

## LITTLE LEAGUE

I told son Tom last Saturday at granddaughter Anna's volleyball game that, triggered by seeing a rolling cart used for ferrying volleyballs around, I thought that I would write about the bat box we used to tote around our bats the first year I played Little League baseball at age 11 for Amity Presbyterian Church's inaugural team, coached by its new pastor, Rev. Colon (I kid you not). During this past week, as I tried to reconstruct the timeline, I couldn't remember whether I was in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade at Oakhurst or the 6<sup>th</sup> at Idlewild when I began playing, so I called brother Bill (4 years older) for help but he couldn't even remember where he went to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Some help he was. I called Bill rather than brother Harry (2 years younger) because I figured he was "too little in the britch(es)" (one of my older Kiser cousins' favorite expressions in explaining why I shouldn't be allowed to do certain things or receive answers to certain questions, a phrase that still sticks in my craw, but which only stimulated my interest in the subject I was asking about or the activity I was begging to participate in, thus causing me to barrage them with more questions or pester them to let me participate, and which, on reflection, I should probably be grateful for as I'm sure it helped spur my intellectual curiosity, such as it is, and feed my competitiveness, which traits, I suppose, have been more blessings than curses over the many years) in those days to be of much help. All of which reminds me, and I hope you, that time, "like an ever rolling stream, bares all its sons (but first their memories) away" so we should say and write those things we'd like others to know about us and what we think while memory and health still permit.

I've written before a little about growing up in a boy's paradise on Sharon Amity Rd, lucky to have an older brother who would let me tag along to watch and eventually play baseball with his buddies in the neighborhood, even if they did get to take my last strike, a real incentive to hit one of the first two, which led to my tendency to swing at the first pitch so as not to get behind in the count. Tommy Hicks, a year or two older than Bill, was the catcher. He even had a catcher's mitt. One day I asked him to let me "burn" a couple of pitches in to him, so he said sure and took off his mitt and caught them bare handed. The only thing that burned was my temper, which got hotter with every pitch.

We would usually get one new baseball a year and when the seams would start to unravel, we would stitch it back up with the curved needle Dad had pilfered from his WWII stint as a storekeeper in the Navy. Actually, he brought back a lot of cool stuff: spools of small gauge wire (very handy before twist ties, plastic cinches and duct tape, though I think there was a roll of one of its early iterations), a soldering iron and rolls of solder, ammo boxes, a bosun's pipe, and most excitingly, some artillery shells 12-14" long, a veritable treasure trove of goodies. And when the ball's cover completely disintegrated, we would still play with it, sometimes wrapping it with tape to keep it from coming unwound. When we played in the front yard, we spent a lot of time looking for a passed or foul ball in the grown up lot between our house and the Flatts. That job was usually assigned to me, as in, as you would say to your dog, "Tommy, go find the ball". I guess that's why I enjoy finding lost balls at the golf course; I count it a good round if I've found several nice balls, regardless of my score. And we were bad about leaving the ball out in the elements and it getting waterlogged, so once we bought a rubber coated ball, but it was a sorry substitute, as most cheaper versions of the real mccoys are; slippery, fake seams making it

impossible to grip for a curve, feeling soft when struck with a mighty swing, turning a home run into a popup.

Bats were, of course, wood, and wood breaks, as did our bats, actually bat, as we only had one. But given our severely limited equipment budget, tightly adhered to by the CFO, Mom, we became pretty adept at repairs. Knock on wood; I've never broken a bone, but if one can hear the femur, tibia or fibula break in one's leg, as I heard Alex Smith, NFL qb discuss its happening to him on ESPN this morning or the humerus, radius or ulna break in one's arm, as I heard Harry describing to Mom what happened when he fell out of a tree when I threw some dill pickle juice on him which he thought, because I scared him into so thinking, that it was urine, I feel sure that sound can be only slightly more alarming or disheartening than the sound of your only bat breaking and the batter, who failed to point the brand up when hitting the ball, thus causing the break, only slightly more chagrined than I was when learning of Harry's misfortune and it's causing the family to have to forgo our annual beach trip. We would gingerly pick up the wounded bat, tack it back together (this was before Gorilla glue and besides, if it had been available, we wouldn't have waited long enough for it to dry completely) and wrap it good with some of that Navy tape. It wasn't our first, but the first bat I remember was an Adirondack. I don't remember whose autograph was on it. I'm sure it wasn't the hated Yankees, Mantle, Maris or Berra, nor my Dodger hero, Snider, sluggers all. It may have been the great base hitter for average, Richie Ashburn, whose batting style I would have done well to have adopted.

