

AP Award Winning Essay For Writing In Broadcast Journalism (1999)

MORE THAN A GAME

Mention the year 1975 to any New England sports fan over 35 and you're bound to get an earful. It was the year the Red Sox made it to the World Series, and Carlton Fisk hit that dramatic home run to end Game Six, considered by many to be the greatest World Series game ever played.

I was living in Boston that year, and I can still recall the surge of electricity that flowed through that town. My excitement, however, was tempered by the death of my father that same year.

I didn't grow up in Boston, though. I was raised in New York City in the fifties and sixties on a steady diet of Mantle, Mays and Koufax. And like a lot of young boys growing up in that era, baseball was the glue that cemented the bonds between my father and I.

Among my fondest memories as a child was eating peanuts with my father in the bleachers at Yankee Stadium, watching the '62 World Series against the Giants and the '63 World Series against the Dodgers.

But the strongest bond between my father and I resulted from our actually *playing* baseball. On Saturday mornings, before anyone else was awake, the two of us would go to the schoolyard with a bat and a bunch of balls. He would pitch the balls to me and I'd hit them all over the schoolyard. Then he'd have to retrieve them himself because there was no one else on the field.

All of this effort paid off in my first Little League game when I actually fouled off a pitch in my very fist at bat...before finally striking out. I've long since forgotten my first kiss, but I'll never forget that first foul ball. Any hits I got after that were just window dressing. Nothing could compare to that first contact.

Which brings me back to 1975 and my father's death. I was a young man in my mid-twenties, and it was my first experience with the death of some one close to me. I didn't know what to expect or how to react at the funeral, so I showed my grief in the only way I knew how. I summoned up the memory of those Saturday mornings when a middle-aged man chased baseballs for a couple of hours, just so his son could foul off a pitch in his first Little League game.

About a month after my father's death I was back in Boston, still quite despondent and feeling an overwhelming need to reconnect with him. As if on cue, the Red Sox were kind enough to be playing in the World Series that night. I had befriended a nine-year-old boy that year, named Richie. He and his divorced mother lived in my apartment building.

She gave him the green light. Richie threw on his jacket - and we bolted for Fenway Park faster than you could say "Luis Tiant."

We spent three frustrating hours in Kenmore Square trying to get tickets. Richie feared we'd never get in. I, on the other hand, had no doubt. Then, about a half hour before the first pitch we got two seats for 75 dollars that were way out in right field past the foul pole. But...we were in!

It was Richie's first Major League ballgame, so I had no idea how it would affect him. He was kind of a reserved child, but that night he lit up like a pinball machine. He was blown away by everything - the hot dogs, the hot dog vendors, the ticket scalpers, the foul pole, the scoreboard, and especially the two guys that were sitting next to us. They took a real liking to him, and entertained him through all 12 innings. Pure joy.

A lot of people remember Game Six of the 1975 World Series for the great heroics on the field. But for that shy 9-year-old boy it will always be about the two friends he made that day who taught him how to have fun. And for this 25-year-old boy it was an unforgettable lesson in how to deal with death, while celebrating life.

I haven't been to a Major League baseball game since the early eighties. I hardly even follow it in the newspapers anymore. The cumulative effect of strikes, fake grass, multimillion-dollar salaries, domed stadiums, and color-coordinated polyester uniforms eventually took its toll.

But I still love the game. So whenever I feel the need to reconnect with my father, I just grab a bag of peanuts and head out to the nearest Little League field. If I'm lucky - if I'm really, really lucky - I'll have the thrill of watching a young kid foul off his very first pitch... At that moment we're all Carlton Fisk. And that foul ball? It just won Game Six of the 1975 World Series.