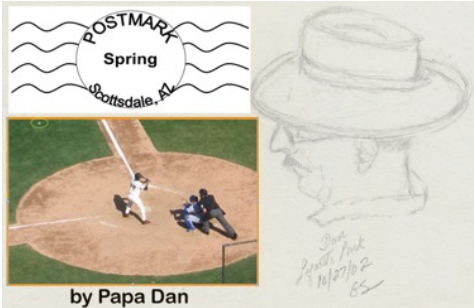


Baseball

By Dan Sapone



“There are only two seasons
- Winter and Baseball.”

— Bill Veeck.

“Baseball is ninety percent mental
and the other half is physical”

— Yogi Berra

Baseball

Here in February, the day Lou Seal shows up at my granddaughter’s school in San Francisco, in full uniform, you KNOW baseball is just around the corner. Why did he appear at Quinn’s school? Was it to introduce young people to the magic of baseball and the optimism that spring training embodies? The timing is clear: Spring Training is about to begin and, once again, it’s magic. All you have to do is say the words “*Spring Training*” and serious baseball fans can feel the magic.



Disclaimer: I was a basketball player. It was the only sport I was any good at, but I grew up loving **baseball** — I watched it ever since 1961 when my brother-in-law Joe Faletti took me and my nephews to my first Giants’ game at Candlestick Park; I listened to Russ Hodges and Lon Simmons describe it on the radio; I lived and died by the fortunes of My Giants. Baseball mattered to a kid growing up in the 1950s/60s in Antioch, CA. It became personal.

[\[Click here for my personal, brief playground baseball history.\]](#)

In baseball, the approach of Spring Training is a hopeful time — no scores yet, no losses, no strikeouts or disappointments. Even after My Giants’ dreadful 2017 season (*we’re not gonna talk about that*) the slate is clean and all things are possible. In 2016, my son Matt and his wife Nou took Gretta and me to our first Spring Training in Arizona. It was a sweet gift. [\[Click here for that story\]](#) Now I grant you, today I am deeply involved in the Warriors’ effort to win another NBA championship. That’s a very big deal. But baseball is something more.

So, what is this Giants fan thinking about here in February, 2018?

To get us ready, let’s listen to some (mostly) REAL baseball people who have gone before us: George Will: “Baseball, it is said, is only a game. True. And the Grand Canyon is only a hole in Arizona. Not all holes, or games, are created equal.”

Terrence Mann (James Earl Jones from “Field of Dreams”): “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. “

Dr. Archibald "Moonlight" Graham (also from "Field of Dreams"): "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."

Ted Williams: "Baseball is the only field of endeavor where a man can succeed three times out of ten and be considered a good performer."

Gerald R. Ford: "I watch a lot of baseball on the radio."

Jim Bouton: "You spend a good piece of your life gripping a baseball and, in the end, it turns out that it was the other way around all the time."

It's About Memories

It turns out that a lifetime of baseball is a lifetime of memories. If you'd bet you have plenty of your own. As a kid standing in the right field bleachers at Candlestick Park during batting practice, I remember when Willie Stargel of the visiting Pittsburgh Pirates hit a ball over the right field fence into a gaggle of kids hoping to snatch the ball. After the ball bounced off the concrete, I remember seeing a hand reach up out of the bunch and grab the ball. What a surprise to learn that hand belonged to my nephew Steve Faletti, who walked away with the baseball. For me that same day, what kind of thrill was it to stand behind the centerfield fence about twenty feet from the greatest player of all time: Willie Mays?



So many memories followed that one.

On the evening of July 2nd, 1963, I finished my homework listening to a pitching duel between Warren Spahn of the Milwaukee Braves and Juan Marichal of My Giants on the "leather radio" my dad had given me. By the time I needed to go to bed the score was 0-0 starting the ninth inning. I couldn't turn it off with that score, so I snuck my transistor radio under the pillow and decided to hear the end of the game in bed. Twenty-five-year-old Juan Marichal came out and continued his shutout in the tenth and, to some surprise, forty-two-year-old Warren Spahn did the same. Turned out that the dual shutout continued until, with my transistor radio still in my ear, Willie Mays hit a walk-off home run into the late-night darkness in the bottom of the 16th inning. The next morning the SF Chronicle quoted a dejected Spahn as saying, "I threw him a screwball and it just hung there, it didn't do a damn thing." When asked if he was surprised that is manager kept him in the game so long, he growled "If that kid can pitch 16 innings, I sure as hell can."



Was that a singular event? Well, fast forward 54 years to May 12th, 2017 — 25-year-old Giant catcher Buster Posey comes up to bat, this time at AT&T Park, in the bottom of the 17th inning against the Reds. Same story — Buster hits a similar walk-off home run over a different left-field fence. Willie (age 86) and Buster (25) got to talk about it. [[Read the story.](#)] → → → On this night, however, nobody pitched a complete game — alas, such is the nature of the game here in the 21st century.



