

## The Games We Played: Memories of a Marion Boyhood

Written by Dan Kellams

Sunday, 05 June 2011 14:58 - Last Updated Sunday, 05 June 2011 20:49

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*(First of a three-part series)*



In modern times, children are often led into sports by their parents, who transport them to soccer or T-ball practice when they are as young as five. They become athletes before they are fans.

Seventy years ago, in mid-20th century Marion, sports came to us out of the culture of childhood, as naturally as shooting marbles or playing tag.

That first spark of interest may have come when we were four years old, rough-housing with our grandfathers. Or when we were seven or eight, during mad scrambles at recess as we ran and wrestled on the leaf-strewn school yard. Perhaps it was listening with our fathers, on a Sunday afternoon, to a Cubs doubleheader on the radio. Or studying older boys at softball, and then asking our parents for a glove.

On the north side of town, we tended to take up softball first, around fourth grade. There was a make-shift diamond on the Emerson school yard, and baseball was by far America's most popular sport. We learned the lore of the sandlot game from older kids, who taught us how to hold a ball (three fingers across the seam) and how to grip a bat (not cross-handed!).

A few fathers played catch with their sons, or hit them grounders and flies, but for the most part we had no coaches. We improved at sports through the act of playing them.

We picked up tips from magazines or instruction books that fell into our possession, studied the moves of the players in the town's adult softball league and drew inspiration from high school athletes, whose success under Coach Les Hipple made them heroes in our eyes.

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On summer mornings, we hitched our gloves to our belts, threw a bat across the handlebars of our bicycles and pedaled off in search of a game. Our parents didn't know where we were going, and neither did we. Hunger would bring us back home.

We went where the action was. Basketball rims hung from homemade wooden backboards on garages and barns all over town. We could squeeze a four-man touch football game into the smallest of vacant lots.

But the Mecca for most north-side kids was the Emerson schoolyard, a full square block, one of the biggest open spaces in town.

A softball field had been beaten into the southwest corner of the playground by the sneakered feet of hundreds of boys, and its outlines were well established by the mid-1940s.

The path to first base, so worn it could have held three inches of water, ended in a dusty circle twice the size of a manhole. The base paths to second and beyond were less worn but clearly marked, and the pitcher's box was a rough oval of hard dirt.

There was no home plate, no pitcher's rubber, no bags for bases. In casual play, we simply estimated the locations of these important markers.

When the game was serious, we hunted up pieces of cardboard or wood and used them for bases and home plate. Then we scratched an agreed-upon line in the dirt to mark the pitcher's rubber. This was to restrain the pitcher from inching closer to the plate and trying to overwhelm the hitter with fast ones. The infield was a rough mat of packed earth, pebbles and stubbles of exhausted grass.

There was no backstop behind home plate. Wild pitches and foul balls often rolled into 14th Street, where the catcher had to chase them down, causing an exasperating interruption in the action. To prevent this, the boys with the oldest, most battered bicycles arranged them in a semi-circle behind the batter's box. This way, balls that squirted past the catcher would bang up against the bikes' spokes and could be retrieved quickly.

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The outfield was sharply asymmetrical, a Fenway Park in reverse. Right field was very short, while straight center and left swept away in distances that challenged the heaviest hitters.

In right field, our equivalent of the "Green Monster" was the school building. Its brick wall with a bank of windows crowded into the outfield and appeared to be within easy reach of a left-handed power hitter. But the windows were protected in part by a large tree in short right-center field, and by the fact that left-handed power hitters were as rare as Eskimos. Our weakest glove man could patrol right field with no fear for the school windows.

A batter's best chance for a home run lay in center field. A hard-hit ball, even a grounder, that skirted left of the large tree and bounced past the center fielder could roll all the way up a small incline and hide under a set of teeter-totters near the school's back entrance. On a blow like that, a hitter could skip around the bases, hooting all the way as the center fielder trotted back in with the ball.

Left field was a hitter's dream. A stand of tall trees stood almost a full block from home plate, lining the far edge of the playground. The tree line was beyond the range of fifth graders, but when an older boy blasted one into their branches play was respectfully suspended so he could make a Ruthian trot around the bases.

