

Horseshoe pit helps build Pigtown's neighborhood spirit

Horseshoes tournament in Pigtown celebrates the closeness of a neighborhood

By Jonathan Pitts, The Baltimore Sun

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Opening match

(Baltimore Sun photo by Kim Hairston / June 25, 2011)

Tony Ashton, Kingston, pitches a horseshoe in the opening match of the 1st Annual Horseshoe Tournament.

It started about 30 years ago — no one seems to recall the exact date — when three men who'd grown up together in Pigtown took a vacant lot at the corner of Ward and Bayard streets, sank two metal pegs into the ground and started tossing horseshoes back and forth. None of the three — not Roy Whitney, not his cousin Emory Green, not Emory's little brother, Leon — had a clue they were founding a tradition.

"We started playing for the fun of it, then word got around, people started coming from other neighborhoods, and it kept on growing," Leon Green, 62, said Saturday afternoon as rhythm and blues music, the smell of burgers on barbecues and the "clink" of horseshoes filled the air at the First Annual Horseshoe Tournament at the Pit In Pigtown.

Residents in the tightly knit community said they threw the pitchoff-cum-block party to celebrate the important role the site has come to play in stabilizing the neighborhood — and the fact that it is now positioned to continue in that role for years to come.

Last year, the City of Baltimore and a local nonprofit, Baltimore Green Space, teamed up to buy the 12-by-60-foot lot from a developer who was planning to build a rowhouse there. It was an excellent move, said William "Bus" Chambers, 83, a lifelong Pigtown resident, as he watched the action.

"I grew up here, so I remember this all like it was yesterday," said Chambers, known to many in the neighborhood as "the Mayor." "There used to be a stag bar on that site. After it burned down in a terrible fire, it was just a vacant lot for years.

"Once the horseshoes started, it became a neighborhood hangout, a place for men to hear music, talk to each other, have a few beers and pitch horseshoes. The drug dealers always steered clear of [the lot]. They've respected us and stayed away from this spot."

Charlotte Marshall, another lifelong resident who owns a day care facility across the street, agreed. "When they started playing here, people saw it happening, and they came out of their houses, too. Everyone set up barbecues, had cookouts," said Marshall, who was helping grill hot dogs and burgers at the event, which drew more than 150 people.

Informal games have been frequent, rain or shine, especially on weekends, she said, showing the children in the neighborhood as well as people from other parts of the city something she calls crucial: "We care about this neighborhood and about each other," Marshall said.

That was certainly the feeling Saturday — the first time the site has ever sponsored a formal competition. Players began showing up for the tournament two hours before it started, digging in the sand pits that surround the metal stakes.

Burly Charles Walker, 69, lives across town, but he has been coming to the Pigtown pit regularly for more than 20 years, schmoozing with the locals and sharpening his game. He and his partner for the day, Harvey Battle, 61, tossed a few horseshoes back and forth, clanking the metal stakes.

Walker bent over with a wire contraption to snatch up his partner's latest toss. "It's my old-man stick," he said with a booming laugh.

Fifteen years ago, a volunteer commemorated the horseshoe tossing by painting a mural on the side of the building abutting the site. One of Saturday's competitors, Tony Ashton, was pitching that day. So was Harold Harrod, who would have been competing Saturday but for a shoulder injury, and Emory Green, now deceased. The painter memorialized all three on the wall.

"Look at me. I'm sitting there in that chair, waiting to play the winner," Ashton says, laughing. "Maybe I'll stand up today."

A star in local competitions, Ashton and his partner, Ernie Jones, dispatch two other two-man teams in early rounds. "My wife says, Don't bring home any more trophies!" he said, laughing. "If I win one today, I'll give it to the neighbors here. They deserve it."

The jollity mixed with the seriousness of competition. Randy Booth, who has lived in Pigtown for 52 of his 53 years, said a key to the game is being able to develop a simple motion and repeat it again and again. "Trust me, it takes years," he said.

So does developing a strong neighborhood. Leon Green and his partner, Whitney, were ousted early in the tournament, but stood by happily sipping a beer. He seemed to be savoring a bigger victory.

"We have a good time here. Horseshoes is about getting together and talking and enjoying yourself. You don't even have to be that good. It's all for fun. It's the way we're raised here in Pigtown," he said.

Community Law Center worked with Baltimore Green Space to develop the procedures they use to acquire property.