



Introduction

Both of my sons are big baseball fans. It's my fault. It's also something of which I am extremely proud.

I could give you a lot of folderol about the metaphysical components of the game, its elegant geometry, how there's something elemental in boys that draws them to this most beautiful and precise of all the sports—I believe all that, but it would not be the reason I made them fans. The truth is, they were weaned on it. Literally.

As first-time parents, we read all the books, talked to the grandparents, and worried ourselves sick about the everyday problems of raising a baby. One particularly challenging issue was how to get the baby to give up his last bottle of the day.

My older son, Rob, didn't think giving up his bottle was a big deal—except for that last bottle of the day. To be honest, this was partly my fault. When I was in town, giving Rob a last bottle and putting him down in his crib was my job. Mom usually headed for bed or a well-deserved break, and I would take over duties at the tail end of the day. Rob and I would sit together and I'd give him his last bottle of the day.

In time, that was the only bottle he took, drinking from a cup the rest of the day. In the spring, when even I had to admit that this special time for me and my son was ending forever (the first of many such endings, I sentimentally and correctly supposed), we started watching baseball on television.

Truthfully, I started watching baseball and describing it to Rob as if he was thirteen years old, not thirteen months. I fed him baseball instead of a bottle. This became our nightly ritual. Mom even started to stay up to watch a few innings with us. Eventually, around the bottom of the fifth, Rob would go to sleep, house finally quiet and all settled down for the night. By the All-Star break, neither of us really remembered that he used to take a bottle.

When Patrick came along, we were a lot more relaxed about things, as are most parents. Someone, I think Erma Bombeck, said about second children, “You find out the baby can kiss the dog and not die.” Part of the relaxation is that you know you did it successfully once, and odds are you can do it again.

All kids are different—some days, ours don’t even seem like brothers—but learning the basic stuff was pretty much the same for both. Patrick was content to sit with Rob and me, ignore his bottle, and listen in as I explained the game, play by play. By the age of three, Rob was ready to do a little play by play himself.

When Patrick was almost three, Rob was ready for the local Tee Ball league. Watching him out there on the diamond as he strived to copy what he had seen on television all those nights, I realized that he was moving out into the world on his own. While he was out there, he needed to learn some rules to help him survive. It wasn’t only the rules of baseball I wanted Rob (and later Patrick) to learn out there on the field. I felt it was my obligation to teach my sons the lessons of life, and I saw the baseball diamond as the perfect classroom for that education. Corny, but true.

By “lessons” I don’t mean the basic ones in those how-to books about kindergarten (share, flush) and I don’t mean the more complex ones that they’ll have to learn for themselves (“I have to stay home and wash my hair” really means “I’d rather kiss a pine-tar rag than go on a date with you”). What I mean by lessons are the concepts that help you get by and make you a little bit more

successful in the world, or at least more successful than those who do not understand the subtle complexities of baseball.

I can't remember exactly how my father taught me these lessons, but I know he did. The parenting books were no help to me, and I was too embarrassed to keep questioning the grandparents. At some point I decided that I would try to use baseball to teach my sons the lessons that apply on either side of the white lines. Some of these lessons are not particularly friendly; in fact, many are harsh. I'll be the first one to say that my list isn't perfect—it is not even intended to be comprehensive.

You might make a good case that basketball, soccer, or synchronized team swimming may have just as much or more to recommend them for lessons on life. Sunday school and nightly reading from *The Book of Virtues* are certainly more appropriate for some areas. But baseball was something I understood and something the boys wanted to do, and trying this was better than admitting I had lost my copy of *How to Raise a Happy, Healthy Child* that they give you at the hospital right after your first child is born. As my wife says, "Look, kid, you didn't come with an owner's manual—we are doing the best we can."

I found out that most of what I wanted my sons to learn from baseball wasn't about baseball. If you accidentally picked up this book thinking it was an instruction manual on fielding line drives, throwing fastballs, or hitting to the opposite field, I'm sorry. There's nothing like that in here and I'm not qualified to teach it.

If you want to find out why I encouraged my boys to play ball and what I wanted them to get out of it, read on.

Both my boys now know how to hit a curve ball and turn a double play. These are no small talents. But, because of baseball, each will take much more with him when he heads off alone into the big wide world.