Bill's first glove was a flimsy JC Higgins (Sears Roebuck's brand) first baseman's mitt and mine was a Higgins fielder's glove. I can picture my glove but I can't remember actually catching with it except I do remember that it had little padding and stung like crazy when trying to catch a hard thrown or hit ball. We discovered Rawlings gloves at Faul and Crymes on S Tryon on our Saturday morning bus ventures downtown. Bill bought a Granny Hamner, 2<sup>nd</sup> baseman for the Phillies, autographed Rawlings glove which he used to shag flies to left in games at Mayers Field which the Mayer family let the neighborhood boys build in a field behind their house. As my fielding ability improved and I convinced the CFO I needed a new glove, I got a Granny Hamner just like Bill's. Why deviate from a proven winner. We used to rub our gloves with neatsfoot oil to soften and keep the leather from cracking and we'd pound the pocket with our fists and put a baseball in it and a big rubber band around it to help better form the pocket and keep it limber. Someone taught me to put my little and next finger in the little finger sleeve, my middle finger in the next and my pointing finger in the next, leaving the pointing finger sleeve vacant, thus creating a bigger pocket which, if the ball was caught therein, wouldn't hurt your hand as bad. I was always taught to catch the ball with both hands, that is, using the right hand to cover the ball once it was in the glove to keep it from bouncing out. Some slickster taught me to catch the ball on the outside of the glove by completely closing the glove and trapping the ball against the outside with my right hand. That was cool, but I never tried it in a game.

I had never played organized sports until I was 11 and found out Amity Presbyterian was going to start a Little League team. I'm not sure where I heard about it; probably at school. We had just moved from Sharon Amity to the house Dad built on Rama Rd. Ross Goode was a neighbor whose family rented a house from Herbert Mullis, my wife Janet's uncle, the brother of her mother Mary. Ross was a year older than me, smaller, with bigger ears and a great glove and pretty good bat. He was left handed and

his glove was black and bigger than my Granny Hamner, and he wielded his much more confidently and proficiently than I did mine, his like a vacuum cleaner, mine like a hand propelled carpet sweeper. We both decided to try out for the new team.

Tryouts and practices were held at a field on N Sharon Amity, not far from the church, adjacent to Hillcrest golf course, a short 9 hole course which for years now has been home to apartments. The backstop backed up close to the road. I don't remember much about the tryouts except that they were conducted by Rev Colon, hereinafter, Coach Colon, Coach, or most appropriately, just Colon. I guess he asked what position we thought we wanted to play so I said outfield and went with several others out to centerfield where he hit us some flies and told us to throw them home. He didn't had a catcher to field the throws home so I think my first throw hit between 2<sup>nd</sup> and the pitcher's mound. Colon yelled and asked if I couldn't throw it any harder than that so I bounced the next one between the mound and home and he repeated the question, so the next one I threw over the backstop and across the road. He made me the centerfielder. It should have been Ross but he put him in left.

Though 11, I was probably the tallest kid on the team and I could take a pretty good cut with the bat. I don't remember ever having any one pitch to me very fast. I think the guys in the neighborhood on Sharon Amity lobbed it in to me and Ross and I would pitch to each other on the field at McClintock Jr Hi, but with no catcher to give a target, we didn't serve it up too fast. I usually dug in, held the bat at the end, and swung for the fences a la Duke Snider. Colon was a pretty big guy, especially round the middle. The pitcher's rubber is only 46' from the plate in LL. He pitched our first batting practice and reared back and fired a pitch right into my ribs. I was gun shy the rest of my baseball career.

