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Time to enshrine Mr. Rucker

By **Scoop Jackson**

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Inside of the office, his presence is felt. It's in a picture hanging on the wall. It's a picture of Tiny Archibald, not Nate. He's standing outside on a basketball court in the middle of somewhere. Just standing there. The ground he's standing on is not yet hallowed; yet to be discovered by "GMA" as one of the Seven New Wonders of the World.

Next to that picture is a large framed photo of a Parks and Rec worker.

So nondescript is this man that if the photo was *not* inside of this office, no one would know who he was or why he's framed.

He, like Tiny, is standing on soon-to-be hallowed ground. But as much as one of the greatest-ever NBA point guards standing on a playground makes the "rose that grew from concrete" analogy prophetic, it's because of the man in the adjacent photo that Mr. Archibald had somewhere significant to stand.

The office where this photo hangs is in the heart of Manhattan. 21st Street between 5th and 6th Aves. 10th floor. The photo itself was taken in Harlem. 155th and 8th Ave. Ground level. The office is home to Chris Rucker, co-CEO of Rucker Sportsworld, Inc. He's lined the walls of his office with items to rep his personal Hall of Fame, jerseys of those who have graced the grounds: Pee Wee Kirkland's Uptown jersey, a Cardozo High School jersey, a Carmelo Anthony Downtown jersey, all framed.

The man in the photo is Chris' grandfather, Holcombe. The grandfather of street basketball.



AP Photo/Frank Franklin II

Rucker Park is one of the most legendary courts in the history of basketball.

See, the Parks and Rec worker is the reason this office in Manhattan even exists. He's the reason a substantial culture of basketball outside of the NBA exists. See, Holcombe Rucker is street basketball's James Naismith. Without him, the game might be a one-season sport.

Chris, along with his partner Dexter Gordon, is trying to continue the legacy his grandfather left through building up the Rucker brand. He is on a mission to immortalize his grandfather's life.

"For what he did for the game," he says, "I think my grandfather should be in the basketball Hall of Fame."

His grandfather never played a game in the NBA. Never was a legendary coach or referee. Doesn't have state championship plaques in his home. Wasn't an astute business person who helped construct the game through rules or financial contributions.

His grandfather simply has a park named after him. A small park in Harlem.

A look of ultra-seriousness overcomes Chris' face. As if he is not joking, *as if he's about to make this mission happen*.

The eyes of his grandfather overcome his face.

"We just filed the paperwork."

There are four categories in which people are entered into the Hall. Either you get in as a player, a coach, a referee or a contributor.

The criterion to be elected into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame as a contributor is as follows: *A person is eligible for enshrinement as a contributor at any time for significant contributions to the game of basketball. What constitutes a "significant contribution" shall be determined by the BHOFF (Basketball Hall of Fame), its Screening Committee(s) or Honors Committee(s).*

In the contributors category there are 50 recognized individuals. People like Luther Gulick, who helped convince Dr. Naismith to create an indoor game as offseason training, which would evolve into the game of basketball; Charles Taylor, founder of Converse All-Stars; Sandra Bernison

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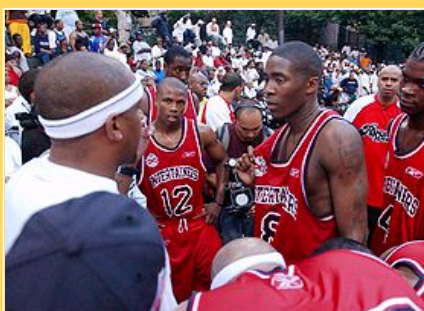
Abbott, the "mother of women's basketball" who was a director of physical education at Smith College in Northampton, Mass.; Indiana high school basketball coach Clifford Wells; Frank "Pop" Morganwreck, a business leader and visionary; Chick Hearn, the LA Lakers announcer; Cliff Fagan, executive secretary of the WIAA; Oswald Tower, editor of the original official rule guide; Lynn St. John, Ohio State athletic director and NCAA rules committee chairman – all of them, in some specific, non-overt way, contributed to the game of basketball. All of them, as Chris Rucker puts it, have been "formally recognized."

