
Growing Up in the Thumb of a First Baseman's Mitt

It's undeniable. If you happened to be out for a leisurely stroll on the lunar surface and looked up (or is it down?) at the brilliant blue and brown boulder we call home, you would clearly see that I have lived my entire life in what is geologically, geographically, and unmistakably an old-time first baseman's mitt. No, the land formations of Africa, South America, and Australia don't count. Just look at them. They are so misshapen that any kid carrying a mitt like that would immediately be laughed off – or beaten up on – nearly every sandlot in the country. Ah, but the lower peninsula of Michigan. Its representation of a mitt is so precise that it even has the slight indentation where the “little pinky” is supposed to be.

To a very young (and highly imaginative) boy growing up in the 1950s, being born in what is obviously the thumb of a first baseman's mitt is not to be taken as mere coincidence—it's destiny. This divination of a male child born to take his rightful place among the all-time greats of the national pastime was not lost on my father either. Like gifts from the Magi, my nursery soon overflowed with precious offerings of baseballs, bats, hats, and gloves.

Learning the Game from George, Ernie, and Dad

My childhood was spent learning to appreciate the intricacies of The Game. To me, it seemed perfectly natural—like the obligation society places on children to learn to walk, talk, or chew with their mouths closed—that I would be asked to master this game that meant so much to my father. Every summer evening, after dinner and dishes, he and I would sneak off to my bedroom where we would spend the rest of the night eavesdropping on a comfortable conversation between two affable southern gents who were detailing and deciphering real-time struggles of valor taking place in enchanted palaces with curious-sounding names like Briggs, Griffith, Fenway, and Comiskey.¹

We would lie on the bed for hours while the soothing drawls of future Hall of Famers George Kell

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and Ernie Harwell coaxed us to construct mental renderings of the patterns of sweat covering the pitcher's uniform; the awkward, nervous movements of a rookie hitter; or the thickness of the muggy, hot dog-beer-and-cigar-scented fog bank that always seemed to hang in the bright white lights of the old stadium on the corner of Michigan and Trumbull in Detroit.

What a wonderful way to prepare for restful sleep (which usually invaded my six year-old body about the top of the seventh inning). But these gentle times were also set aside for serious instruction. When Harwell mentioned the problem Gus Triandos was having corralling a Hoyt Wilhelm knuckleball—despite the use of his oversized “butterfly” catcher's mitt—Dad would pick up one of the dozen or so balls that were strewn around my room and expertly maneuvered my fingers around it so I could not only hear, but see, and kinesthetically experience, how the peculiar pitch was thrown. George, Ernie, and Dad would then describe, with sanctity and solemnity befitting a brotherhood of monks, the mischievous little jig such a grip could inspire in mere yarn and horsehide.

Of course there is a lot more to learning the game of baseball than could ever be accomplished lying on a bed listening to the radio. I spent every day, from March to November, honing my baseball skills—not an altogether easy task—having no brothers and living miles from the nearest kids. But with a little creativity, even an isolated six year-old can devise a way to practice the fundamental arts of throwing, catching, fielding, and hitting.

After hours of refining my makeshift practices I became rather adept at hitting fungos to myself, tossing the ball high in the air with a gloved hand, hitting the towering fly with a one-handed swing, dropping the bat, and chasing the ball into the deepest corner of the yard to attempt a Mays-like over-the-shoulder catch before crashing into the crabapple tree.

Infield practice consisted of throwing a hard rubber ball against the garage door so as to test my ability to range far to my glove or backhand side to stab the hot smash, whirling and throwing to first base in a single motion. If the initial toss at the garage door skipped off the ground a split-second before hitting the base of the door, it would result in what George or Ernie would describe as “a high chopper off the front of the plate” that had to be charged hard and flipped sidearm—or submarine—on to first base. My permanent first baseman, by the way, put “Iron-Man” Gehrig to shame—literally and figuratively—because he was the inner iron hub of the rear tire on our rusty old orange Case tractor. If I hit the hub with my throw to first, the runner was out. I would often play complete nine-inning games, fielding every ball for both teams. Each game would take somewhere between two and a half to three hours if you included the obligatory “rhubarb” with a first base umpire (who was apparently under

the mistaken impression that my throw hit the rubber tire and not the metal hub of the tractor) and the pre-game interview with Harwell.