I think our uniforms were light gray and trimmed in red and black. I loved the stirrup socks and pulled them up as high as possible to expose more of my white socks. The CFO bought me my first pair of baseball cleats, which for LL were molded plastic. Cool guys, which obviously didn't include me, wore special baseball sweat shirts which were white but had sleeves the color of their uniform trim under their uniform shirts. They may have looked cool but I'm glad I was literally cool while they sweated on hot days. Our uniform hats may have been my first baseball hat but I soon learned how to slowly, so as not to crease the cardboard substrate, bend the bill to create a tunnel effect, holding the bend in position when not worn with a rubber band, just like my glove. Without rubber bands, there may have been no baseball.

Our league consisted of two teams in Hickory Grove, the Blues and the Reds and Newell. Hickory Grove was a baseball hot bed. They had recently built a new field with dugouts, a chain link backstop and chain link fences parallel to the foul lines, but no outfield fence. Newell's was an old field behind the school with only a backstop of, I think, chicken wire and no other fencing. Our home field was the old Oakhurst high school field behind the gym which had only a backstop but no fencing.

Coach carried our bats, balls, and catcher Coy Helms equipment in the trunk of his car. I don't remember how many bats we had, probably 8 or 10, which were transported in the "bat box", 12-16" square, 3-4' tall. Before batting practice before a game, the bats were lined up against the fence in front of the

dugout and the bat box stood beside them. Some of our games were played on Saturday afternoon and Dad got to see those.

We were playing one of the Grove teams and, as usual, Colon was expelling a lot of hot air, the only air we could hear being that which he was bellowing out of his big mouth. He got excited about something and kicked the bat box so hard that he kicked a hole in it and his foot got stuck and he started jumping around on the free leg, shaking the boxed leg and yelling to get that blanket-blank box off his foot. He attracted so much attention that the game stopped while everyone watched us try to get his foot out of the box. I don't guess the blanket-blanks were profane, him being a man of the cloth and all, or if so, I don't guess Dad heard the profane ones, because he thought the whole episode was hilarious. He laughed about it for years. That was one tough bat box-it lasted the rest of the season. I don't remember if it was during the same game or another at the Grove that Coach flung the ballpoint pen he used to keep score toward the heavens. A few minutes later a Grove player returned it after it had landed in their dugout.

We were playing a game at Oakhurst one Saturday and Dad, Mom, and probably Harry and maybe even Bill were there. Somehow I got on 2<sup>nd</sup> and someone was on 1<sup>st</sup>. In LL, runners can't leave the base until the ball has passed the batter but once passed, they're free to steal. Coach gave a sign for us to steal but I missed it or misinterpreted it because it's unusual to try to steal 3<sup>rd</sup>, so I didn't run, but the guy on first did, resulting in me being called out. Coy was coaching third and as I trotted by him on the way to the bench, Colon yelled "Boot him, Coy" and Coy kicked me in the butt, making me the butt of ridicule. I don't remember Mom and Dad's reaction, if any. They usually sided with teachers and others of authority and may have thought I did something to deserve it, but I would have liked to have given Colon a boot to his rectum.

The last game of the season was on a Saturday afternoon at Newell and once again, I think most or all of the clan was there because there was going to be a watermelon cutting after the game to celebrate the season. Gene Sides, a year plus older than me and 2 grades ahead of me in high school where he was a star pitcher, a flame thrower in LL and the fastest in the league, was pitching for Newell. I'd had a so-so batting record for the season, hitting several home runs but striking out a lot while trying to hit a dinger every time up. I think I struck out my first time up. I was scared of Sides. One in the ribs from him would have been worse than the one from Colon. My second at bat, I swung and missed; strike one. Colon called time out and walked out to the plate with a bat length piece of 2x4. I didn't know what he was up to. He grabbed the bat from my hands, handed me the 2x4 and said "See if you can hit it with this!" I have no idea what was going through my mind. I tried to give him the board back and get the bat back but he said no, to stand up to the plate and try to hit the next pitch with the board. Everybody was howling, including Sides, who grooved the next pitch which I swung at with the board. I don't remember how it happened, whether I walked back to the bench or whether Colon brought the bat back out to me, but I got the bat back in my hands with two strikes on me. Sides grooved the next pitch and when I rounded 3<sup>rd</sup>, the left fielder was still chasing the ball. I don't remember who won the game, but I remember the watermelon was cold and sweet. Ross was the only Amityite who made the All-Star team.