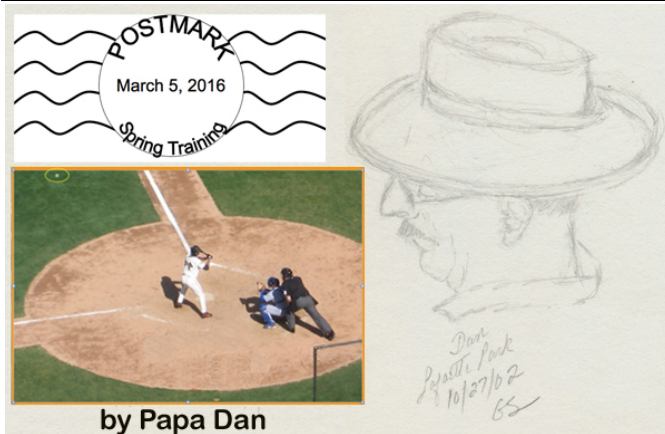


# It's Spring and It's Baseball; It Must Be Arizona

By Dan Sapone



by Papa Dan

"And they'll walk out to the bleachers; sit in shirtsleeves on a perfect afternoon. They'll find they have reserved seats somewhere along one of the baselines, where they sat when they were children and cheered their heroes. And they'll watch the game and it'll be as if they dipped themselves in magic waters. The memories will be so thick they'll have to brush them away from their faces."

— Terrence Mann

(James Earl Jones in "Field of Dreams")

**Matt:** Dad, you've been a Giants fan since you were eight; how come you never went to Spring Training?  
**PapaDan:** I dunno. Just never got around to it.  
**Nou:** We can fix that.

So, it's March, 2016. I'm almost 66, a month or so from retiring from a long career, and my son Matt and his wife Nou have brought Gretta and me here to Scottsdale, Arizona, for my first visit to Spring Training. It's a gift: a combination of Christmas, birthdays — Matt's, Gretta's, and mine — and my retirement. And, oh, what a gift!



I raised my sons to be Giants' fans and we went to a lot of games, in Candlestick and then AT&T Park. (OK, so we also went to a bunch of Oakland A's games at the Coliseum, — I even have one of those "half-A's, half-Giants" hats from the first Bay Bridge Series, but let's not be telling anyone, eh?) Baseball has always been part of our lives, from [my own childhood](#) in Antioch to the day we took my first grandchild, Matt's daughter Ruby, to [her first Giants' game](#) in 2005 against the Dodgers in San Francisco. But the true heart of baseball wakes up from Winter in Arizona — The Cactus League — where the pitchers and catchers report early, the young players bring their wild hopes, and every dream of every player and fan seems possible, maybe even likely, with the first crack of the bat. There's magic.

Dr. Archibald "Moonlight" Graham: *Well, you know I... I never got to bat in the major leagues. I would have liked to have had that chance. Just once. To stare down a big league pitcher. To stare him down, and just as he goes into his windup, wink. Make him think you know something he doesn't. That's what I wish for. Chance to squint at a sky so blue that it hurts your eyes just to look at it. To feel the tingling in your arm as you connect with the ball. To run the bases - stretch a double into a triple, and flop face-first into third, wrap your arms around the bag. That's my wish, Ray Kinsella. That's my wish. And is there enough magic out there in the moonlight to make this dream come true?*

## Scottsdale Stadium

Scottsdale Stadium is perfect. It has room for just 12,000 people. Its natural-grass field has been the Springtime home of the San Francisco Giants since it was built in 1992, on the site where the old Scottsdale Stadium stood since 1956. Its ten-foot fence is 360' down the left-field line, 330' down right, and 430' in straightaway center. Perfect.



Once again, this Super-Classy Giants organization shows MLB how things should be done. Behind the fence, from the left-field corner to right-center, there is a berm – a large, deep-green lawn-covered hill and picnic area where fans are arrayed on blankets on the field side of the berm – with a clear view of the entire field.