Hello everybody, this is Ernie Harwell. We have a real special treat in store for ya this evening, when the Tigers host the White Sox in this, the rubber game of their three-game series. A youngster who hails from a small town just a little over an hour's drive from the ballpark was called up from Denver yesterday and we'll get our first good look at the young fella here tonight when he starts at third base and bats in the leadoff slot against Chicago's wily veteran righthander, Early Wynn...

I would spend hours on end nearly every day, by myself, practicing the fundamentals of the game. In fact, so much time was spent on these imaginary diamonds that the old busybody who lived in the one house close enough to ours to see how I spent my days, felt compelled, in all seriousness, to inquire of my mother the exact nature of her son's mental condition.

The highlight of each day came at 4:30 when it was time for me to grab my six-fingered fielder's glove, an old Bill Dickey Model catcher's mitt, and the best (least waterlogged) ball I had.² I would sit, not so patiently, on an old tree stump where our gravel driveway met the dirt country road. I was waiting for my father to come home from work at the Marlette Coach trailer factory. Although he often worked two jobs and still had chores to do around our small farm, I can't remember him ever refusing to play catch or "pitch me a few." Although he was occasionally so unreasonable as to insist that I allow him to get a drink of water, go to the bathroom, or say hello to my mother before we assumed our customary positions in the well-worn dirt spots in the otherwise plush green lawn, I never once remember him rejecting my request.

There may be nothing terribly unusual about a young boy being totally consumed by baseball. But my obsession might be considered a bit extreme (maybe the old lady next door was on to something after all). Oddly enough, for example, I loved shaking hands. Not because I was an outgoing and sociable young man but because it always reminded me of the way baseball players in those days congratulated one another for hitting a home run. As he rounded third base, the slugger would always shake hands with the third base coach and, as he crossed the plate, shake the hands of the next hitter and anyone who might have been on base at the time. These were the days before high-fives, forearm bashes, fist pumps, chest bumps, or skyward points. A simple, stoic, running handshake was the full extent of a home run celebration.

In our small-town Lutheran church, it was a tradition that our old German preacher would shake hands with the congregation as they left the Sunday service. Needless to say, I took every benediction as an opportunity

to make believe I had just blasted a three-run shot off Whitey Ford and the Reverend was my third base coach, standing there offering an outstretched hand to congratulate me on my worthy accomplishment. Now that I think of it, it was probably a good thing for me that chest bumping and fist pumping hadn't yet made their way into baseball (although I suppose I might have gotten away with a brief, silent skyward point).

Playing for the (Watertown) Cubs

The Bill Dickey model catcher's mitt I dragged to the road each evening didn't really belong to me or my father; it was part of the catcher's gear for the Watertown Cubs little league baseball team. My father had volunteered to coach the team and that meant we always got to take the team's equipment bag home with us. Of course that also meant my mother soon found it necessary to unilaterally impose a ban on the wearing of shin-guards, chest-protectors, masks, or batting helmets at the dinner table, or to bed.

Watertown was not a city, or town, or even a village. It was a half-mile stretch of "reduce speed" road at the junction of a state highway and a pothole-ridden blacktop road consisting entirely of a gas station, a church, a cemetery, and what was insensitively, but unashamedly, referred to in those days as a "school for retards." It just so happened, however, that the school's lumpy hayfield playground lived a secret life as the practice field for the Watertown Cubs, a unsanctioned "little league" team made up of 8 to 12-year old farm boys living within a five-mile radius of the intersection. One need only imagine the inappropriate razzing the little Cubbies were forced to endure when the team's secret connection with the "retard school" was exposed.

Unfortunately, in a rural area where houses are typically a mile or so apart, there were only about ten or eleven boys who lived close enough to join the team. Worse yet, because most were farmers' kids, one or two of the players had to miss virtually every practice or game in order to help out on the family farm. This ragtag bunch of country bumpkins had neither a team sponsor nor a home field. Their pregame ritual consisted of four or five kids piling into a couple of cars and traveling a half hour or so to a neighboring town.

Such impoverishments are typically thought to hinder athletic skill development, but, in my case at least, they provided an opportunity unavailable to most young ballplayers. As a six year-old, my official position on my father's team was that of batboy. But because we were usually short a player or two, my father would approach the other team's coach before the game to discuss the alternatives. Dad would matter-of-factly point out that forcing the Cubs to forfeit the game wouldn't really be in the best interest of the kids on either team and a reasonable solution might be to simply allow his son, the scrawny batboy, to take the place of the missing player.

