passed in 2017.

Below are glimpses into the lives of these two men.

Wallace Perry E. Jr. Biography

Excelled in School Sports, Broke the SEC Color Barrier, Endured Racist Assaults, Forged Successful Legal Career

1948— 2017

College basketball player; law professor

As the first African-American player in college basket-ball's Southeastern Conference (SEC), Perry Wallace pioneered the way for black players to excel in this sport. Yet his years on the Vanderbilt University varsity team were marked by racist incidents and by a sense of isolation on campus. Despite daunting obstacles, however, Wallace became one of the school's most celebrated athletes as well as a distinguished alumnus with a career in legal education.

Excelled in School Sports

Born in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1948 to Perry E. and Hattie Haynes Wallace, Perry Junior was the youngest of six children. He grew up in Nashville and attended racially segregated public schools. "It was segregation with an attitude," he commented to *Black Athlete Sports Network* writer Michael Hudson. "People had an attitude about where you were and what you were—and what they could do to you." Wallace showed early academic and athletic promise. At Pearl Senior High School, where he earned the nickname "king of the boards," he played center on the varsity basketball team. At six-feet, five-inches tall, he became famous for his powerful slam dunks. In 1965-66, the first year in which African-American students were allowed to participate in local, regional, and state championships, Pearl's team swept away the

competition to become the first African-American team to win the Tennessee Secondary School Boys' State Basketball Tournament.

Wallace averaged 19 rebounds and 12 points per game, earning the distinction of high school All-American. Valedictorian of his graduating class with a straight-A average, he was recruited by more than 80 colleges and universities. "He was the best player in the region with major college aspirations, and he was smart," observed Roy Neel in *The Vanderbilt Hustler*. Faced with a wealth of college options, Wallace weighed his choices carefully. "When I was looking at schools," he commented in *The Vanderbilt Hustler*, "I was interested in a good education and playing major college basketball. But when you're black and growing up in the South, there are just not many opportunities."

Wallace expected to attend either a historically black college or a school in the North. "But then Vanderbilt came into the picture," he recalled. One of the country's top 20 universities, Vanderbilt, located in Wallace's hometown of Nashville, had been segregated for most of its history and did not accept its first black student until 1953. "I knew that it was going to take a lot of extra effort and resilience [to enroll there]," he remembered. "It was all a big unknown." Despite his doubts, Wallace chose Vanderbilt, mostly on the basis of its excellent engineering program.

Broke the SEC Color Barrier

Wallace entered Vanderbilt on an athletic scholarship in 1966. During his first year, he played on Vanderbilt's freshman squad because NCAA regulations prohibited freshmen from playing on the varsity team. Another black player, Godfrey Dillard, had come to Vanderbilt that year from Detroit and played with Wallace on the freshman squad. Dillard was later injured and did not go on to play on the varsity team. Though Vanderbilt fans accepted the black players, at away games Wallace and Dillard faced racist taunts and jeers from hostile crowds. "You could really hear the catcalls and threats and racial epithets," Wallace told *USA Today* reporter Jack Carey. "It was clearly racist stuff. They'd cheer when we made a mistake and yell 'Which one's Amos and which one's Andy?' It was literally chilling. There were times my hands were absolutely cold. That was a real baptism."

Wallace and Dillard supported each other as much as they could, but remained silent about the threats they received. "This was a horror," Wallace later told Hudson. "To even let it out and speak the words created the danger that you might actually realize what you had been through." Despite these intensely hostile conditions, Wallace finished his freshman season with an impressive average of 17 points and 20 rebounds per game.

When he joined the varsity squad the following year, becoming Vanderbilt's first African-American varsity athlete and the first African American to play basketball in the SEC, Wallace confronted a different game than he was prepared for: the NCAA had decided that year to ban the slam-dunk in college play. Some coaches and players saw this decision as an attempt to stop "black basketball," as played by such stars as UCLA's Lew Alcindor (now Kareem Abdul-Jabbar), from dominating the sport. In any case, the new rule forced Wallace to learn a whole new style of play. According to Roy Skinner, who was head basketball coach at Vanderbilt from 1961 to 1976, the ban on slam-dunks presented Wallace with a significant handicap. "They took away his game," Skinner recalled in *The Vanderbilt Hustler*. "He couldn't shoot

worth a damn.... He basically had to start all over. He had to learn to play basketball, but he worked hard at it."

