

DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER

Somewhere it was written that boys must join Little League where they will learn about physical fitness and teamwork and self reliance and the other manly virtues. Introducing boys to baseball through Little League is an ideal way to develop them into young men. Little League is viewed as wholesome and American and some view baseball as nothing less than preparation for the rest of life. This benefit is now extended to little girls so that virtue no longer belongs to men alone, but the premise is the same: Baseball is good for America.

The seasonal nature of baseball and the school calendar compresses the Little League season into a few months in the spring. Everything, from organizing to training to competition and, finally, championship is jammed between Washington's Birthday and the last day of school. This is probably appropriate for nine-year olds whose concepts of time are, at best, no wider than a week or so. Entering into a Little League season with its calendar of practices and games is a long term commitment.

For the nine year old, Little League baseball is the only path to social standing and personal identity. I first learned about Little League in the Fifties when my dad helped out a friend of his with a team of boys who were a year older than I. Being too young to play, I got to be the bat boy. I got to sit in the dugout with the older boys and chew gum and spit. Our field had a real, below grade dugout with a bench and a screen and steps up to the field. Entry into the dugout was induction into a special society which had team shirts and caps and language and ritual. To me, practices and games were not athletic participation or being with my dad. Each was a social

experience, even for me, the younger, inferior bat boy. None of my classmates, except the kid who had been held back a year, was yet in Little League. Although I was not awarded a shirt bearing the name of the team and the sponsoring business, I did have an orange cap. That was OK because the wear of uniform shirts to school was forbidden. Caps were permitted, though. I wore that orange cap every day. Only Little Leaguers wore Little League caps.

On the field, or rather at the field, I was an effective bat boy. I had a several ways I arranged the bats; on the ground, leaned against the dugout wall, and hooked into the chain link fence. I would run out and retrieve the discarded bats and place them appropriately into that evening's display. I was considered a member of the team and was even included in the team photo, distinguished only by my lack of a team shirt. But I had that cap. At the end of the season, I received an enameled pin with the Little League emblem which was screwed onto the cap. The pin identified me as a veteran of one Little League season. A player's membership in Little League could be measured in the number of pins on his cap, and some eighth graders had four pins. The wear of the pins on caps was later banned as a safety hazard, thereby robbing us of our only visible symbol of service. I was sad when I had to pull three pins off my cap and bury them in my pocket.

Things changed, though, with the next school year when everyone else in my class qualified for Little League tryouts. A note went home from school and the tryout session was set for Saturday. I rode my bike to the play field, looking for baseball heaven, and I found nothing. Little League was gone. I had missed the tryouts.

Everyone else in my class was going to be in Little League except me. I pedaled home in tears. Closer examination of the note by my mother showed that I was a week early. Enthusiasm had managed to compress time and we had gotten the wrong Saturday.

On the correct Saturday, there were hundreds of nine year-olds at the field. At registration tables for each age group we submitted forms and fees and were each provided with a large card bearing a number. The cards were pinned to our shirts and we were shuttled into lines. Young players slammed fists or balls into gloves trying to get the pocket just right and mothers clustered at the edge of the crowd while disinterested siblings scampered about. Men with clipboards commanded lines of placarded boys to move to the different stations. It was thrilling just being there.

The first tryout was fielding. An older boy hit fly balls to about ten of us at a time, but somebody else always caught the ball. I couldn't catch the ball because it never came to me. The next station was batting. Each boy was given three chances to demonstrate his batting skill. Arrayed to one side was a row of men seated on lawn chairs, wearing sunglasses and holding clipboards. I watched the boys in front of me swing and sometimes connect, but the full impact of the situation did not hit me until I was at the plate myself. Suddenly, there I was, all alone. Everyone, the boys in line, the pitcher, the catcher, the fielders and, worst of all, the seated men, were all watching ME. It was terrifying. A seventh grader smiled malevolently from the mound. Then it was pitch, swing, pitch, swing, pitch, swing, next. I looked at the men on the chairs and they were writing on their clipboards. I have no recollection of any feeling of failure though. My sense of baseball then was less about catching and hitting than it was

about belonging to baseball.

