

## The Boys of Summer

Memo to self: Next time, have more patience. Take a couple of pitches. Wait for a real good one. I had just grounded out weakly to second base with the bases loaded and two out to end the game that we lost by a meager run. Forgotten were my two clean hits that preceded this ignoble out. My mistake will haunt for the whole week until I play again.

Never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine that I'd be obsessing about a ground ball at this stage of my life. Yet here I am, playing a game that I more or less gave up thirty years ago, and having a great, if painful, time.

I had known for a couple of years about a special softball league for old guys, and this spring I decided to look it up on the internet. It took a little Googling, but I found it and signed up in March – the Eastern Mass Senior Softball League designed for men (and an occasional gal) over 55.

I had no idea what to expect, but imagined a bunch of doddering grandfatherly types. Although I was never particularly good, I figured that a spry guy who runs ten miles a week could probably hold his own with these geezers. Well, this group of old-timers was quite a surprise.

Ranging in age from 55 to 78, these boys of summer were a collection of real athletes, all whose hair had betrayed them, most with a serious knowledge of the intricacies of the game, and a few with nagging infirmities. For many, the arms and legs weren't quite what they used to be, but every one still had a good bat and a love of the camaraderie and competition. Some still ran like gazelles or had those valued soft hands or hit towering shots to the outfield, but most accepted the consequences of age and played accordingly.

Rules were designed to avoid collisions and sudden stops (sliding was verboten). Still there were injuries. One guy, who was recovering from a wrist injury, tore his knee apart shagging flies during practice and left by ambulance. Another broke his hand after being hit by a thrown ball while going into second base. There are lots of braces and supports, and ice seems to be readily available.

I, of course, was invulnerable. Never had a sports related injury and was in great shape with my weekly jogging routine. While my skills might not quite be up to snuff, I'd compensate with my superior conditioning. That mindset worked fine into the second week of practice in April when I blew a hamstring racing to first base to beat out an infield dribbler. A hamstring? I didn't even know I had one, but that sudden searing pain in the back of my leg, midstride, sure educated me fast. Yet there I was the next week, very black and blue, tenderly limping along.

The hamstring healed and I'm back up to speed, albeit with a creaky knee and an annoying groin pull that serve as constant reminders that I am indeed mortal. Worse still is the painful discovery that I can't throw overhand any more than twenty feet. This is particularly humiliating for a former little kid who used to win bets for distance throwing

against big guys. Suddenly the words tendon and rotator cuff give me both horror and a surreal identification with professional baseball players. For the first time in my life, I can hit the ball further than I can throw it.

Of course, that batting prowess is due in part to a few extra pounds and a change in bat technology since I last played. I remember hitting a ball with a good wooden “thunk” thirty years ago, but the 21<sup>st</sup> century “clang” sure makes the ball go farther.

And then there’s the glove issue. I notice my old glove, a relic dug out from under a pile of memorabilia in the basement, is about four inches shorter than the other players. So am I, but I know the glove puts me at a competitive disadvantage.

I do have one distinct (sore) leg up over the other guys. Never having been that good in the first place, my skills haven’t deteriorated all that much. I’m almost as bad as I used to be.

While some of the more serious participants travel around the state playing several times a week, I limit myself to my one weekly four hour excursion. In that time we play two seven inning games. They are highly competitive. But at the same time each player appreciates the efforts of the opposition, applauding the great plays and forgiving the errors (of which there are more than a few). We’re in this together and while winning is great, everyone seems to understand that having a good time is the key factor. And this wonderful bunch of dedicated guys play for that big hit or that great catch, or in my case, just taking an extra base. My wife calls me a macho masochist, but she doesn’t have the sweet mental picture of that solid line drive that almost split the outfielders.

Back in the days when fielder’s gloves were even smaller than mine, Thomas Wolfe wrote “You Can’t Go Home Again”. He was right, but this is as close as it gets.