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J.A. ADANDE

Nowadays, the Streets Are Paved With Gold

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Street basketball has moved right past the mainstream. It's up in the jet stream.

Call it street in name only. These days that trash-talkin', rim-rockin', shake-and-bake style of hoops can be found in giant arenas, at large estates and on MTV.

And in the ultimate proof of the game's growing clout, it even caused one bride-to-be to change her wedding-day plans.

That explains why those who head down to the Nike "Battlegrounds" one-on-one competition at the Venice Beach courts this evening might find a woman in her bridal gown.

How'd we get here? Time to rewind. Two shoe company promotions swept street ball into pop culture. There were the And 1 "Mix Tapes" — highlights of street games set to a hip-hop soundtrack and distributed at shoe stores. And the Nike "Freestyle" commercials from 2001, which seamlessly blended NBA players and street ballers to the sound of bouncing basketballs and squeaking sneakers. Ad Age dubbed it the best commercial of 2001, calling it "so cool, something like Twyla Tharp meets the Harlem Globetrotters."

The Mix Tapes launched a tour, which launched a documentary-style "Streetball" show on ESPN. (The new season begins July 8.) The tour has gone from parks and playgrounds to venues such as the Sports Arena and the American Airlines Center in Dallas. Tickets cost up to \$50 to see street stars like "Sik Wit It" and "1/2 Man, 1/2 Amazing" do their thing, with musical performances by Nate Dogg and David Banner.

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Last Sunday MTV launched "Who's Got Game?", a weekly sort of hoops "Survivor" reality series in which 12 players compete for a \$100,000 prize under the watchful eyes of Magic Johnson.

"Now, more than ever, these sports are more entertainment than actual sports in a lot of ways," R&B singer Brian McKnight said. "It used to be athletes were just athletes. Now, everybody's multimedia. It's great, but at the same time, it may be taking away from the game. You've never seen it exposed like this. This is something."

McKnight was standing on the *outdoor* marble floors of the Bernini Mansion in Bel-Air last week. The home bearing the name of the fashion empire hosted preliminary competition for the Battlegrounds, a four-city one-on-one tournament that will culminate in a final round in New York on Aug. 9 to determine the "King of Kings."

Guests at the invitation-only event strolled down a winding, red-carpeted driveway, past the decorative pool, paused to grab hot and cold appetizers under a small arcade, then sat in theater seats or leather couches to watch the basketball players go at it in steel cages erected on the tennis courts. Deejays spun records while bursts of flame shot into the air to accent particularly good plays.

The 32 competitors were locals who played high school and/or college ball in Southern California and are now trying to catch on. Guys like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar Jr., the son of the former NBA great who plays wherever he can, here or abroad.

"I've been in some weird situations," Abdul-Jabbar said. "I've had to step off the plane and go play in Germany, where I didn't understand what anybody was saying. I've been down in Panama, where they had people beating on the drums the whole game. But nothing like this. It's like a party, and you've got to get down in the middle of the club and start showing them your mid-range game."

It's a far cry from the streets. Or even the site of last year's competition, at the old gas company on Rose Avenue in Venice.

"We wanted to figure out a way to create a buzz for [today] within the basketball community," said Drew Greer, the L.A. brand manager for Nike. "What better way than to do it in that sort of setting?"

"Last year we did it in a raw space. This year we wanted to take it up a notch and do it in Bel-Air."

The games had scoreboards and a shot clock. There were referees, although they didn't call too many fouls. And there was plenty of harm, despite the posh environment.

"I've never played in anything this physical," said Matt Garrison, one of the eight finalists.

"This is rougher than park ball," said Jair Fray, another finalist.

"I would challenge anybody in park ball to play in something like this," Garrison said.

The players say that the street never leaves a player.

Even in the NBA?

"You didn't watch the playoffs?" said Boston Celtic guard Paul Pierce.

In one of the most celebrated moves of the postseason, Pierce gave Al Harrington of the Indiana Pacers a steady stream of trash talk as the clock wound down in the third quarter of Game 4 in their opening-round series, then busted a jumper in Harrington's face.

"When the juices are flowing, that's how it is," Pierce said. "It's like growing up, playing on the playground. It really didn't feel like a playoff game. It felt like you were playing one on one on the street."

On the playground, once the game ends it's time to head to the too-hot water fountain or, at best, a bottle of Gatorade.

At the Bel-Air event, the eight players who advanced received Cristal champagne.

But there's a lot more than bottles of bub at stake today: the winner gets \$10,000, a billboard over the court, a one-year Nike apparel contract and a medallion featuring plenty of bling-bling. The national champion gets another \$25,000.

Serious stuff, which is why Matt Garrison knew he had a problem as soon as his last-second shot bounced in to complete a comeback and send him on to today's final round.

This happens to be his wedding day, with more than 300 guests from as far away as New York invited to the ceremony.

"I was excited I won," Garrison said. "Then right away I went, 'What are we going to do?' "

After discussing it with his fiancée, LaNej Tolbert, and working with the Nike folks, he'll be at the church on time for his 4:30 p.m. wedding in Burbank, then he and his bride will leave the reception early to get down to Venice Beach for his game, scheduled slightly before 9.

"We're going to get married," Garrison said. "That's the most sacred moment of our life. We don't want to spoil that. The reception's just a party to celebrate our marriage. If we have to sacrifice a couple of hours out of our party, that's OK."

They'd already rearranged their honeymoon, canceling a trip to Bermuda to stay in-state so Garrison could be ready to try out for summer league teams. Tolbert is used to sacrificing for basketball; Garrison has spent at least seven months playing in Australia in each of the last four years while she stayed in California to attend Biola University.

"This is not just something he does for fun," Tolbert said. "This is his livelihood. This is how he's going to make money to take care of us."

So she's ready to root him on, gown and all. She figures that with the photographs, cake-cutting and speeches she won't have time to change before they leave for Venice.

"I only get to wear this dress once in my life," she said. "People say, 'What if it gets dirty?' I don't mind. It should be fun."

The next step, of course, would be to hold the tournament *before* the wedding at the church. After all, if street ball can go to a mansion, is any place off limits?

"It ain't the 'hood," NBA star Gary Payton said, looking around at the Bel-Air estate. "But this is the 2000s."

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