A week later, boys at school began to report that they had been assigned teams and I worried that I had not heard from anyone. One evening, I received a telephone call from a man who told me that I had been selected for the Brown House Miracles. I was so excited that I didn't think to remember his name or to ask when or where I was to report for practice. My mother had to make several phone calls to reconstruct things.

I was in. I was on a team. It is said that baseball is all about coming home and when I reported my assignment to my classmates, I was home. We were now all on teams and were embarking upon great careers. Team mates wore the same caps to school and hung around together. The world was then divided between those who were on a Little League team and those who were not.

The euphoria of being on a team soon began to fade though. Just as marriage can dissolve into bills and diapers and a new job can become just another Monday, my career crashed into one harsh reality: I had no talent for baseball. It was not only that I didn't know the rules (which were never taught), but I couldn't catch, I couldn't hit and I couldn't run. At first, I attributed these shortcomings to equipment, but new shoes and a new mitt and my own bat did not compensate for being afraid of the ball and for a serious lack of athletic aptitude. I was a klutz. Since each kid was entitled to play a minimum number of innings, I was guaranteed opportunities to strike out and to spend time standing in right field waiting for fly balls. Even when a ball made it all the way out to me, I would run after it as fast as I could and throw it in the direction of home

plate. All I can remember is people yelling at me. At bat, I hit either foul balls, or, once, I was thrown out at first base, but I usually just struck out. Only in my very last game in Little League, did I actually score a run.

This lack of baseball skill resulted in an almost immediate rift between me and the more accomplished athletes. They hit regularly and they competently served as pitchers and catchers and first basemen. They could play baseball and they saw that I could not. What is more, not only did I not help win, I contributed to losing. The coaches, dads just doing the best that they could, were very patient, and I cannot recall a single critical remark from any adult. However, the sneers and insults and complaints from teammates all blend now into one bad memory.

I played in Little League for two seasons. The first season, all the fifth graders were in the same league. The next season, I was selected by the same coach for the same team along with one other sixth grader, to play with boys a year younger. The rest of my team moved up into the next higher league to compete with older boys. I was left behind; held back. Even playing with the fifth graders, I was stationed in right field and I struck out nearly every time. As I recall, I missed a lot of games that second season. I did stick around long enough to collect my pin.

That was it for sports and me. The athletes went their way and I went mine. Naturally, it did not help that I developed an asthma condition or that I was a little overweight. The next athletic competition I entered was at age 30 when I got sucked up in the running craze and did a fun run with some other cops. There were several seasons of 10Ks, but these were not really competitions and running is not a team

sport.

This early separation from the group also stunted my social development: I became a bit of a bookworm and joined other, non-athletic clubs, if I joined a club at all. I did not date in high school and I married just once. Although I have always managed to be employed by institutions, my work has been somewhat solitary in nature. The awards in my personnel folder cite to "independent action" and "initiative." Like the time I arrested that rapist when a dozen other officers were searching for him blocks away. Or when two of us commandeered a Coast Guard cutter and rammed a drug smuggler at night. One thing that made me a good Scoutmaster was not being the least bit concerned how I looked to other adults while wearing a brown uniform and relating to twelve year-olds. I couldn't teach them to bat, but I showed them how to saddle a horse and how to right a canoe.

Today I do not read the sports pages and I do not watch games on TV. The only good part about baseball on TV is holding hands with my wife, but I can't even do that for nine innings. She explains the game to me and I wonder how a girl learned all that and I did not. I think I am still afraid of the ball.

In any event, I haven't missed the athletes and I suspect that they haven't missed me either. Being unable to catch or hit meant that I could not belong to baseball, so I had to belong to myself. Although I have valued being a member of a good team, I never needed a team to do what I wanted or to succeed. I guess they were right; baseball is preparation for the rest of life.