Indeed, by the end of his Vanderbilt career, Wallace had proved himself one of the school's greatest athletes. During his three varsity seasons, he improved his free-throw percentage from 50 percent in his sophomore year to 77 percent in his senior year, and raised his point average from 9.7 per game to 17.7 per game. In his senior year, he averaged 13.5 rebounds per game and scored 461 points for a career total of 1,010 points, making him one of 33 members of Vanderbilt's 1,000 Points Club. More than 30 years after graduating, Wallace remained the school's second-leading rebounder with a total of 894 career boards, as well as its 35th-best scorer.

Endured Racist Assaults

Success, however, did not come easily. When Wallace joined the varsity squad and began participating in SEC games, the virulence of the racist attacks against him increased. According to *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, "He experienced racism at its worst, particularly at SEC schools in Alabama and Mississippi. Cheerleaders led a volley of invective racist cheers. There were threats of beatings, castration, and lynching. He endured physical abuse on the court that referees refused to acknowledge as fouls. Wallace was harangued, taunted, and threatened throughout his SEC career." As the only black athlete on the court at away games, according to Hudson, Wallace felt like a "marked man."

At a Glance ...

Born in 1948 in Nashville, Tennessee; son of Perry E. and Hattie Haynes Wallace; married Karen; children: one daughter. *Education*: Vanderbilt University, BS, Engineering, 1970; Columbia University School of Law, JD, 1975.

Career: U.S. Justice Department, Washington, D.C., attorney; University of Baltimore, Maryland, faculty member; Washington College of Law, American University, Washington, D.C., professor, 1991–.

Memberships: National Advisory Council for Environmental Policy and Technology; U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; National Panel of Arbitrators, New York Stock Exchange, National Association of Securities Dealers; American Arbitration Association.

Awards: Second-team All-SEC, and SEC Sportsmanship Trophy, 1970; Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame inductee, 2003; SEC Living Legend honoree, 2004.

In his first game at the University of Mississippi, in the Tad Smith Coliseum, Wallace was punched in the eye and badly injured while jumping up for a rebound. The crowd cheered after the attack. "It was an ugly incident," he recalled in *The Vanderbilt Hustler*. Determined not to allow such behavior to defeat him, he came back to the game in the second half to score 14 points and make 11 rebounds. "Struggling to stay inbounds between whites who wanted him to fail and African Americans who expected him to be a 'superstar,'" wrote a contributor to *The Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, "Wallace became the quintessential 'organization man.'" He refused to retaliate for violence against him on the court, knowing that

a fight would only confirm negative stereotypes against black athletes. Instead, he played with renewed passion and skill to defeat his adversaries. As Hudson put it, Wallace "kept his mouth shut, played hard, sacrificed for Vanderbilt—and for black America." In his senior year, Wallace was chosen captain of the Vanderbilt varsity squad and was second-team All-SEC. He also received the SEC Sportsmanship Trophy, determined by league player vote, in 1970.

Wallace was popular off the court as well. In fact, according to Brad Golder in *The Vanderbilt Hustler*, one of his professors described him as an "honorary white guy" on campus, and the senior class voted him "Bachelor of Ugliness," an award given to the most popular man in the graduating class. At the same time, however, Wallace felt extremely isolated. After his final game in 1970, according to Golder, he decided to go public about the pressures he had endured and, in an interview with a Nashville newspaper, said that "I don't have any faith at all that people who say 'Hi' to me are addressing me as a human being." Many Vanderbilt alumni resented this comment, and some went so far as to accuse Wallace of disloyalty to the university. As Hudson put it, "People wanted to paint his years at Vanderbilt as an uncomplicated success story [but] although it was against his nature to make waves, he believed it was time to set the record straight."

In 2002, Wallace told Golder in *The Vanderbilt Hustler* that he doubted that he would choose to do it all over again. "I've realized too well how much it took," he commented. "I understand now the physical, psychological and emotional problems it caused." Lonely and threatened as Wallace felt during that period, however, he played a crucial role in desegregating college basketball. In 1970, the first season after Wallace graduated, the universities of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Kentucky created desegregated varsity teams; within the next decade, black athletes were routinely dominating SEC teams.