Behind right field – Wow! — the split-level “Charro Lodge” has a covered pavilion and a large terrace patio. You can sit there by adding a hundred or more dollars to your ticket price – all food and drink included! The money goes to a local charity, managed by volunteers, called *The Scottsdale Charros,* which has run spring training for the city since 1964. (Next year – I’m there.) *[Photo below]*



My friend and Spring Training aficionado, Richard Ward, told me what to expect from Scottsdale: the sweet scent of orange blossoms by night; the aroma of creosote bushes by day, green-barked trees everywhere, bougainvillea along the freeways, and restaurants suitable for a range of tastes — one example:

**Honey Bears BBQ:**  
**“Don’t need no teeth**  
**To eat our meat”**

There are restaurants for other tastes as well. My daughter-in-law Nou introduced us to some culinary delights with two remarkable reservations:

EVO (lobster Risotto, fennel sausage in magic pasta, amatriciana)  
N. Goldwater Blvd., Scottsdale

The Salty Sow (roasted porchetta, trout almandine, duck fat fritters)  
East Cactus Road, Phoenix

But, let’s not forget— the most important meal at the ballpark is the traditional ‘beer and a dog.’ My choice was the “Giant Dog” and a Sierra Nevada Pale Ale.

### **What’s It All About, Really**

Spring Training is, first and foremost, pure baseball. But the unique feature that sets it part from the 162 games of the MLB regular season is a seeming contradiction: *the games in March in Arizona do not count for anything!* BUT for the players, the games matter a great deal. For the veterans, the task is to get ready for Opening Day back home when every game counts. Sandy Koufax famously said, “Anyone who thinks Spring Training doesn’t matter has never tried to throw a baseball.” This weekend, one player caught my attention and demonstrated that the games *matter*. I didn’t remember the name Jarrett Parker before Saturday — I had to look up his #6 in the program. This 27-year-old lefty got my attention when his third-inning home run put the Giants on the scoreboard for the first time. Then over the rest of the weekend, he made some remarkable plays in right field, including back-handing a base hit down the line and throwing a ‘rope’ on one hop to Buster Posey from the right-field corner. Turns out we saw him play last year with the Sacramento River Cats where he hit .283 and hit 23 home runs. The word is that his performance in Spring Training last weekend is causing a ‘problem’ for the Giants. Looks like they are going to want his glove and his bat in the lineup on Opening Day — so, to do that, which one of their existing outfielders will he replace? I guess the games in Arizona the rest of this month will answer that question. So, don’t tell any of *them* that Spring raining doesn’t matter.

For those of us on the lawn behind left field, Spring Training isn’t only about the future. Spring Training seems to be designed to bring back baseball the way it lives in our *memories of the past — our own past*. This past weekend, my son Matt and I did our best to live in that moment as we leaned up against the beer stand on the left-field lawn. We told each other stories — reminded each other, really —about long-remembered days at major-league parks from his childhood, and that of his brothers, and my own. In that setting, the baseball memories poured out like the beer from the tap when the handle is pulled at the beer stand behind us. Memories like these:



- When Matt and his brothers were kids and we sat in the ground-level seats behind left field in Candlestick Park (he remembered that those seats cost \$2.50 each) watching Will Clark come to bat wearing his famous “Nouschler” — that was the name he gave to his most intense “game face,” reserved for only the most intense situations with men on base — and then waiting for him to unload one of his screaming line drives in our direction down the right field line. (Matt remembered the name of the “Nouschler.”)
- Or when I was eleven years old and my brother-in-law Joe Faletti took my nephews and me to our FIRST Giants game in 1961. It was the day when I learned THE hard truth about baseball – that even on a momentous day like my *first* Giants game, “we” didn’t always win. Even after 55 years, I remember that the Pittsburgh Pirates beat my San Francisco Giants 4-3 that day. I loved it anyway. And how could I not, with a lineup that included Willie Mays in center, Willie McCovey in left, Felipe Alou in right, Jim Davenport at third, José Pagan at short, Chuck Hiller at second, Orlando Cepeda at first, Tom Haller (or Ed Bailey) behind the plate, and Juan Marichal or Jack Sanford on the mound? How many times had I told Matt the story? (Matt had heard it before, but I carefully listed that lineup again.)
- Or, that same 1961 day, when we stood on the blacktop behind right-field fence and my nephew Steve ‘caught’ (after one bounce) a batting practice home run off the bat of Willie Stargel. Yes, I told that one again, too.
- Or, on another Candlestick day from my childhood, when my nephews and I stood behind that same chain-link fence, in awe at the fact that the hero of all heroes, Willie Mays, was standing in centerfield, tapping his glove not more than twenty feet or so from us — what a thrill THAT was!
- Or, again, when my sons were young, watching the Oakland A’s at the Coliseum (OK, I admit it, we watched the A’s sometimes) the day Roger Clemens was ejected from the game and, before leaving the dugout, heaving the large orange Gatorade jug onto the field in one of his fits of rage.
- Or, on October 7, 2001 at AT&T Park when Matt’s brother Ben and I watched from nine rows behind the Giants dugout as Barry Bonds’ 73<sup>rd</sup> home run that season sailed over the fence in straightaway center field.
- Or, even in my back yard as a kid listening to Russ Hodges on the radio shout “Bye, Bye, Baby!” when one of my heroes hit one out of the yard, or Lon Simmons with his own call “You can tell it Goodbye!”
- Or, the day in 2005 when a bunch of us brought my first grandchild, Ruby, to HER first Giants game. [Click this slideshow for a few moments from that day.]



The third important purpose of Spring Training is to create new memories. Scottsdale Stadium contains some special characters worthy of our memories, special spirits who live only there -- the lemonade vendor in the bleachers was selling "Lemonade Like Grandma Made." Take a listen/look (8-second movie plays on the website only)

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### **Where was I?**

Where was I? Oh, yeah, it's 2016, it's Spring Training, I'm a week away from my 66<sup>th</sup> birthday — where has the time gone? It has been such a joy to have spent some of that time at the ballpark. Base Ball (as James Earl Jones pronounced it in 'Field of Dreams') walked along beside us all the way from there/then to here/now.

Yes, here at Spring Training, thanks to this gift from my son and his wife, the memories are thick and sweet, memories from decades ago or from yesterday afternoon, from my own childhood, that of my sons, or my grandchildren.

Yes, we're all children together at the ballpark.

Finally, some of you will remember, from another field, a conversation between a father and a son from the edge of an Iowa cornfield:

[John Kinsella \(to his son\)](#): Is this heaven?

[Ray Kinsella \(to his father\)](#): It's Iowa.

[John Kinsella \(to his son\)](#): Iowa? I could have sworn this was heaven.

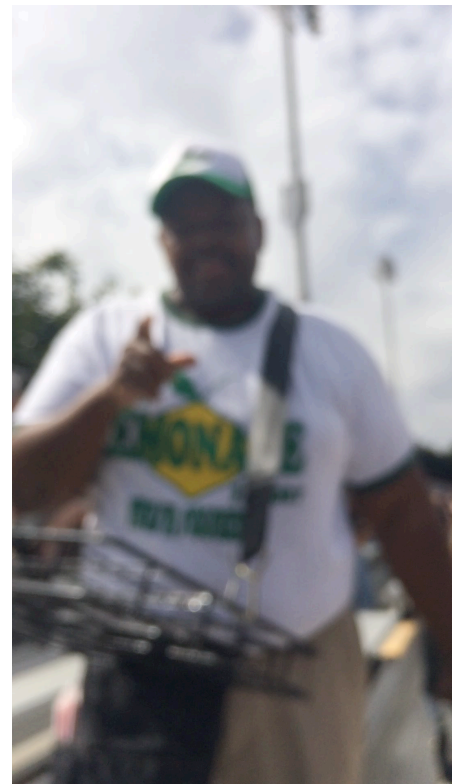
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[Ray Kinsella \(to his father\)](#): Is there a heaven?

[John Kinsella \(to his son\)](#): Oh yeah. It's the place where dreams come true.

*[Ray looks around, at his field, his wife and daughter on the porch]*

[Ray Kinsella \(to himself\)](#): Maybe this is heaven.



Thank you, Matt. Thank you, Nou.

