



A Moment in the Sun

— Same Sun, Different Moment

Antioch, CA— I was a scrawny kid in the 50s and 60s, the oldest but thinnest and shortest of six boys. “Wow!” people would say, “six boys — enough for a basketball team (or to play three-on-three)! Or a batter and a full infield.” There were two dozen boys in the neighborhood within six houses either way from home, so we frequently had enough to play baseball for real. However, the diehard baseball fanatics among us sometimes ended up with just two of them — my younger (by 21 months) brother Steve and my uncle Dan (whom many of you know as ‘PapaDan’), only 21 months older, who lived three blocks away. As the only sibling of my mother, he was raised as an only child, but since he lived close enough to walk over to our house, he played with his nephews a lot. He was like an older brother to me and my brothers, except he went home at night and I reverted to being the oldest brother until he returned!

But no, scrawny doesn’t quite capture me — let’s make that wiry. I was skinny but what muscles I had were stronger than most and, in things I cared about, relatively nimble. I played the piano, and was good at untying knots and taking things apart (although not so good at putting them back together). Although Steve was bigger, and we never got into real fist fights, I could cause enough pain with a single knuckle in the shoulder to “keep the peace” if he decided to use his strength and weight against me. I was good enough to hold my own at marbles. And not bad at tether ball, and jacks — more about that in a moment!

But in most things, I was clumsy. In any other kind of sports I was useless, and also not particularly interested. I seldom managed to hit a baseball, although **IF** I connected well, it went pretty far, but always ended up in right field. Yeah, **THAT** right field — the one in the song! When I played in the field, of course, I always ended up in right field too. And that song, every word of it, is the story of my defensive baseball career. Well, except for the triumphant catch at the end — that’s fiction! Never happened! Even after I got my own baseball mitt and had half a chance of catching the ball if it came my way.

You’re probably wondering “But if you weren’t good at baseball, and didn’t enjoy it, why did you bother to play? And why are you writing about it now?” Well, I have written in the past about the Tyranny of Baseball (or of Basketball), describing all the ways in which those games dominated major portions of my childhood, dragged along with the family to watch my dad or a brother play lob ball or grasshopper or Babe Ruth until I was old enough to stay home alone or go out alone.

Left to my druthers, I did prefer to spend most of my spare time reading. But when Uncle Dan came over, I wanted to do whatever he had come to do, and that was usually some form of baseball. And even without Dan, my parents would frequently tell me to put the book away and go out and play with the other kids. So I had to do whatever they were doing. And that was usually some kind of baseball.

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Since there wasn’t enough yard to play real baseball, and going to a nearby diamond was usually not an option, they’d invent something that looked like baseball but that fit the room, or the driveway, or the back yard. They’d pitch some kind of ball, maybe solid plastic, maybe a Whiffle ball (holey plastic), maybe a (red) rubber ball, maybe a ping-pong ball, maybe a Styrofoam 76 Union antenna-topper ball — or maybe even a badminton birdie, or a mini-frisbee. And they’d hit it with a wooden baseball bat, or a plastic bat, or a badminton racket or something else you could swing at whatever missile they had chosen. When it was too cold to play outside, they rolled a small rubber ball (loose from its elastic string and wooden paddle) on an old mattress on the floor of the garage and hit it with a foot-long 1-inch dowel.



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That's right! They were committed to baseball and if I wanted to play with them, I was stuck with baseball. And I could either play along or play alone. But that wasn't the only way I was forced to play baseball. In the early grades, as soon as I learned to read chapter books, I would read a book at recess, or just hang around talking with the other sports-incompetents in my class, many of whom also preferred to read at recess. But at some point, around 3rd grade, the teachers decided that I must actually get exercise and interact with other students during recess, so reading was banned. **Banned!** My fellow book-loving klutzes then decided that since girls were allowed to play jacks at recess, we would join in and play jacks. But that was soon also prohibited and we were forced to play whatever the other boys were playing.

That brings us to dodge ball! Does dodge ball make sense to anyone as a thing kids should be doing? The kids who are biggest and strongest and most nimble get to stand around on the side lines and aim at the klutziest skinniest kids in the middle. Once a klutz is hit, he "gets" to stand on the sidelines and try to aim at the nimblest? No, since the goal is to get back into the middle (I'm not sure why!) even the klutzes will be aiming for the klutzes in the middle. So it's only the extra-competitive nature of the best athletes that makes them target the athletes in the center. Was there another way to get out of the center? Or was the goal actually to throw the ball over the heads of those in the middle and thus stay out of the middle? I'm not sure. Whatever it was, I wasn't good at it.

What I was good at was schoolwork, which came as easily to me as baseball and other sports seemed to come to the athletes: Artie, Jim, Larry, and Doug. On the playground, they were the leaders and I routinely failed. In the classroom, I was a leader and they routinely struggled. In those early years, they would sometimes ridicule or even bully me on the playground; but, as we grew, I was frequently asked to tutor them. Gradually, over the years, we reached a truce of sorts, partially through baseball.

Our school's limited playground space was divided into assigned spaces for each class (and gender), gradually larger for kick ball or dodge ball for the younger grades to ever larger baseball fields. In 5th grade, my class was huge with 20 or more boys, so we actually had at least one extra outfielder. Of course, with 20 boys, 10 per team, at least two of them were the least skillful and so I got to hang out in right field and talk with the other klutz who got chosen last or just before me (no dandelion watching for us!), although we did have to pay attention.

By the 7th grade I observed that the less skilled players were likely to be swinging late, so **IF** they connected, they would hit toward right field, hence toward the least skillful fielders. This fact led to my only, only in my life, *almost* home run! I managed one memorable day to connect solidly with the ball and send it zooming over the head of the fellow-inept in right

field. He had to run after it, catch up, stop it, and throw it back a long way into the infield. I headed off around the bases, not for a moment expecting to make it home. As I approached third base the klutz in right field had stopped the ball and had thrown it toward home; but Artie, the third base coach and one of our best ball players, waved me toward home. I could see in his face that he was pleased with my achievement and believed that I could score. When I stopped at third, satisfied with the joy of my life's first and only triple, my teammates, especially Artie, were gravely disappointed. It was my big chance and Artie was pulling for me. When I came up short, everyone thought I had blown it.

I thought I had triumphed.

Of course, I had slightly more experience than Artie in being caught between the third baseman and catcher, after having gone too far past third when being driven round the bases after a single by subsequent hitters — note that the worst players bat last in the lineup, so if we make it on base, we are the ones unfortunate enough to be driven around the bases by the much more capable, and faster, baseball stars. If we were slow, or timid, it is likely that the faster runners behind us would catch up and end up caught between bases. So somehow, regardless of how I ever reached third base, I was very likely to disappoint my teammates. Sigh!

So that was my almost-moment in the sun! My onlyest triple that could have been my onlyest home run if I'd trusted Artie to know what he was doing, which of course he did!

But the moment of light in my relationships with Artie and the other athletes came to us all gradually. I learned patience as I watched them work hard and struggle with math or diagramming sentences. And they learned patience as they watched me struggle while they tried to coach me to become a better ballplayer. I think bringing a mitt with me may have showed them some measure of commitment. We gradually recognized that each person had some things that came easier and some things that didn't come very well at all, regardless of how much effort we put in. So eventually, Artie and I accepted each other for who we were.

In the 40+ years since high school, we've met at reunions and parish functions and became good friends. Artie went on to become a policeman, then briefly a mortician(!), then back to the police force to mentor and train new recruits, which he does today. But I think that our shared moments in the sun — one basking in the sun and the other struggling under its glare — have contributed a bit of wisdom, patience, and acceptance to both of us.