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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

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](#).

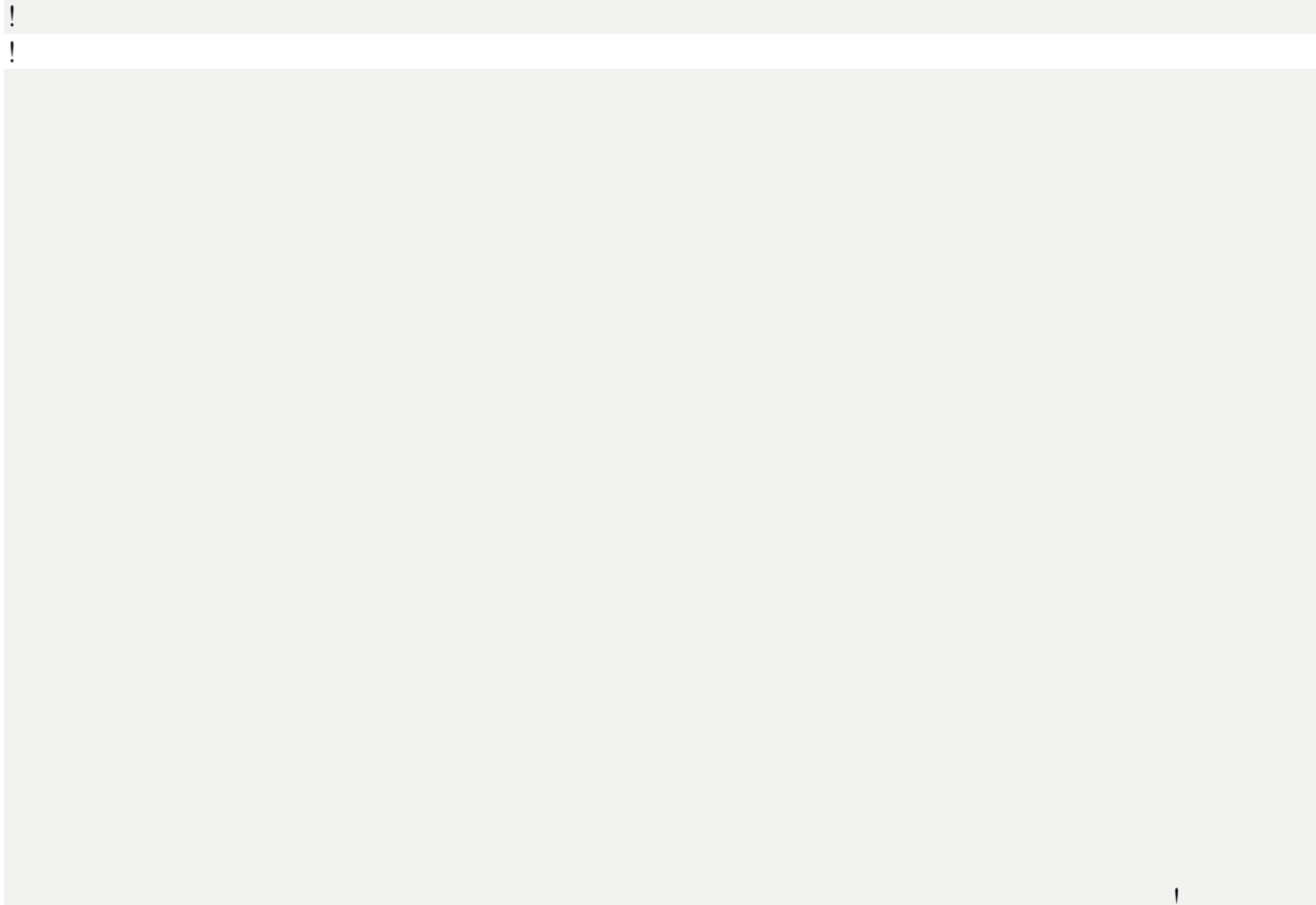
And a 16-year-old named Connie Hawkins.

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







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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

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."

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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."