

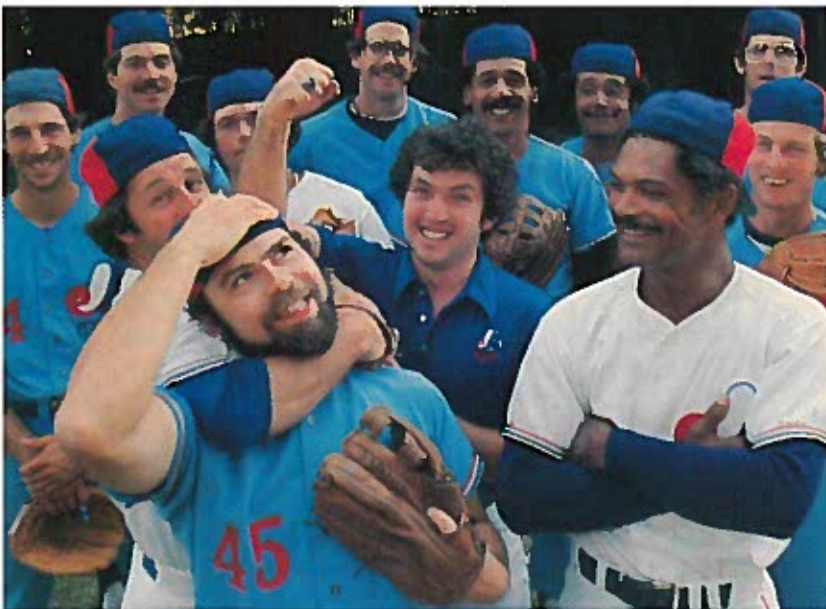
Let me state at the outset that if baseball is merely a game for kids, then World War II was just some boys out playing soldier. Author Roger Angell best described how the game absorbs men when he wrote in *The Summer Game*, "Whatever the pace of the particular baseball game we are watching, whatever its outcome, it holds us in its own continuum and mercifully releases us from our own."

Like the writer who once described pelicans as funny old men in baseball caps, I've always perceived life itself in terms of that glorious allegory, our National Pastime—and Tom Landry's America's Team be damned. Growing up in a semitough neighborhood two bus stops from the Buffalo, New York, city line, I first heard of the game in the first grade when I pitched pennies for baseball cards with street-smart Dave Glinski.

I'm dead certain that baseball saved me from a life in the doomed steel mills of Buffalo. What happened is that a marvelous author of baseball fiction, John R. Tunis, lured me every week into the town library. After I finished *Kid from Tompkinsville* and other Tunis masterpieces, I advanced to the novels of fellows named Hemingway, London and Twain. My theory, incidentally, is that you can judge the true worth of a sport by the number of poets and novelists who rhapsodize about it. According to *Guide to Baseball Literature* by Anton Grobani, more than 2,000 books dating back to 1838 have been written about the diamond game. I've personally read more than 100 baseball classics such as *The Boys of Summer*. In contrast, I'd be hard put to recollect reading 10 books from all the other sports combined.

But, going back to my boyhood, because my protective parents wouldn't allow me to walk unescorted to our town park until the sixth grade, I didn't play my first sandlot game until I was 11. Because I waited so long to start, my peers forced me to play "official catcher." They laughed at me for ineptly holding the bat crosshanded in my first at-bats, cruelty that drove me to my at-

Hank Nuwer, an Inside Sports contributing editor who is in the photos above, last wrote "Start Making Scents!" for Men's Fitness and has four books scheduled for publication.



Of Men, Dreams and Baseball



MAX HELLWEG

"Nobody ever said,
'Work ball!'
They said,
'Play ball!'"
—Willie Stargell

By Hank Nuwer

tic to swing a weighted bat 100 times daily until I could hit as long a ball as any of them.

And because my working-class parents thought the sport was a refuge for lazy nogoodniks, I didn't see a televised game until that same magical eleventh year, when an uncle babysat me during the seven-game 1957 World Series. I hold sacred the memory of Lew Burdette valiantly defeating the Yankees

three times, for his feat converted me into a baseball disciple.

Like most youngsters, my love for the game was both deep and naive. Robert W. Creamer could have had me in mind when he wrote, "The small boy does not know that the best third baseman in baseball is human: that he fights with his wife, worries about bills and occasionally swears at the bat boy. All the small boy knows is that the third baseman is his hero, and a hero always does the right thing."

Once hooked on baseball, somehow I persuaded my father to drop me off at dozens of games at Buffalo's Offermann Stadium. I never persuaded my hardworking dad to stay for a game. But, God bless his memory, he learned to swing a mean fungo bat, at age 44, to hit me towering fly balls on Sunday visits to my grandfather's farm.

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ternational League Bisons as Luke Easter and Lou Ortiz, always feeling protective of players on the way down and excited about those who looked a phone call away from reaching the majors.

Best of all, I discovered a secret hole in the stadium wall behind a concession stand that led to a screen separating me from the players' tunnel. Here I stood in plain view of them. I even chatted with them—when they initiated conversation—but I never pestered anyone for autographs in this sanctuary, being content merely to adore these gods. My only run-in came with former Yankee pitcher Rip Coleman, who had been yanked by the Buffalo manager in the early innings of a game. I raced from the grandstand to my hiding place, perversely desiring to witness his shameful exit. But I blundered into a tirade of Coleman's that my presence only increased. When he broke a light bulb and threw his mitt at the fence a foot from my head, my feet fled the area and took the rest of me with them. After that incident, I sneaked down there only in the pre-game calm, while the fans in the stands settled for goofy organ music.