Forged Successful Legal Career

After earning a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering and engineering mathematics from Vanderbilt, Wallace played briefly in the minor league but chose not to pursue a professional basketball career. He took a job with the National Urban League, where he worked for future U.S. Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown, and then attended Columbia University's School of Law, where he was awarded the Charles Evans Hughes Fellowship. He earned his J.D. in 1975. He worked in the U.S. Justice Department and taught at the University of Baltimore before joining the faculty at Washington College of Law at American University in Washington, D.C.

Specializing in environmental law and in corporate law and finance, Wallace is active in several organizations, including the National Advisory Council for Environmental Policy and Technology, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the National Panel of Arbitrators. He also continues to give interviews about his experience as a pioneer in the desegregation in college sports. He and his wife, a Howard University professor, have one daughter.

Though he retired from sports shortly after his college career, Wallace remains one of Vanderbilt University's most acclaimed athletes. In 1996 he was named one of five Silver Anniversary All-American team members by the National Association of Basketball Coaches. In 2003 he was inducted into the Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame, and in 2004 he represented Vanderbilt as an "SEC Living Legend" honoree at the SEC Basketball Tournament in Atlanta. Also that year, Vanderbilt retired his basketball jersey, making him only the third athlete in the

school's history to receive this honor. "Perry Wallace is a Vanderbilt hero," said Chancellor Gordon Gee in a speech at the ceremony, quoted in *The Vanderbilt Commodores*. "It took great courage for him to come here, and he represented the university with great dignity and skill during a turbulent time. Perry's accomplishments—in the classroom, on the basketball court and throughout his life—are an inspiration to us all."

From the Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame Biography:

WALLACE, PERRY

Category:

2000 - 2010 Inductees

Year Inducted:

2003

University:

Vanderbilt University, Columbia University

Team:

Philadelphia 76ers, Vanderbilt Commodores

BIOGRAPHY

Perry Wallace grew up in Nashville and played basketball and ran track for Pearl High School from 1963 to 1966. In 1966, Wallace's basketball team went 31-0 and won the TSSAA state basketball championship in the first year in history the tournament was played on an integrated basis. Perry won All-Metro, All-State and All-American honors. He was valedictorian of his high school class.

After high school, he enrolled as a scholarship athlete at Vanderbilt University where he would become the first black varsity basketball player in the SEC. He led the team in rebounding each year with a career average of 11.5 per game (second best in school history). His average of 17.7 points per game still ranks as the 11th best average in Vanderbilt history. His No. 24 jersey was retired by Vanderbilt in 2004.

In his senior year, he was named to the All-SEC second team and became a member of the 1000-point club. He graduated from the Vanderbilt School of Engineering and was drafted by the Philadelphia 76ers.

Over the years, he has received numerous awards for his efforts in integrating the SEC. Since graduation, Wallace received a law degree from Columbia University in New York where he was awarded the Charles Evans Hughes Fellowship and worked as an attorney for the U.S. Justice Department. Perry is now a Professor of Law at the Washington College of Law, American University, in Washington D.C.

Connie Hawkins:



Hawkins, barred for years from the N.B.A., instead spent his prime playing for teams in lesser leagues, like the Pittsburgh Rens of the American Basketball League. Credit...Associated Press

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Account

He Changed the Game, but 'Nobody Knows
Who He Is'

Connie Hawkins was destined for basketball stardom until his career was unjustly derailed. But a new effort to honor him is complicated by one fact. He's not the only legend in the neighborhood.

By **Saki Knafo** Feb. 18, 2022 NYT

There are people in Bedford-Stuyvesant who still talk about a pickup basketball game that took place in the neighborhood back in the summer of 1958 or '59. The details of the story largely depend "on which griot is telling it," as one old-timer recently put it, but if the best version is to be believed, the game featured one of the most spectacular collections of athletic talent ever assembled on a patch of blacktop.

The guys running up and down the court in Brooklyn that day supposedly included [Bob Gibson](#), one of the greatest pitchers in the history of baseball; [Jim Brown](#), arguably the greatest running back of all time; and the future basketball Hall of Famers [Larry Brown](#), [Lenny Wilkens](#) and [Oscar Robertson](#).

And a 16-year-old named Connie Hawkins.