When school opened in the fall for fifth grade, my classmates and I began playing softball regularly during recess and lunch hours, then resumed that spring. We eventually coalesced, with no involvement from the adult world whatsoever, into a sort of a team. We continued to play often that summer, attracting boys from outside the neighborhood. Practices were held during the week, with a real game on Saturday afternoons.

Lineups changed constantly because players showed up according to their whims or obligations, and we could never be certain who would be diverted by chores or a trip to the dentist or an invitation to go fishing. Those of us who had balls, bats and gloves brought them. Those who didn't used ours.

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One day we sent emissaries across town to see if the fifth graders from Lincoln school wanted to play us. This was a gutsy move. Lincoln's fifth grade was larger than ours, and south side boys were, by reputation, tougher than we were. Never mind. We thrashed them. And just like that, we became fifth-grade softball champions of the whole town in a playoff of our own creation.

Typically we played without umpires. Perhaps for this game an interested parent or an older boy helped make calls at first base, but we did not call balls and strikes, leaving it to the hitter to choose his pitch. Stealing bases was not allowed. The outcomes of disputed plays were negotiated. For example, a questionable third-strike foul tick granted to an opponent in one inning could be redeemed in the next for a safe call on a contested force out.

Then came a shocking development: the Lincoln sixth grade wanted to play us. Somehow, our defeat of Lincoln's fifth grade had disgraced the sixth-graders, too, since both attended the same school. The older boys wanted revenge.

We knew that the challenge from the sixth grade was an invitation to disaster. For one thing, they had a larger pool of players. They were also older, bigger, stronger, faster and meaner than we were. We decided to play them anyway.

Tom Domer remembered across the years that the Lincoln sixth-grade team included boys who would later be top athletes at Marion High School, including Shorty Novotny, Jerry Peck and Harry Oakley — in other words, the best the sixth grade could throw at us. I remember only a hulking lineup of scowling strangers.

For this game, we would need umpires, if only to assure our personal safety, so we recruited my father to work first base and one or two other adults, including Mr. Kruger, a neighborhood dad, who was stationed near third base.

Our ace pitcher was John DeJong, who had perfected a low, accurate fastball through years of practice in a vacant lot next to his house. He also threw a spinning pitch that at least looked as if it was trying to curve. Tom Fisher was behind the plate, catching his neighbor's pitches just as he had in so many practice sessions.

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Harold Hayes was at first base, a position for which he had unassailable credentials. He had been to Chicago, visited Wrigley Field and observed the great Cub first baseman, Phil Cavaretta, in action. The clincher, however, was that Hayes owned a real first baseman's glove — an item otherwise unknown in our circle.

Wally DeWoody, Tom Domer, Mike Kepros and I were somewhere in the field with two other boys. Based on the single play I remember, I was probably at shortstop that day.

Spectators at our games were rare, but this one attracted a few. Some older boys lounged on their bikes. A dog or two panted in the shade. An old man sat on his camp stool. A few fathers stood quietly at a distance. Mothers would not consider showing up for this sort of thing.

When the game started, I fully expected us to be routed. But as the innings passed, we saw that we had a chance. DeJong's fastball did not handcuff the sixth-graders, but it did contain them, and we found that we could hit and score against their pitchers.

We may have benefited, too, from a more polished defense. The only play I remember, and this one distinctly, was a foul popup to the third baseman, who had to back-pedal to his right, all the time tracking the ball as it crashed through the branches and leaves of a tree. He made a great catch.

It was a big out. As the third baseman clutched the ball I gave a small cheer, which was immediately cut off when Mr. Kruger called the batter "safe." Unfamiliar with the finer points of the rulebook, he decided that the play did not count for an out because the ball was caught in foul territory.

The batter was allowed to stay at the plate. We raised no howls of protest, nor did my father come over from first base to try to undo the mistake. We accepted the call and played on.

Fifty-seven years later, at a class reunion, I saw Tom Fisher for the first time in half a century.

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One of the first questions I asked him was whether he remembered our great softball game that summer. He looked at me sharply and responded in a singsong voice, calling up a phrase we must have chanted that happy day:

“Nineteen to sixteen, the fifth grade beat the sixth grade!”

*(Dan Kellams is the author of “A Coach’s Life: Les Hipple and the Marion Indians.” To learn more about the book, go to [www.acoachslife.com](http://www.acoachslife.com) )*