The range of their contributions stretches from one end of the basketball spectrum to LA. All to some degree helped shape the game, helped build it to what it's become, and were responsible for establishing a heritage that soon became a culture, that soon became a path to a life out of the ghetto.

"I'm not trying to hate on anybody," Dexter says in his office, in response to those already enshrined. "But if a high school coach from Kentucky can get in ..."

It's been 41 years since Holcombe Rucker died. And his contribution to the game is not so much what he did while he was alive, but what he left once he was no longer here.

The park that is named after him is, without question, the most "significant" park in the history of basketball. Its games and tournament have single-handedly shaped an entire culture of basketball, one that doesn't rely on an NBA paycheck to validate greatness.



AP Photo/Frank Franklin II

How 'bout that Rucker squad -- Sebastian Telfair, Jamal Crawford and Smush Parker.

The Black Fives (the original Negro basketball leagues), the Harlem Rens (the original Harlem Globetrotters), players from Texas

Western University, Earl Manigault, Joe Hammond, Fly Williams, Hawthorne Wingo, Connie Hawkins, Julius Erving, Charlie Scott, Junie Saunders, Adrian Walton, Corey Williams, Rafer Alston – all at one point called that park home, all were given a chance to "develop" their games and develop themselves as men on Rucker's concrete.

"You can look at the players that have come through there to play," Dexter continues. "Wilt Chamberlain, Bill Bradley, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, etc. They all came to the Rucker to play, some of them felt that the comp at Rucker was better [than in the NBA]. If the Hall of Fame is to tell the whole story of the game, how can they not have this represented?"

Nowadays, Kobe Bryant comes to play there, Ron Artest is a regular, Vince Carter has shot commercials there. Rod Strickland, Mark Jackson, Kenny Anderson, Pearl Washington – every great NYC point guard had part of their legacy built there. Jerry Stackhouse has his own personal "Joe Hammond story" about one of his visits. Eddy Curry and Jamal Crawford were teammates there before they were with the Knicks (they balled on the same tournament squad for a few years while they were teammates with the Bulls). Stephon Marbury and Sebastian Telfair are considered gods up there.

But it's not necessarily the names that make what Mr. Rucker started so significant. It's the worldwide reverence that has been sustained over the years – how even those who play the game at the highest level feel that their game, or their journey through the game of basketball, cannot be complete – fully tested or solidified – until they've visited Harlem and played at Rucker Park.

Making this situation really no different than Adolph Rupp's or Dean Smith's. Those two have arenas and domes named after them at the universities at which they made their greatest contributions. The only difference is that Holcombe didn't coach as long as they did. But his impact on the players that played for him and those that played on his court is equal to the impact of Rupp and Smith on those that played for them and on their courts after they were no longer there.

The span of years that this covers is unreal. Sixty years and still relevant. Still playing host to the best summer tournament in the country (Entertainers Basketball Classic), still where pros come to get their game right, still where unknowns come to get a rep, still where And 1 built its brand, still where (for the first time ever this past September) the top 24 high school players in the country came to play against each other (Elite 24), still where the best basketball outside of the NBA and NCAA Tournament is played.

Still Rucker.

To many, playing there is more important than playing inside Madison Square Garden.

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"He organized the first outdoor basketball tournament," Ernie Morris tells me. "1946! All of this summer basketball you see – he started it! All these inner-city games – he started it! All of this AAU, teams from different cities playing against each other – he started it!"

And Ernie Morris would know. Because he was one of the players who played for Holcombe Rucker; he was coached by the man, taught by him. "Mr. Rucker was the greatest man in my life,"

the recognized first disciple of Holcombe Rucker says over the phone. "He sent me to school [college] as well as many other kids in that neighborhood.

