

Baseball

This last Saturday, Anne and I went to a ballgame, Oakland versus Chicago. It was a perfect day for baseball: mild, sunny weather in the 70's, a mellow crowd, and a topnotch 3-2 game with Oakland winning. Good seats, great pitching, unbelievable defensive plays, timely hits, and the 33rd save by Dennis Eckersley. Major league players have a knack for making the game look so easy that it isn't long before you expect the near-impossible.

I could tell Anne enjoyed it, too. And not just the game itself, but the modern-day stadium with its music, instant replays, scoreboards keeping track of other games and current batter statistics, best plays of the week, candid camera shots, dot racing, the public address announcer, and baseball food – hot pretzels, popcorn, sodas, and ice cream, all consumed within the space of three and a half hours – kept her attention from wandering. I enjoyed it also, even though the seats were more uncomfortable after the fifth inning than I had remembered, and I was a little rusty picking up on some of the nuances of the game. We had a good time, just the two of us.

Baseball seems more normal than other major American sports. Basketball is played by tall, giant-sized players who look normal enough 50 rows from the court, but when you see them up close, they seem almost freakish looking. Football is played by oversized hulking creatures dressed up as uniformed gladiators. In contrast, baseball players look like regular people. And when you meet them in person, without their uniform, they could be mistaken for one of your family members. Some are slight, some short, some tall, some overweight, some slow; and yet all have developed skills of throwing, hitting, and fielding that can hardly be described. Some players can play for 20 years or more. Baseball strikes me as a game that mirrors that ideal melting pot of America: all races and all languages.

Baseball has human proportions. Sitting in the stands, you know very well that you don't have the skills necessary to play professional ball, but even so, all the game amounts to is a stick and a ball – swinging a stick to hit a ball, catching the ball, and throwing it back. These are elements of the game that most of us enjoyed early in our elementary school years. It doesn't take much of a leap to believe that I could play in the game today, if I had to.

And the fans at the game can be worth the price of admission. We arrived early enough to see the White Sox take batting practice, and since the A's were last place in the league standings, the crowd turnout was low. Sitting on our right was a young man, perhaps this or that side of 30, wearing a Boston Red Sox uniform shirt. He struck me as something of an overweight nerd. Computers, I would have bet. He was sitting with a buddy, perhaps a classmate from back East. But he knew his baseball. The scoreboard told him about the rain-delayed game between his beloved Red Sox and the Yankees. He knew who would be pitching, because their numbers showed on the board. He knew most of the White Sox players coming up to the batting cage to take their cuts, even though their numbers were not visible under their warm-up jackets. He knew the batting averages, win and loss records, and ERA percentages of different major league players. He also knew the title, the lead singer, and sometimes the guitarist of every song that blared out from the centerfield tower speakers. And I'm sure that one of the most enjoyable parts of the day's game for this transplanted BoSox fan, in addition to his two pizzas and beers and a malt, was meeting some people from Boston during his smoking break near the Interactive Network Booth of the Coliseum.

Also among the fans was the black mother behind us with her two young, well-mannered sons who came to the game to eat their picnic dinner. Fried chicken, sodas, and snacks, but mom did not miss a play. And the young couple sitting at the end of the aisle did not say a word or show any emotion during the entire game but still seemed to enjoy each other's company as they watched the game unfold. Nice day.

My father loved baseball, too, but it was a bittersweet experience for me. One of my earliest childhood mental pictures is related to my dad and baseball. I have a recollection of sitting high up on the first base side of the diamond in the grandstand of the Colusa County Fairgrounds, and someone sitting with me is directing my attention to a man on the baseball field. It's too far away for me to recognize him, but I'm told that it's my dad. He was wearing a navy blue sport coat standing in the full sun. My dad was one of the umpires. I sometimes wonder if this recollection, which now must be 64 years old or so, can be accurate. Maybe I dreamed it and just incorporated it into my childhood experiences.

But one incident I did not dream up was watching my dad play softball at the Colusa High School ball diamond. I think my dad played for the Elks Club. During the warm-ups I noticed he didn't even have a baseball mitt, but it didn't seem to bother him at all. He caught the ball with his bare hands, and I remember him running in the outfield after a fly ball and snagging it out of the air with one hand. It was very impressive. But tragedy would come soon enough, ending my father's softball season. He was batting against a fireball softball pitcher from Maxwell, whose name might have been Sullivan. He had a windmill style of windup and delivered the ball to the batter with unbelievable speed. My father was not the kind of person who flinched, and he never backed down from anyone in his life, so he dug in at the plate, determined to hit that ball if it killed him, and I think it almost did. The ball hit my dad squarely in his genital area, and he just crumpled at the plate. There was much concern and solicitation about his condition, and he finally limped off the field to lie down in his pickup truck. I never heard a word of complaint or a groan from my father. He was an absolute stoic when it came to dismissing injury. But I don't remember him playing in the softball league after that.

During the baseball season, when my father came home from work we played catch on the front lawn. I was in the fifth or sixth grade, maybe a little older. My dad threw the ball so hard that it hurt my hands. I gamely hung in there, and sometimes I would put a handkerchief in my mitt to ease the pain. Finally, I would start to cry and ask to quit. I knew I was a failure in his eyes for quitting, but I was afraid of getting hurt. And our daily baseball exercise also included ground balls that my father would throw at me, expecting me to field them cleanly and throw the ball back. I enjoyed this exercise more than catching his pitching, because the ball didn't hurt so much. But even his ground balls were thrown with the intention of making a man out of me. They had spin on them, one time to the left, then to right, rarely straight at me. The most difficult ones, of course, were the balls he threw to create the short hop; that is, just far enough in front of me that I couldn't catch the ball on the fly and yet not short enough to create a clean bounce with which to field it. They were ugly throws, which made me flinch because I always feared the ball would bounce up and hit me in the face.

But life has a way of equaling the score. First, I became an adept baseball infielder and enjoyed the practice hours (and days) of fielding ground balls for

my high school team. I even taught one of my roommates how to pick up the rhythm of a hard-hit bouncing and twisting hardball. And then, in my senior year of high school, after I had switched my position to pitcher, I had the opportunity to pitch to my dad during one of my week-long vacations at home. I soon noticed that he couldn't catch me, and my curve ball made him flinch, but this only made him more proud of my baseball prowess. He hung in there.