



TAKE ME OUT OF THE BALL GAME

by Michael Finley

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The Losing Team

It is an experience that takes place in crowds.

People cheer; people jeer, people's feet kick over your beer.

You hear them, you smell them, you bump them, you line up behind them, time and time again.

Yes, the people.

Properly, a game isn't a game without them. Imagine the hollow knock of wood against ball in an empty stadium.

That isn't a ball game. You need the milling, the closeness, the rudeness of it, the differentness of all of us affably encroaching upon one another.

The myriad social strata, which never mix anywhere,
mix here.

The rich man argues the fine points of strategy with
the poor man. Patiently, the husband explains to his
wife. The black man, the white man agree, that the
man at bat knows how to play.

The bat cracks. Eight, nine thousand eyes lift in
solidarity.

The ball rises, and higher. All those anxious hands
clench. Like a dentist's vestibule crammed full of
patients.

The ball socks, disappointingly, in the visiting left-
fielder's glove.

A complete stranger nudges you, says, with neither
syllable of introduction nor trace of shyness, "It hung
up."

And you have to answer, and you do, "He got under it."

The thrill of that instant, that crack of hope!

How seldom we experience raw, naked hope in our lives. There must be this ritual, this outward enactment, with all its trappings and sacramentals, to urge that instant, and its giddy, childlike joys, to come, inhabit our flesh.

When we are fans, we are no longer of the adult world, with its somber competitiveness and sense-dulled demands. When we are fans, we are fellows, we are friends. When we are fans, we are not islands.

An ear to the radio and its dull clamor is a link in the chain that attaches us, one by one, on a summer day, on our separate screen-door porches, to the Main, to the game, to our communion, to the ballpark grass that is Pentecost green.

Of course, it is possible to rhapsodize a thing past reality. Baseball is a rough business, and it exacts its toll from us. Particularly here.

"I want to believe, believe me, I do," a serious man I know explains, "but too much is asked. The Twins -- they are impossible. No team I know toys with the emotions as they do, first getting up one's springtime hopes, then dashing them, unfailingly, like sucked-out sno-cones on the bleacher steps of September.

"It is the modern dilemma: love and suffer."

Another acquaintance, a learned man, has made a separate peace. He has decided on perpetual standoffishness.

"The Twins aren't my team," he reasons. "They're simply the employees of a man who chose to locate in Minnesota in order to sell me tickets, peanuts, and a place to park. I'm sorry, but I feel I have to be firm about this. I compare it to falling in love with a prostitute. It's a love that has nowhere to go."

Yet another, quite clinically, examined mathematical probabilities last year and determined that he should ally himself emotionally with the Boston Red Sox. This year he passes, Ophelia-like, distractedly strewing flowers in his path. World Series? he asks. What World Series? The Sox won, didn't they?

The poor fellow, his reason, his abstractions, his statistics to the contrary, has passed on to baseball's Cloud-Cuckoo-Land:

It's just a ways past Brooklyn, he says.

I have seen the best minds of generation racked, pillaged, and torn apart in Metropolitan Stadium.

We have watched as the team owner, Calvin Griffith, systematically tortured us with his penury. And we have watched him let skilled players slip away to higher salaries and better-balanced teams.

We have stuck by younger players, tolerated their youthful errors, long after their errors were no longer youthful, just errors.

We have watched them on TV in their sodden gray road uniforms, beaten up in Baltimore, tarred in Kansas City, humiliated in the Bronx, embarrassed in Milwaukee, and nearly kicked to death in, of all places, Chicago.

Ulysses' team reached home more often.

Shabby, neurotic ballplay, and the death in the arena, the blood on the basepaths, gradually sink deeper and deeper into the fan's psyche, like a tapir in a mire.

Imagine a benchful of lovestruck fans, and one by one, exhausted with defeat, forsaken in the fight, they slump forward, motionless, in the crickety August night.

Is April the cruelest month? Is May mere fantasy? Are the Twins truly the winningest team in the majors? Will

Smalley make it to the All-Stars this year? Will Marshall make us forget Matthewson?

Do we sound as happy as we should be? No.

So many fears prevent pure euphoria. So many treacheries, so many trickeries, like Charlie Brown and his running kick. So many eager hearts tumbling down the altar.