Hawkins was a local high school player, maybe the best in the city. As the story goes, he went head-to-head with Robertson, who had just won a national scoring title at the University of Cincinnati. The college star was visiting friends in New York that summer. "I drove up there and stayed for two weeks," he recently recalled. "I was just having fun."

Robertson now says he didn't play in Brooklyn, but the neighborhood's oral historians insist otherwise. As they tell it, his appearance at St. Andrew's Playground on Kingston Avenue — or Kingston Park, as most people called it — sent tremors of excitement through the streets. "Cars would come along, and people would stop at the light and say, 'You'll never believe what's going on,'" [Ed Towns](#), a former congressman from the district, remembered. Soon kids were scaling fences to catch a glimpse of the action. "Connie slowed Oscar's game considerably," said the former councilman [Albert Vann](#), who claims he was there.

Of the six stars who are said to have played in that game, Hawkins, who [died in 2017](#), may have actually had the highest ceiling. Lenny Wilkens, who grew up in Bed-Stuy and later spent 45 years in the N.B.A. as a player and as a coach, recalled Hawkins as an athlete with enormous potential. "He was one of those young men that you knew was destined to really be successful," he recently said.

Larry Brown, another legendary player who was born in Brooklyn, once described him as "simply the greatest individual player" he had ever seen.

But in 1961, while he was in college, Hawkins was falsely accused of getting involved in a gambling scheme and was barred from playing in the N.B.A. He spent the prime of his career wearing out his knees in scrappier leagues, astonishing small crowds with feats of agility and creativity that were rarely captured on film.

To honor the street-ball legend, a group of guys from Bed-Stuy who grew up hearing tales of his underappreciated exploits have petitioned the city to rename the basketball courts at St. Andrew's Playground after him. That may sound like an easy win. It's hard to imagine how anyone could object to honoring a local hero whose due has been long denied.

And yet their effort has been met with resistance — not from the newcomers who are buying up the neighborhood, one \$2 million brownstone at a time — but from another group of longtime residents who have just as much reverence for Brooklyn’s basketball history as they do. As the members of this rival faction see it, someone deserves to be on a plaque in that park, but it isn’t Connie Hawkins.

The expanse of cracked pavement that the Parks Department calls St. Andrew’s Playground spans a block on the southern edge of Bed-Stuy. Back in the 1950s, when the city was the undisputed capital of basketball, the park was considered “the capital of basketball in New York,” [Ray Haskins](#), an esteemed coach and teacher from the neighborhood, recently contended. Today, weeds grow from the fissures that snake across the courts, and the softball field is riddled with holes. A newcomer would have no way of guessing that the place is a landmark.

Earlier this winter, James Mcdougal stood in the park with some of his allies and spoke about his dream of naming the courts after Connie Hawkins. Mr. Mcdougal is an usher for Brooklyn Nets games at the Barclays Center and the founder of a local youth-mentoring organization, [Concerned Community 4 Change](#). His family has owned a building across the street from the park since 1920. Growing up there in the ’60s, he said, he and his friends looked up to two kinds of people: athletes and gangsters.

His love of basketball kept him out of trouble, and he has tried to encourage others to follow his path. It hasn’t always worked out. Three years ago, one of the young men in his program [fired a gun in the playground and hit a 13-year-old girl in the shoulder](#).

“There’s a lack of opportunities in this community,” Mr. Mcdougal said. Honoring Hawkins wouldn’t change that, but he thought it might at least provide some young people with a source of pride and inspiration. “He was a great example of perseverance in spite of all the walls that were put up in front of him,” Mr. Mcdougal said. “The racism and injustice.”

Hawkins was born in 1942 on the other side of Bed-Stuy from Kingston Park, in a tenement where he shared a cot with two brothers. The family was extremely poor. “We ate,” his older brother Earl told David Wolf, the author of “Foul!” a 1972 book about Hawkins’s life. “That’s about all you can say.”

Tall and awkward, Hawkins was routinely bullied. “People said I was stupid,” he told Mr. Wolf. “They said I was ugly and weak, and I felt they was right.”

His savior, or at least one of them, was Gene Smith, a Black police officer who taught the fundamentals of basketball at a nearby YMCA. Hawkins showed no obvious aptitude for the game, but Mr. Smith noticed one thing that was special about him. “He passed the ball very well for a kid his age,” he told Mr. Wolf. “Most kids want to shoot every time, but Connie seemed to prefer passing.”

