

Rucker Park goes Hollywood

A FORGOTTEN NEW YORK CITY hero is about to get his due on the big screen.

Maloo Productions, the film and TV company created by the family that owns the Sacramento Kings, is in the early planning stages on a movie about Holcombe Rucker, the Harlem coach who created the playground hoops tournament that changed basketball history and deeply influenced American culture.

"Holcombe Rucker's story will show where basketball came from — the streets," says Gavin Maloo. "It's a story that needs to be told."

In 1946, Rucker, a recreational director with the city parks department and a junior high teacher, created a basketball tournament to keep local kids off the streets and out of trouble. Rucker stressed discipline and hard work; troublemakers and kids who didn't apply themselves in school weren't allowed to play.

The local politicians Rucker approached for funding turned him down, but John "Twenty Grand" Hunter, a gambler with deep pockets, provided the money for uniforms, sneakers and other gear. Hunter's investment and Rucker's support went a long way: Thousands of Rucker kids went on to become lawyers, doctors, educators, activists and businessmen, the backbone of New York's African-American community.

The Maloo film won't be Rucker's first movie appearance. Forest Whitaker played Rucker in HBO's "Rebound: The Legend of Earl 'The Goat' Manigault." But Chris Rucker, Holcombe's grandson, says his

family was disappointed with the HBO flick.

"They made it look as if all he ever did was sweep the park," says Rucker, who now runs his own tournament at Rucker Park and has produced a Rucker clothing line with jersey manufacturer Stall & Dean. "He used basketball as a vehicle to improve lives."

In 1950, Rucker established a pro division that went on to teach the NBA a thing or two. At Rucker Park, the best players played very differently than the NBA's staid, crew-cut, set-shot crew: The thunderous dunks and behind-the-back passes that thrill NBA crowds today have their roots at Rucker Park.

Holcombe Rucker died from cancer in 1965 at age 38, but the tournament and its influence continued on. The fashion, the trash talk and the urban attitude that came out of Rucker Park still inspires rappers, writers and artists; And1, Nike, Tommy Hilfiger and other companies use street ball in their marketing campaigns.

Maloo Productions hope to release the film in 2007. "We want to make sure this story is told the right way," says president Andrew Jameson. "I'm surprised his story hasn't already been told."

The Score
hears...