The coach's initial suspicion that he was somehow being hoodwinked was generally alleviated when he caught a glimpse of the ridiculous-looking whiffet with a jack-o-lantern smile, a baggy flannel uniform, a fielder's glove half the size of his entire body, and Buddy Holly glasses who was being proposed as the substitute ballplayer. My recollection is that more than one coach had to strain to hide a visible smirk at the mere thought of his twelve-year old pitcher, nearly the size of a grown man, firing speedballs past the runt in the pop-bottle-lens glasses who was nearly a foot shorter than the next smallest player on either team.

There were, however, a couple of things these opposing coaches didn't take into consideration. Remember, George, Ernie, and Dad had worked with me almost every night on the finer points of the game. Unlike most of the players in the league, I knew how (and when) to lay down a bunt, execute a "fade away" slide, tag up on a fly ball, set up a relay, hit the cutoff man, back up a throw, and force the lead runner. In addition, the thousands of ground balls off the garage door and subsequent throws to my tractor tire teammate had given me fielding skills of players twice my age and size. Finally, although I may have fancied myself being cut from the same cloth as Kaline, Killebrew, or Colativo, my offensive contribution to the Cubs was far more suggestive of Gaedel.³ Few little league pitchers, it turns out, can consistently hit a 17 X 17 inch strike zone from 46 feet, so I ended up leading the team, if not the league, in on-base percentage.

The Longest Home Run in Baseball History

Despite the realism of George and Ernie's nightly play-by-play descriptions, the mysteries of major league baseball only fully reveal themselves when the sights, sounds, and smells are experienced firsthand. On Saturday, September 10, 1960, my father and I made the 92 mile pilgrimage from our house in the middle of the "Thumb" to what was then called Briggs Stadium. Never mind that as we loaded up our blue and white Oldsmobile Rocket 88 that morning, our beloved Tigers were a horrendous seven games below .500. Never mind that they were languishing a whopping 19½ games out of first place. Never mind that they had not fired—but *traded*—their manager, Jimmie Dykes to Cleveland just a month earlier.⁴ Never mind that they would be facing the first-place Bronx Bombers. Dad and I were about to join 10,813 other diehard Tiger fans at my baptism into the game of professional baseball.

In those days, the Detroit Tigers did not play in a "park" or on a "field"—this was a STADIUM—and it looked more like a state penitentiary than a ballpark. The façade of the massive, grimy, gray-white concrete-and-steel fortress was interrupted by a succession of sliding metal gates, padlocked chain-link fences, iron-barred windows, narrow turnstiles, and massive towers of flood lights pointing in every direction. Its perimeter was even patrolled by uniformed, armed guards. To a small boy from farm country,



this would have been a cold and menacing place, except for one thing. This “prison” was turned inside-out. Its extensive security systems were not designed to keep people in but to keep them from entering. This, of course, served as direct confirmation that the rituals practiced behind the walls of the edifice must surely comprise our tribe’s most sacred forms of magic.

As it should be, my first of many visits to the “Corner” was indeed nothing short of magical. The Tigers jumped off to a 1-0 lead in the bottom of the first inning when Charlie “Paw Paw” Maxwell⁵ drove in “Stormin” Norman Cash with a hit off Yankee starter Bob Turley. The Yanks answered with a run in the top of the second on a Gil McDougald homer, and after another McDougald solo shot in the fourth, took a 2-1 lead into the top of the seventh. That’s when it happened. With two outs and two on in the seventh, Tiger pitcher Paul Foytack committed the cardinal sin of pitching. Now George and Ernie always said, “you’re tempting fate by pitching behind in the count,” but when you’re pitching to Mickey Mantle—in his prime—and you fall behind 2-0, you’re tempting more than fate. That’s history waiting to happen. The left-handed hitting Mantle—sitting “dead red” all the way—turned on the Foytack fastball and blasted his 33rd homer of the season that flew more than the length of two football fields—in an estimated 643 foot arc—over the 94-foot high rightfield roof, over Trumbull Avenue, and into the shed of a lumberyard across the street. Despite understandable and ongoing debate, the *Guinness Book of World Records* still lists the clout as the longest home run ever hit (Folkard, 2003). My first game. I was hooked.

