

The Boys of Winter

Baseball lives in many guises. As kids, we changed the rules to fit the situation, sometimes daily. There was no Little League in the veterans' housing development where I grew up, but more than 400 families spawned enough kids to fill the brand new post war Memorial School, and provide plenty of like-minded baseball crazies.

We lived near the end of a cul-de-sac; a perfect diamond for 7 year olds. After a couple of broken windows and one injured pup, our dads forbade real baseballs. The tennis ball tourney instantly replaced hardball hell. The new little maple tree in front of the Blairs' was first base. The sewer was second, and the Heinze's driveway ramp was third. Poor Mr. Roud . . . home plate was the sidewalk square in front of his gate. Foul balls, missed pitches and errant throws to the catcher peppered his house, and made us trample his flowers. He and Mr. MacDonald next door made it clear to us that it was time to move our game to the schoolyard.

When there were only three or four of us, we played Halfball, Rollyups or Against the Steps, stepchildren of Baseball, all.

Halfball was played, logically enough, with half of a ball. A dead tennis ball, "pinkie" or pimpleball was cut in half, creating a soft rubber hemisphere that would curve, dance, dive and maybe even levitate when thrown by a skilled practitioner. We used a piece of broomstick for a bat, and I'm sure that game is responsible for the eye-hand coordination I have enjoyed all my life. A batter, a pitcher, a catcher and one or two fielders was it took to make a fine game of it.

Rollyups? I credit my little brother for that one. The batter hit the ball out of his hand to any number greater than one fielder. He could hit until a fielder rolled the ball back to him and hit the bat, which had been laid on the ground by home plate. Kind of a silly game, but it, too, was a skill improver. Sometimes the rules were modified so that the fielders could run the ball into the infield for the critical roll, in order to get the other kids a turn at bat.

As few as two boys could play a lively game of Against the Steps. The other requirement was, ahem, steps. A tennis ball, pinkie or pimpleball was thrown by the "batter" as hard as possible against the steps. The angle at which it struck the horizontal and vertical surfaces determined its unpredictable flightpath. Fielders made outs by catching the ball in the air. Grounders became singles or doubles, depending on their placement and distance. Triples and homers were determined by the length of flyballs, and whether or not they cleared some predetermined obstacle, like the curb on the other side of the street, or Tommy's sleeping dog.

Softball is a game I never played until I was 58 years old. In fact, prior to that magic age, I hadn't swung a bat or put on a glove since the summer before seventh grade, when I fell victim to my own hormones. You all know about softball, so 'nuf said. This year, Fred organized an indoor winter league, a venture that stuck me as a little weird, but absolutely

worth a try. What it is is sort of like cage football. The building is about 100 by 200 feet, with nets strung over the walls and hung from the ceiling. Home plate is in one corner. Picture that if you can. What you have is a really long left field and a really short right field. Balls hit in the air are stopped by the ceiling nets and fall to earth like a duck with a shotgun pellet in its brain. The balls are as soft as one might imagine a softball ought to be . . . sort of like a nerf ball with a fabric cover. Swing as hard as you can and it goes maybe half as far as a regulation ball would. This'll never work!

By the second week, we sort of got the hang of the physical limitations of it all. An extra infielder made circus catches of dead ducks on either side of the pitcher. Left side fielders played in nearly normal, but short, positions. The second baseman was also the right fielder (!). Teams are selected weekly in true pickup game fashion, by drawing cards from a deck; a red team and a black team, with batting order determined by the cards chosen.

This has been a great way to spend rainy, icy Wednesday mornings. I'm sure it is keeping our batting eyes sharp and fielding skills alive. The camaraderie and spirit is much the same as in our regular EMASS summer league, and the best part? It feels just like being back on the diamond behind Memorial School swinging at half a pinkie or rolling a tennis ball at a bat on the ground, hoping to earn my next turn at bat.

Spring training has just begun; Manny has reported on time, Curt's shoulder is blown out and Jacoby is challenging Coco for the center field job. That means that soon winter will end and practice will begin for the Grey Sox, Extra Innings and Boys of Summer. Beware, EMASS, there will be about 20 winter-weary veterans arriving at camp with sharper batting eyes, well broken-in gloves and a couple of us with the new-found ability to play caroms off of ceilings!

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