Still, we tune in. Good-humoredly, we wish we could end the season now and advance directly to Series competition. Many crossed fingers, many stiff upper lips, many more white knuckles as the score evens at the bottom of the ninth.

And all for what -- a dream of respect? A sensuous impulse when the pitch uncurls and the bat curls around it, that adrenaline crack?

The ball rises, and higher! The anxious hands are at it again! Our ball rises into the air, our hearts into our throats. All our complexes follow in its human arc.

Only this time, that ball is out of there.

Fan Declares Free Agency

by Guy Bartleby

Veteran fan Mike Finley declared free agency today, casting doubt that he would be available to cheer for the Minnesota Twins next opening day.

"I arrived at this decision after a lot of careful thought, and prayer," Finley said. "Nothing could please me more than rooting for the Twins through to the end of my career as a fan. The players have been great, and management has always made me feel at home here. The thought of packing up and leaving them tears me apart.

"But I have to keep in mind that baseball isn't just a game any more. Sure, I could settle for less and stay here, out of sentiment. Being a lifelong Twins fan was something me and my family always aimed for. But where's the reward? Without some kind of quid pro quo, could I continue to be as good a fan? My competitive nature tells me I should test the market, just to find out my true worth."

Players and management will always remember "Finley's Fly Cast," during the first game of the 1986 League Championship Series. As Doyle Alexander went into his windup in the fourth inning, Finley, sitting behind the Twins' dugout, screamed, "Hey, Doyle, your zipper's open!" The

befuddled pitcher threw one up Gary Gaetti's power alley, and the rest is history.

Kent Hrbek praised Finley's intensity in the stands. "Mike is a fan with intangibles that don't show up in the box scores -- character, spirit, a never-say-die attitude. He pulled the fat out of the fire for us more games than I care to mention."

"I never actually met him, being new to the team, and a rookie," said journeyman Twins infielder Donnie Hill. "But it was always a dream to play for him."

Andy MacPhail, general manager for the Minnesota Twins, tried to put a positive spin on the Finley announcement.

"Mike has been a great fan for many years. He helped the Twins to two world championships. "But we understand his attitude. We intend to sign him for 1993, but he has to understand that that is just one of our priorities. Now that he has taken this step, it may be difficult to return to the way things were."

Insiders speculate that Finley is trying to stick it to the Twins for having rewarded other fans more than him during season. "I saw where they gave Al Lonborg hats and pennants for his family, and one of those headphone radios to listen during games. I have no problem with

Lonborg, but how many games did he actually go to this year -- three?

"The thing about me was, when the bell rang, I was there. Even during that layoff when I had back spasms from getting blown out the revolving door into a mounted patrolman's horse.

"The way I see it, if they have the kind of money to put that kind of package together for a three-game man, they can afford reduced season ticket prices for me, plus a set of those tall plastic cups with the Twins logo on one side and the Marquette Bank logo on the other. We entertain a lot."

Finley is reportedly angling for a multi-year contract with a guaranteed box seat behind home plate, but not behind the screen, "off to the side, so everything isn't cut up into squares." His agent, Lance Tawdry, stipulated that Finley is anxious to be an everyday fan, and not be forced into a platoon system with a fan who performs better in fair weather.

"Finley's a mudder, everyone knows that," Tawdry said. "But that only makes him more curious what it would be like to cheer for another team, where rain has a greater chance of actually hitting the playing field. He feels this would lengthen his career, and it's hard to disagree with that."

Manager Tom Kelly was asked how he felt about Finley's possible departure, and responded by pelting this reported with wrapped sandwiches. "Everyone thinks they understand this game better than me," he exclaimed. "Here, do you want another sandwich?"

Team officials would not say it, but there is the feeling that Finley may have missed a step in last season. During a game with Chicago September 29th, he seemed more intent on popping corn than on Bill Krueger's pitching duel with Kirk McGaskill. Another time, at a Dome game August 11th against the Rangers, Finley stood to sing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," in the sixth inning. "He's not a malingerer," said one Twins official who asked not to be named. "But he'd rather not cheer in pain. The other fans pick up on that."

Apprised of these shortcomings, Finley brushed them away. "I'm not Superman," he said. "But I know that when I stay inside my own capabilities, and not to try to root the ninth inning of the seventh game of the World Series, every at-bat, good things happen.

"I've got years of cheering left in me, and frankly, it hurt when management refused to discuss an extension during the season. I think I might have been distracted by that."

