

Appeared on At The Yard website-After far more years than I care to admit, I love watching the game-and 60-somethings still play, so who knows?

When I Think Of Baseball

I think of ten year olds playing pick-up games on the shabby playgrounds of the wrong side of the tracks, Fremont, Nebraska, in the late 1950's. As few as five players per side, as many as ten on each team. Games that began in the dewy coolness of early morning, broke for lunch, and ended in the heat of the afternoon sun. Worn out bicycles in disarray around a broken backstop and run down bleachers. Wooden bats, often broken-nailed together, bound with tape. Foul lines marked in the dust with the knob of a bat. Dirt infields, weed outfields, only an occasional clump of grass. No catchers, so no base stealing. A left field fence of barbed wire-requiring a brave soul to retrieve home runs, hurdling the fence, racing through a herd of grazing cows to the ball, and retreating to safety in the nick of time. This wasn't Little League. This was not a select team touring the region's cities. Nothing organized. Just as pure baseball as baseball can be, kids playing for the love of the game. NO adults.

I think of learning to love words devouring The Sporting News. Back when it looked like a baseball paper, smelled like a baseball paper, and read like a baseball paper. Hours spent eying dispatches from exotic places like Toledo, Minneapolis, Durham, Wichita, and Shreveport. Taking to heart the exploits of the super heroes of the Texas, Carolina, and Sally Leagues. Each seemed to exist in magical kingdoms far, far away from Nebraska. Chicago or Los Angeles or San Francisco? Places almost impossible for a ten year old to comprehend.

I contemplate my fixation with numbers beginning in the most unlikely of sources, the Kessler Baseball Guide. Only 30 or so pages, a distilled version of contemporary baseball almanacs packed with information the ten year old boy I used to be found unforgettable and irresistible. Need the seating of Crosley Field in Cincinnati? There. Same with the dimensions of Fenway Park and Yankee Stadium. The batting average of Luis Aparicio of the White Sox, and Dodger Don Drysdale's win-loss record were easily found. Not once did I ever think of whiskey perusing this manual, yet it most definitely formed the foundation of my life long love of numbers, unquestionably an addiction. For 38 years I have earned a living from numbers, for over 50 their realness has fascinated me.

I remember plunking down my nickel a day allowance to buy five Topps baseball cards. Five cards, five sticks of bubble gum. I can still smell the sweet, rubbery, gummy smell of those cards. And, believe that one of the great unanswered questions of our time is how I could buy five such cards and two might be Camilo Pascual's, but if I bought one hundred cards none would be a Willie Mays. I have forgiven my mother for throwing away my baseball cards. She denied doing so anyway, plus, how many kids ever had what collectors call a "mint condition" card? Mine were looked at, fingered up-and full of dust, the kind of dust that only baseball cards in a shoe box under a bed could acquire. Plus, most Camilo Pascual and Pedro Ramos cards ended up attached to the spokes of my bike by a clothes pin. A lovely racket indeed. I could never forget Willie Mays, but from time to time I do wonder about what happened to Camilo Pascual or Pedro Ramos.

And not just Pascual or Ramos. What became of Pirate's greats Vern Law, Harvey Haddix, Vinegar Bend Mizell, Smoky Burgess, Bill Mazerowski, and Bob Skinner. So many heroes. Where have you gone Joe Adcock, "a nation turns its lonely eyes to you," doesn't sound right. But, where have you gone Joe Adcock? And Walt Moryn? Turk Lown? Early Wynn? Norm Siebern? Bob Buhl? Moe Drabowsky? And Roy Sievers too? Someone needs to write a book about where they have gone. I would buy it.

I can smell the leather of a baseball mitt, still. I never had a new mitt, but even used mitts had the smell only a baseball glove can have. I loved the feeling of a ball glove on my left hand. Playing catch. I would argue that a more perfect activity has never been devised. Catch with your father. Or your son. Or a brother. Or a friend. Perfect. I loved playing catch with my son, and feel a major lump in my throat imagining a tiny voice saying one day "play catch with me Grandpa."

I remember the occasions no other human being was available for catch. The family garage and a hard rubber ball eliminated that problem. I didn't realize the laws of physics were at play, I just knew the harder I threw the ball at the garage, the faster it would return. Of course even rubber balls thrown hard enough can crack the sturdiest of woods. Front and back, our garage was a maze of painted over broken boards. Yes, this upset my father. A lot. Which was icing on a chocolate cake for me.

Of course, snagging a grounder, or a hot shot off someone's bat was great fun. Fly balls were never easy for me, and

one floating into my glove was a cause for celebration by my coach and parents. That it didn't hit me in the head, or fall just beyond my outstretched glove was cause for great relief on my part.