The Reality of Baseball Sets In

To paraphrase a popular folk song of the time, “*Baseball lives forever, but not so little boys.*” Growing older leads to the realization that it’s not just the uniforms, but the game itself that is sometimes dazzling white, sometimes dingy gray.⁶ Amid the sordid revelations of performance-enhancing drugs,

adultery, drunkenness, and domestic violence, you somehow reconcile yourself with the fact that Cobb was not only the best all-around baseball player in history but one of the game's most despised human beings (Stump, 1996); Rose was not only baseball's all-time hit leader but, like Shoeless Joe, received a lifetime ban from the sport for gambling (Dowd, 1989); Thomson's dramatic "shot heard 'round the world" may have captured the imagination of a generation of baseball fans, but the '51 Giants probably really won the pennant because they were stealing the Dodgers' signs with a telescope hidden in centerfield (Prager, 2001); and Canseco, Palmeiro, Bonds, McGuire—and who knows how many more—hit homers with a regularity that few had ever seen, but to do so they had to deceive their muscles and their fans (Mitchell, 2007).

If you engage in any activity long enough, you will certainly experience its darker side. Like the varsity coach who has you play for him all year but, because he's philosophically opposed to freshmen winning a varsity letter, removes you midway through the last game of the year, a single inning short of qualifying for the one thing you wanted above all else. Or the English teacher who, after you were acknowledged as the league's "Most Improved Player," announces to your class that the only plausible explanation for receiving such an award was that *"you must have been pretty bad to begin with."* Or the unqualified coach who, in a perverted attempt to instill his unique form of motivation and discipline, has you crawl on your hands and knees—despite your two recent knee operations—between the legs of all your teammates as they each take turns swatting you on the behind. Or, ultimately, the diagnosis of nystagmus and astigmatism so severe that your Kansas City Royals' contract could no longer be pursued (recall the pop-bottle-thick lenses on the Cubbies' pintsize batboy).

When you are 6 years old, the dream of playing in the Big Leagues is a certainty; when you are 26, it fades to a remote possibility; but by the time you are 56—like most of the things you cherished earlier in life—it is gone forever.

George, Ernie, Dad, and the old Stadium on the corner of Michigan and Trumbull are gone too. But their legacies are not. After giving hundreds of baseball coaching clinics – in just about every corner of the old mitt – the painful losses of my old friends are tempered by the knowledge that thousands of boys and girls – most of whom I'll never meet – can trace their appreciation for The Game back to the lessons George, Ernie, and Dad lovingly shared on those warm summer nights nearly a half-century ago in the "Thumb" of the first baseman's mitt.

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Notes

¹ Under new management, Briggs Stadium was renamed Tiger Stadium in 1961 and continued as the home of the Detroit Tigers until the end of the 1999 season. The Washington Senators played in Griffith Stadium until 1961 when the team moved its entire baseball operation to Minnesota. Fenway Park opened its doors in 1912 and, as the oldest ballpark currently in operation, remains the home of the Boston Red Sox. The Chicago White Sox played their home games in "old" Comiskey Park from 1910 to 1990 when it was demolished and replaced by a new stadium bearing the same name. In 2003 the naming rights were sold to U.S. Cellular.

² The distinction between a "glove" and a "mitt" is worth noting. A baseball glove, as is the case with any form of glove, has separate finger holes for each finger whereas a mitt (a truncated version of the word "mitten") requires more than one finger to share the same finger hole(s). Fielders usually wear "gloves" whereas first basemen and catchers use "mitts." A "six-fingered" glove has a sixth (nonfunctional) "finger" instead of the traditional webbing between the thumb and index finger.

³ Eddie Gaedel was a little person (3 feet 7 inches tall to be exact) who, as a publicity stunt, was sent to the plate as a pinch hitter by St. Louis Browns maverick owner Bill Veeck in the second game of a double-header with the Detroit Tigers on August 19, 1951. Tiger pitcher, Bob "Sugar" Cain, was unable to hit the reduced strike zone and walked Gaedel on four straight pitches (who stopped to bow to the crowd twice on his way to first base).

⁴ In an unusual move that took place on August 3, 1960, Frank "Trader" Lane, the general manager of the Cleveland Indians lived up to his nickname by sending his team's manager, Joe Gordon to the Detroit Tigers in a straight-up trade for Tiger manager Jimmie Dykes.

⁵ Tiger outfielder Charlie Maxwell was given the nickname “Paw Paw” by Detroit Tigers announcer Van Patrick because of the unusual name of his hometown—Paw Paw, Michigan.

⁶ In professional baseball, the home team customarily wears bright white uniforms (the “good guys”) and the visitors wear a darker (typically gray) “road” uniform (the “bad guys”).