The D.A.’s detectives refused to believe this. They kept the 18-year-old in a Manhattan hotel room for two weeks, pressuring him to say that he’d worked with the gamblers. When he insisted he hadn’t, they told him he could go to jail for perjury. One detective later admitted that they had stopped him from calling his mother and had not informed him of his rights. Scared and confused, he eventually yielded to the pressure and falsely testified that he’d been involved in the scheme. As he later explained to Mr. Wolf, “I decided I’d never get out if I kept telling the truth.”



Connie Hawkins, whose career was hobbled by false gambling allegations, guards Walt Frazier in a 1973 game. The coach Larry Brown called Hawkins “simply the greatest individual player” he had ever seen. Credit...John Lent/Associated Press

The leaders of the gambling ring went to prison. In the end, Hawkins was not charged with a crime, but the perception that he’d played a role in fixing games turned him into a pariah. Under pressure from Iowa, he dropped out of college. The N.B.A. refused to let any of its teams draft him, so he pursued less prestigious opportunities. In the eight years after he left college, he played for the Pittsburgh Rens of the short-lived American Basketball League, crisscrossed the country in cramped buses for the Harlem Globetrotters and eventually won a championship for the perpetually broke Pittsburgh Pipers of the American Basketball Association.

Despite his outcast status, he made a strong impression on those who watched him play — especially at summer tournaments in city parks, where he could be seen throwing down dunks over his N.B.A. counterparts. More than almost any of his contemporaries, he was responsible for pioneering the fluid, aerial style that would come to define the modern game. “Everyone plays like him,” the Hall of Fame forward Spencer Haywood said. “And nobody knows who he is.”

In 1961, Hawkins met the lawyer S. David Litman, whose brothers owned the Pittsburgh Rens. Convinced of his innocence, Mr. Litman and his wife, the [lawyer Roslyn Litman](#), later pressed the N.B.A. to grant Hawkins a hearing. When that failed, they filed a long-shot lawsuit. Against all expectations, Hawkins eventually won a million-dollar settlement, which included a contract to play with the new team in Phoenix, the Suns.

In April 1970, still hobbled by a serious knee injury he'd sustained the year before, he led his new teammates to the seventh game of a playoff series against the dominant Lakers. But his prime was behind him. Some suspected that the punishing conditions of life in second-class leagues had aged him beyond his 28 years.

Although his portrait now hangs in the Basketball Hall of Fame, there's no telling how much more he would have accomplished, and how much money he might have earned, if the N.B.A. had allowed him an opportunity to clear his name from the start. His grandson, Shawn Hawkins, who grew up in a tough housing project in Pittsburgh, said Connie Hawkins left relatives no inheritance. "He should have been able to advance the whole family," he said. "He should have been able to take a lot of people with him, but he was shortchanged himself."

According to the younger Mr. Hawkins, the N.B.A., which has been highlighting its history this year in honor of its 75th anniversary, has never officially acknowledged any wrongdoing or offered Connie Hawkins or his family an apology. A spokesman for the league replied, "We don't know enough about the case to comment and would need to first research any files we may have on league litigation from the 1960s."

About a year after Hawkins died, Mr. Mcdougal began the process of trying to get the playground courts named after him. With the blessing of Shawn Hawkins, who still lives in Pittsburgh, Mr. Mcdougal held several events to celebrate his grandfather's legacy, gathered signatures from local residents and even secured a letter of support from Eric Adams, the Brooklyn borough president, now the mayor. But months before his campaign got underway, it turned out that someone else, a property assessor from East New York named Samantha Lewis, had already set out to rename the same playground after a different Brooklyn basketball hero: her father.

Like Mr. Mcdougal, Sonny Lewis had served as a mentor to young people. In the 1980s, he ran the athletic programs at the Bedford-Stuyvesant YMCA and organized playground tournaments throughout the city, often volunteering to referee the games. A loquacious personality and flashy dresser who had his initials sewn into nearly everything he wore, he had a way of connecting with teenagers who generally didn't have the highest regard for authority figures.