"He introduced us to players that we thought were myths. Sonny Hill in Philadelphia, Guy Rogers. We heard the stories about what they were doing on the basketball court and we thought they were myths. But Mr. Rucker made it possible for us to play against them, he found a way to put us against the best players from around the country and also have them come to Harlem to play against us."

And through his endeavors and the money he earned as a New York City Parks and Rec worker he found a way to use the game of basketball to make the kids in Harlem see the world, and he gave the world a reason to come see Harlem. He sent more than 300 kids to one prep institute alone.

"He sacrificed his life for this game and this park," Chris says. "He sacrificed his family time to raise other people's kids in that park."

Julius Erving, who played for many years at Rucker (Rucker name "The Claw") laminates Chris' statement. "[Holcombe] was a community servant, an educator, a visionary. He was instrumental in providing hope to those of us who really didn't have much hope. For so many kids he was able to take the skills they were blessed with, the skills he was able to help them develop in basketball, and provide them with a better life."

And concerning the Hall of Fame and the contributors who are already enshrined, Erving (who is a member) said the following about Mr. Rucker:

"He has very few peers [that are already in as contributors] and that is reflected by the ball players who graced Rucker Park."

And so it will go on.

I'm told that 30 years ago, Bob McCollum, basketball legend, sent in the paperwork for Holcombe Rucker to be considered for the Hall of Fame. No one really followed up after the submission and no serious consideration was given to it.

But this time, that won't happen. Chris and Dexter are prepared to do everything, from "Holcombe To The Hall" T-shirts to video testimonials.

"We have to take a different angle of how we apply," Chris says. "Writing essays and providing supporting materials, including footage and photos ..."



AP Photo/David Zalumbowski

Rafer "Skip To My Lou" Alston was a Rucker legend before becoming an NBA pro.

"But the problem is," Dexter cuts in, "we don't have a lot of material. People don't understand, back in the day, they were so used to seeing Julius Erving up at Rucker playing for the Westsiders, Chamberlain, Tiny, Pee Wee Kirkland, it was no big deal. They never took pictures or anything because this was a normal occurrence up at Rucker. It happened every week!"

Chris then ignites the honesty. The honesty that might hurt them in the end.

"Does it irritate me to have to go through all of this to prove that my grandfather deserves to be in the Hall? Yes, to a certain degree. And I don't want to disrespect the panel, but a lot of them maybe have never been to Harlem."

And if you walk through Harlem, you feel it. You feel that void, that void of validation. Not that it's the main topic of conversation in the bodegas, the restaurants, the B train stop and the old polo grounds that surround the Park. But it's there – the fact that there's not a plaque to symbolize what the Park is, and what the man it's named after meant to the game of basketball.

Alston ("Skip To My Lou"), the Houston Rockets point guard who is partially responsible for introducing a whole new generation to Rucker by the work he put in on the courts at 155th as a 14-year old – embarrassing pros, then practically making the NBA as a streetball legend whose rep was built solely at Rucker – perhaps says it best when asked about Mr. Rucker and the push to get him in the Hall of Fame.

"That's a tough question," Alston says. "I think he should be a force to reckon with. I think everyone should be familiar with who he is and what he's done for the game of basketball. A lot of people in New York then and now, a lot of people throughout the United States, a lot of them are wanting to spend their summers playing in the Rucker League and in the tournament."

It's just amazing.

Basketball players all over the world know the Rucker name. They come to Rucker Park and play there because Holcombe Rucker created a climate and culture where the best in the world feel like they must come to prove their worth and pay homage at the same time.

They've been coming for 60 years.

If that isn't enough of a "significant contribution" to get recognized in the game's final resting place, then what is?

You just hope that certain people will make a trip up to Harlem so that they can truly understand the significance of that sort of impact.

*Scoop Jackson is a national columnist for Page 2 and a contributor to ESPN The Magazine. He appears regularly on "Quite Frankly" and other ESPN shows. He resides in Chicago. Sound off to Scoop and Page 2 [here](#).*

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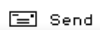
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