The Nuschler

Another Giant favorite, Will Clark, was known as “Will the Thrill” from his high-school days in Louisiana. He lived up to that name in his first major-league at-bat hitting a home run off Hall-of-Famer Nolan Ryan in 1986. He went on to hit 35 homers in 1987, leading his (My) Giants to the playoffs for the first time since 1971. But my enduring memory of Clark came at the end of the 1989 NL playoffs when he hit the ball up the middle to drive in the game-winning runs sending them (us) to the World Series. But, that series turned out, well ... *we’re not gonna talk about that* But I digress. Where was I? Oh, yes ...



“The Nuschler” (his actual middle name) is the name given to Clark’s “Game Face” during his rookie year with the Giants, a face (above) described by a teammate as a combination of confidence, satisfaction, arrogance, and just plain oblivion.”

Giant Plans to Make New Memories in 2018

A whole bunch for things need to go right for My Giants to be a playoff contender this season. Let’s face it, last year (64-98) is a tough experience to build on (*we’re not gonna talk about that*). But, in the spirit of the ‘new beginning’ that Spring Training always promises, there is hope.

Thing One — Pitching: Madison Bumgarner. He needs to pitch well enough to be in the running for the Cy Young Award. He needs to start 30 games and My Giants need to win more than 20 of those to be contenders. Period. Johnny Cueto and Jeff Samardzija can certainly be expected to improve as are Chris Stratton and Ty Blach to round out the starting staff, with Tyler Beede and Andrew Suarez lurking in the wings. (There has been recent talk about a return of Tim Lincecum, but that’s still just talk.) So, no question, the pitching staff must step up and there’s no reason to doubt that possibility. It’s Spring Training, right?)

Thing Two — Offense: IF Bumgarner and the rest of the pitching staff come through as we hope, we're going to need to score more runs than last year, right? I'm looking for Jarrett Parker to step forward and improve on his .247 average and 23 RBIs. He can do better than that. We know that Hunter Pence is capable of improving on his 2017 numbers (.260, 67 RBI) as is "The Panda" (.220, 32 RBI). The Brandons can be expected to top last year's stats (Crawford: .250, 77 RBI, 14 HR; and Belt: .241, 15 RBI, 18 HR). Joe Panik can at least repeat his numbers (.288, 53 RBI, 10 HR). No need to worry about Buster Posey — we can count on at least his .320, 67 RBI, 12 HR numbers from 2017; and his handling of the pitching staff will, of course, be crucial.

Trade rumors are still circling, but as of Monday morning, rumors about Panik, Chris Shaw, and Tyler Beede seem to be quashed. So, it looks like Panik (and his bat) will be starting at second base for the Giants. According to the Chronicle, he is (and we are) happy about that.

The Giants signed two former Pirates — Outfielder Andrew McCutcheon and LH pitcher Tony Watson — among several players added this month. They also announced 28 non-roster invitees to Training Camp and, as in the past, some pleasant surprises may emerge from that list.

Thing Three — Groan-Ups Meddling with the Rules: Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred announced on Monday that new rules are in place to speed up the pace of MLB games this season. The plan is to limit trips to the mound (six per game by coaches and players), reduce the time allotted for pitching changes, and shorten the breaks between innings (by five seconds). *You won't believe* the specific times and circumstances listed in the new rules (and, believe me, you don't want to know). But, resisting this rising tide of time-slicing, the players union rejected the idea of a 20-second pitch clock. *Whew.*

And what problem are they trying to solve? Last year's games averaged 4½ minutes longer than 2016. Here is my editorial comment → → → I think this effort to speed up the game is ... well ... *bull-babble* (did I make up a new word?). The game was intended to be slow-paced and thoughtful. These rule changes and the attempt to gain back that 4 ½ minutes are ridiculous.

So, there!

Thing Four — What Does Vegas Say?: Odds makers have established an early favorite to win the 2018 World Series. Before I tell you their prognostication, let me tell you an important part of my upbringing. You may be surprised to hear that I grew up having **two** favorite baseball teams:

1. The San Francisco Giants
2. **Any** team that happens to be playing against the LA Dodgers on any particular day.

With that in mind, who does Las Vegas predict will win the World Series in 2018?

We're not gonna talk about that!

P.S. And, of course, this one — technically in my lifetime — is still my favorite memory:



Watch Bobby Thompson's "Shot heard round the world," 1951
The New York Giants beating the Brooklyn Dodgers
(Yes, the voice is Russ Hodges)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lrI7dVj90zs>

And one final quote, from Yogi Berra: "It's fun; baseball's fun."