"A lot of adults demand respect," Billy Gulley, one of his protégés, said. "Sonny *gave* you respect, and you had to respect him back." He went on: "I have two brothers, and they spent their whole lives in jail. They used to tease me — 'Basketball ain't gonna get you nowhere.' But after that summer I spent with Sonny, I ended up being good enough to go to college." He ultimately became a teacher. "Sonny was a great man," he said.

For those who think of Mr. Lewis as a great man, St. Andrew's Playground is something of a sacred site. In 1994, Mr. Lewis helped one of his protégés get a permit to run a tournament called the Kingston Unlimited Classic at the park. On one of the first days of the summer-long competition, a referee called to say he couldn't make it. Mr. Lewis took his place. It was a sweltering afternoon, and the court was surrounded by cheering fans. Less than halfway into the game, Mr. Lewis collapsed. "The crowd stopped," his daughter said. "He got back up and brushed it off. A few minutes later he fell and dropped dead." He was 48.

On a brutally cold day this month, Ms. Lewis stood on the court where her father died. "This is where he spent his last moments doing what he loved to do," she said. She exhaled. It offended her, she continued, that Mr. Mcdougal wanted to put someone else's name on those courts. "This is causing anger in my soul," she said. "Why? What is the gripe?"

Sonny Lewis running a basketball game in Brooklyn circa 1980. Credit...via Samantha Lewis

Although she can't be sure, Ms. Lewis suspects that the recent standoff with Mr. McDougal may have something to do with a dispute that unfolded on these courts more than a decade ago. Around 2010, Mr. McDougal began running youth tournaments and other activities in the playground. Some of Ms. Lewis's friends apparently didn't care for his presence. They said he dominated the park and tried to kick them off the courts; Mr. McDougal, for his part, said he had permits to use the courts for his gatherings.

In the summer of 2018, Ms. Lewis decided to organize a day of games in the park to commemorate her father. By her account, Mr. McDougal asked to help run the event, but she didn't want him involved and told him she could manage it herself. (Mr. McDougal says he doesn't remember this conversation.) She then went ahead and held it without him.

It was around this time, Ms. Lewis says, that she began talking to people in the community about renaming the park after her dad. She and some of her father's admirers were still gathering the necessary documents months later when she learned that Mr. McDougal was trying to get the courts named after Hawkins. She doesn't doubt that Hawkins deserves recognition, but wondered why Mr. McDougal hadn't picked some other playground. She pointed out that Hawkins had played on courts throughout Brooklyn, especially on the other side of Bed-Stuy, where he lived. "The only reason I can think of is he wanted to beat me to it," she said.

Since then, both campaigns have run into obstacles. Ms. Lewis says the pandemic has stalled her efforts. As for Mr. McDougal, a block association led by half a dozen of his neighbors turned down his request for a letter of support, in part because Ms. Lewis had already approached them. This rejection, in turn, has made it difficult for him to gain the approval of the neighborhood community board, a critical step in the application process. Mr. McDougal may find a way around the roadblock, but a spokeswoman for the Parks Department says there are no plans to announce a name change.

One day earlier this month, Mr. McDougal stood on the street and surveyed the buildings surrounding the park. By his count, only three of the families he'd grown up with were still living in those houses. Over the last decade, the Black population of the local community district has declined by a quarter, while the white population has [more than doubled](#). "It's very hurtful," Mr. McDougal said. "It hurts me just knowing that people could come in and move people out and change the whole way of life."

What hasn't changed is the physical condition of the park itself. Last fall, [Mayor Bill de Blasio announced](#) a \$425 million investment in an initiative aimed at improving dozens of underserved parks throughout the city, declaring, "Our recovery must focus on communities historically left behind." St. Andrew's Playground didn't make the cut. According to the Parks Department spokeswoman, it needs so much work that the city can't afford to fix it. "St. Andrews Playground has not had a major capital investment in over 20 years," she explained.

Despite their differences, Mr. McDougal and his rivals share a perspective that few newcomers to the neighborhood are likely to hold. Like so many people steeped in Brooklyn's basketball history, they say they owe their lives to the game. "Basketball saved me," Mr. McDougal once remarked. "I could have gone another way."

The disciples of Sonny Lewis can say the same thing. “I don’t know who St. Andrew was, or what he did to become a saint,” Samantha Lewis said the other day, waving a hand at the plaque bearing his name. “But I know that Sonny Lewis was the saint of Brooklyn.”