After a lifetime of loving this young boys game, I finally realize baseball is a game of failure. The greatest hitters in the game make outs 325 times over a season with 500 at bats. If my math is correct, that is a .350 average, and major leaguers who hit .350 make around \$5,000,000 a year. Or more. Those all-stars occasionally swing at a bad pitch. Make an error. Miss a sign. Yet they are heroes to fans around the world despite their failures. So, if a 10 year old strikes out, boots a ground ball, drops a pop fly, it is not the end of the world. If only I had realized this at age 10, instead of age 50. Or better yet, if someone had told me it was OK to fail, I wouldn't have cried after a bitter loss, carrying the weight of the loss solely on my shoulders, heck, carrying the weight of the world on those skinny shoulders for a game my team lost in the Fremont YMCA Cookie League. It is a team game, the team loses. No one play causes a loss-of course, tell that to Bill Buckner.

I remember West Coast swings by the Cubs and Cardinals meant late night Midwest radio broadcasts. In bed, lights out, my head covered to keep this potential felony from my mother, my transistor radio on and earphone plugged in, I listened to the Jacks-Buck and Brickhouse, and lots of AM static. Great artists, those Jacks of the broadcast trade, their palettes simple words.

I remember black and white TV's, and the Game of The Week with Dizzy Dean-no color, no cable, no ESPN, no HDTV, no seven nights of baseball a week. The All-Star game meant something, and was played in the day. So were World Series games. I don't remember Bobby Thompson's 'shot hear round the world,' but I do remember Bill Mazeroski's to beat the Yankees, making me a Pittsburgh Pirate fan for years.

Thinking of baseball, I question how much longer this country can continue to ignore its true pandemic. NOT bird flu. I trust minds greater than mine will save us from this malaise. No, this dread disease has been around for ages. I for one suffered horribly from this malady in the summer of 1963. Like so many before-and since, I was afflicted with curve-itis, the inability to hit a curve. This disease effects mostly 12 and 13 year old boys, and the end result is the destruction of childhood dreams of a major league career. There is no known cure for this dread condition and no ongoing research, either. For shame America.

I think of I umpiring and keeping score at YMCA youth league games for \$4.00 per game. It was 1965, and one game bought one Beatles or Beach Boy LP. Or four 45's. Think of all the incredible music produced in 1965. And thanks to baseball, I have a great record library. Of scratched highly used stereo records. Meaning I can also credit baseball for at least a portion of my hearing loss-listening to all those records, my head between both speakers, the volume turned as high as it would go-11 I think.

And I think of my Dad taking my brothers and me to Omaha Cardinals or Omaha Dodgers games. A once or twice a year expedition. A trip to the city wasn't quite the undertaking it was back in the 1860's, but in the early 1960's it was still a big event. \$1.50 got you into the game. For some reason I always associate popcorn and Coca-Cola with baseball. Much more than hot dogs. And never, ever, did I eat cracker jacks at a ball game. Peanuts, yeah, but they were sort of messy.

I think of taking my son to see the Omaha Royals. Box seats, and a little boy thrilled with someone's autograph. Of course you can't be a fan in Nebraska without thinking College World Series. I am not into all the hoopla that surrounds the event. But an afternoon at a CWS game instead of work, is closer to heaven than Iowa.

I think of taking my grandson to see his first baseball game-well, whenever I have a grandson(or granddaughter) that is. Hint-I am not getting any younger Matt and Steph. And even now I will probably require chiropractic care after playing catch with the youngster. Not that that will stop me for a moment.

I think of watching 'Field of Dreams' for the very first time in an Omaha theater, alone, on a summer afternoon. And I mean alone-there was no one else in the auditorium. So was I to receive a message that day. If I built it, who would come? I probably missed the message, though after reading more about Shoeless Joe Jackson, he was most definitely screwed by baseball powers, and deserves a spot in the Hall of Fame.

I also loved the Kevin Costner movie 'Bull Durham,' and wonder just how many Crash Davis clones have played the game. Hanging on with all their strength and courage for one more day in the sun. Playing professional baseball, still dreaming little boy dreams of making the show.

I think of a long lost APBA baseball game, my birthday present

in 1962. The game was based on the 1961 season major league season-Mantle/Maris, 61 home runs. Nights, rainy days, and winters I played the games with dice, card sets, and strategy boards. I learned to keep score playing this game. I remember wanting always to shaft the New York Yankees, but the dice simply wouldn't let that happen. Damn Yankees was more than a Broadway musical to me. Hour after hour, game after game, one could play an entire season of APBA, and the results would be remarkably close to the real stats of the real players. And this was pre-computer. You can still play APBA with dice, but there is now a Windows version, of course, with disks for most seasons. How tempting it is to buy the game and the 1961 disk, and replay my youth.

Replaying my youth. So very tempting. Never swinging at a bad pitch. Always making the right play. Choosing the other fork in the road. No might have beens. Replaying my youth. What wondrous thoughts, thinking of baseball.