When I couldn't watch baseball, I scooted down to the local pharmacy and laid on the linoleum floor reading *The Sporting News* beginning-to-end. I closely followed Bobby Richardson of the hated Yankees because his birthday fell on August 19th, the same date as mine. I memorized batting averages, win-loss records and earned-run averages with a scholar's aptitude that I never showed in school. I was a veritable billy goat, as Arthur Daley of the *New York Times* once wrote, learning to "devour any set of diamond statistics with insatiable appetite and then nuzzle hungrily for more."

Suffice to say, I grew up an impatient kid, waiting for the inconsequential winter months to breeze by so that I could study how to behave when I reached the high minors. Considering my Buffalo background, no wonder professional baseball seemed my destiny. The sixth greatest pitcher of all time, a grumpy, 363-game winner named Warren Spahn, hailed from South Buffalo, and a terrific minor leaguer, Danny Ozark, used to live on the corner of Hedwig and Walden, just two fireplugs from my house. More-

over, my first Little League manager, Steve Bania, a white-haired father figure who filled his lungs every afternoon with black soot at the coke mills, had played first base in the minor leagues. How could I, who loved this game so much, not get an opportunity to play?

But, needless to say, no contract came my way. Although I managed to hustle my way into becoming captain of my Little League, Babe Ruth and American Legion teams, I degenerated into a sliver collector, riding the bench of Buffalo State College's freshman baseball team.

Come to think of it, the only kid from our neighborhood who played in the majors was a pitcher named Ray Peters. I batted in one parochial league game against him in May 1960, when we were both 13. Even at that age he was well on his way to reaching his mature 6'6", 220-pound frame. Peters was the terror of his league, because he threw a crackling curve ball to go with his smoke. I still recall how I batted ninth for St. John Gualbert's during that seven-inning game, striking out (swinging) in the third and reaching first in the sixth inning, when a curve ball didn't break and nicked my forearm.

Exactly one decade later, Peters surfaced with Milwaukee of the American League, but stayed in the Bigs only long enough to shatter his ego, going into the record books with an 0-2 record and a sorry 31.50 ERA. Still, Peters found immortality in the *Baseball Encyclopedia* while I settled for becoming a sportswriter, slapping a microphone against the chests of George Brett, Pete Rose and Ron Guidry.

In 1981, I finally found out what a life in baseball might have been like. My opportunity to don a uniform came on a George Plimpton-like assignment when I was allowed to join the Montreal Expos' minor league training camp in Daytona Beach, Florida.

That thrilling day began with my breakfast bolting nervously from my belly, but I masked my fear while chatting with future major leaguers Terry Francona, Dan Briggs and Joe Hesketh. The highlight came in batting practice against another boyhood hero, then Denver Bears manager Felipe Alou, who charitably grooved three pitches and allowed me to rocket three line

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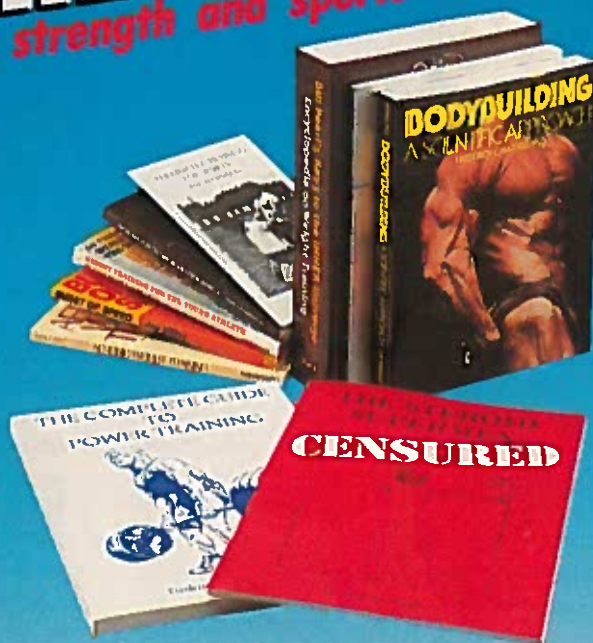
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shots to straightaway center. "Hey, Hank," shouted Jim Fanning, vice-president of player development who was destined later to briefly manage in Montreal, "I thought your magazine was sending us a writer, not a ballplayer." I floated through infield practice.

But being a batting-practice slugger was one thing; playing two games against top-notch, go-for-broke Minnesota Twins farm prospects was another. In the field, I made one error in two easy chances, and I struck out twice in two at-bats. In fact, the only contact I made off pitchers Brandon Chesser and Ed Hodges was a late-swinging foul down the right field line and a foul tip into the groin of a very angry catcher for the Orlando Twins. To add to my embarrassment, that second strikeout was on a wild pitch; I forgot, for a second, to run and was thrown out at first by that same limping catcher who chased the ball to the screen. So much for my professional debut!

Today, it stuns me to think that it has been 30 years since I bought my first glove—a \$5 pancake that I foolishly kneaded with hair tonic in the hope of softening the imitation leather—and fell in love with what sportswriter Thomas Boswell calls "the leisurely pastime of our national mythology." Many dreams other than playing baseball have evaporated, but other goals and accomplishments have replaced them. Baseball has taught me that atonement for failure and even a chance at immortal glory is but one at-bat away. Thus, even during grim times I've learned to at least meet the curves that once went by me.

Each year, I experience nothing less than personal rebirth when spring training begins. Thanks to the game, I feel young and think young despite cracking 41 this August. The blow of aging is somehow softened by knowing that Phil Niekro—seven years my senior—started the 1987 season on Cleveland's roster. It also helps to know that I can occasionally whack a pitch from my 15-year-old son Chris to a 375-foot sign during our daily summer games of home-run derby. And like Pete Rose, who schools his young son Tyler in the art of batting, I, too, delight in watching my 2-year-old Adam wield a wiffleball bat. For some reason, however, I choose never to correct him when he holds the bat crosshanded. □

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