

## Inventing Cork Ball: Memories of a Marion boyhood

Written by Dan Kellams

Saturday, 01 October 2011 21:59 - Last Updated Saturday, 01 October 2011 22:57

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*(Fifth in a series)*

A few years ago, the New York Times reported on a furor that arose in the wealthy suburb of Greenwich, Conn., because a few boys wanted to play Wiffle ball.

The boys created a small field for this purpose on a town-owned vacant lot. Their changes to the property were slight because Wiffle ball does not require much in the way of landscaping. All you really need is a place to bat, a place to pitch and a marker to indicate a home run.

But a commotion began soon after the boys took over the lot. Neighbors complained about the possibility of noise, the threat of damage, the erosion of property values. Since the town owned the lot, various city officials representing various jurisdictions fretted over the matter, raising questions about liability issues, usurpation of green space and unpermitted special use of town property.

Lawyers were summoned. Meetings were convened. Documents were reviewed.

I never learned what happened, but it seemed almost certain that the little Wiffle ball league of Greenwich, Conn., would not survive.

All that got me thinking about how we worked things out in Marion during the 1940s and 1950s before Wiffle balls came into being and people were more forgiving about the peaceful enterprises of sports-loving boys.

The Wiffle ball, a hollow plastic sphere with vents to facilitate throwing curves, was invented in Fairfield, Conn., in 1953 so kids could play baseball in small spaces. It didn't reach Marion, Iowa, until years later. So in our Wiffle-less youth we had to come up with our own inventions to play backyard baseball.

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Marion in those days was a town of about 5,000 people living in compact homes on small lots, and except for rocky school yards the town was largely without playing fields. Marion boys, inspired by the great high school teams turned out by Coach Les Hipple, were mad about sports, and we mounted pickup games on almost any patch of ground we could find.

You could get a basketball game almost anywhere. Basket rims and makeshift backboards hung on garages all over town. And in the autumn it was easy enough to downsize football for four players on small lots.

But backyard baseball was a problem. A real baseball or softball, hit with a real bat, sailed well beyond the boundaries of our small back yards. The ball might be lost forever or crash through a neighbor's window. In any event, chasing a ball into a cornfield or down a street took too much time away from the game.

So we experimented with different types of balls and bats. We could throw a decent curve with a tennis ball, but when it was hit with a bat it went much too far. We tried using a broomstick instead of a bat, but it was almost impossible to hit the ball, and if you did get lucky, it still went too far.

When we came across a golf ball, we tried that, knowing full well it would be lost on the first solid hit.

We tried marbles, which were hard to hit, but they came off the bat like bullets. Even we were smart enough to realize this experiment could end with someone catching a marble between the eyes.

Old socks bound together with tape were safe but lifeless.

Table tennis balls curved wonderfully. With a little practice, we could master an arsenal of tricky pitches: a curve, a screwball, a drop ball and a rising ball. We would giggle with delight when we

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fooled a batter.

If the ball was not hit solidly it would float and dance in the air, giving a fielder time to get under it but also challenging him to judge its wayward path back to earth.

The table tennis ball would have been perfect for two-person baseball games, but it had a fatal weakness: it broke easily. A solid hit cracked the ball, destroying its aerodynamics.

There was nothing to do then but put a match to it and watch it sizzle into a small string of ash.

After years of this, someone discovered the cork ball. They were in Kendall's hardware store on Main Street in the fishing section. Apparently intended as a float, they were perfectly round, ranging in size from slightly larger than a golf ball to somewhat smaller than a tennis ball. Strangely, no holes had been drilled in them for a line to go through. This was a mystery to us, but we took it as a blessing.

Cork balls were fairly cheap, which was good, because they had a tendency to break apart after a while. The balls weighed enough so that we could throw accurate fastballs, curves and knuckleballs. When hit, they made a satisfying crack and went just far enough for good games of two-to-a-side baseball.

One player on the team pitched, the other patrolled the outfield. We used softball bats. Hits had to travel certain distances in the air to become singles, doubles, triples or homers. A short ground ball was an out. Balls caught on the fly were outs. It was possible to strike out, but not to walk.

In time, we formed a sort of a league and found a central location for our field. We set up in one corner of the town park, right in the heart of Marion and across Main Street from Kendall's, our only source of replacement balls.

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We played in the town park most of one summer, gathering eight players or so for doubleheaders on weekends or after work on days there was no baseball practice. We arranged the park's green wooden benches in a semi-circle to serve as an outfield fence. In time, we wore out the grass in rough circles where the pitchers and batters stood.

We asked no one's permission to do this, taking it as a right of citizenship. We attracted neither spectators nor criticism. Even ladies of a certain age, who could be expected to scold us for damaging the grass, apparently looked the other way.

The police station was less than a block from the park, but we were never so much as questioned by the authorities. Shaded by the park's trees, we played on in our little field of dreams, relishing our friendships during those last sweet days of high school. Soon we would all go our separate ways.

More than a decade later, I returned to Marion to visit my old haunts. In the park I examined the area where we had once performed as pitchers and batters and found small bare spots that were slowly being reclaimed by the grass. But the memories of our summer cork ball games have never vanished, nor has my gratitude to the town for tolerating our innocent seizure of public property.

*(Dan Kellams is a graduate of Marion High School now living in Connecticut. He is the author of "A Coach's Life: Les Hipple and the Marion Indians," which has just been published in a second edition.)*