Through Tawdry, Finley has contacted six teams he would be interested in cheering for, all of them on the coasts. At this point, however, the only teams to have contacted him are the Cleveland Indians and Seattle Mariners.

"It would kill me to leave this area. I feel I have established excellent relationships with the players, and I would really miss them. Rachel and I had really hoped to make the Twin Cities our home, even bring our kids here to live with us.

"But what can I say? Baseball is a business."



The Unnatural

It was the damnedest career the game ever saw. Or didn't see. Or sort of saw, but never quite took note of.

Thad Flessum barreled in from the Midwest League in 66 with a fistful of write-ups and a grin on his face. Mention Thad Flessum to the folks back in Ohio, the people who saw him play the sandlots, and their mouths just dropped open.

He was so swift and so strong that ordinary words could not describe him. Instead people got this faraway look, and for a while you thought it was the awestruck expression of rapture, but it was sadder than that, a look that grasped at what might have been.

He was the original bonus baby, the fundamental phenom. But things kept happening, and he never got his look. His first week in Florida, playing against the Red Sox, he went deep on a well-hit line drive. People say they never saw an outfielder cover so much ground so quickly.

Back to the ball, he looked over his shoulder and lost it. By the time he hit the Robert Hall sign ("Hit Me and Win a New Suit!"), he must have been clocking 28, 29 miles per hour. "That wasn't running," one scout said; "that was a rocket to hell."

Asked in the hospital what threw him off, he said he lost the ball in the white of the moon.

Hobbled until July, he took the field for the

second game of a double header against Cleveland, and just before he could make a diving shoestring catch to his left, he stepped into a gopher hole and snapped his shin like a piece of barnwood, and spent the remainder of that season in Ashtabula, clipping hedges by his mother's house on Lake Erie.

In the late innings of an exhibition game in Montreal the following spring, when Flessum was trying desperately to get noticed, he rapped a grounder to third base and headed for first. What he did not know was that the catcher had grabbed a stray thread from his uniform, which rapidly unraveled as he raced down the baseline. He would have been safe had his pants not collapsed around his ankles, crashing him jaw-first into the hard clay. A bit on the modest side for a modern athlete, Flessum draped himself in a few fistfuls of thread and dashed through the opponent's dugout to the locker room, and did not venture out again until the last sportswriter had retired for the bar.

A platinum screw connecting his leg to his ankle, Thad Flessum battled back, through Utica, through Providence, and back to the show. He had lost a step of his speed but he still had that

amazing power to the opposite field. He set a record in the Carolina League that still stands for hitting the greatest number of foul tips (22) before tipping one into the catcher's mitt for an out.

In a June game against the Athletics, batting from the right side, he hit a ball so high that Euclidian mathematicians estimate its eventual trajectory would have exceeded 540 feet from home plate, had it not punctured a hole in the Goodyear blimp, causing 20,000 fans to run screaming down the ramps to their cars as the giant gray skin draped itself, deflating, along the upper mezzanine. The game was forfeited, and Flessum, branded a jinx and a misfit by his team and by the league, was shipped back to the minors.

He was once attacked in the outfield in Fort Worth by a swarm of Africanized bees, suffering stings on ninety percent of his body. He swelled up so bad, and so fast, that the team physician had to read the number on his back to place him.

One lightly attended twinkiter, late in the game, with the flags ripping in a left-to-right wind, Thad followed a hooking, streaking line drive into the

dead part of the ballpark, a shadowy zone where no ball had ever been hit in a night game. The ball presumably landed in Flessum's glove, in a corner between the jutting stands and the outfield wall where no umpire or TV camera could make it out. Though Flessum emerged from the dark, lofting the ball proudly in the web of his glove, no one saw it, and the opposing manager fumed until the second base umpire ruled it a ground rule double.

In a single game in August of 1969, Flessum batted for the cycle in a game in Sioux City called on account of hailstones the size of ducks' eggs. During the Plains League championship series, he leaped five rows into the stands in the tenth inning to snag the winning home run ball -- only to stumble on the seats and experience a severe concussion when his head struck a lead pipe railing, with the ball rolling stillborn from his glove. Witnesses described the sound of Flessum's forehead striking the pipe as something out of "The Three Stooges."

Flessum lay in a coma until Thanksgiving of that year. It was not until he was awakened by the smell of frying bacon at the next bed that he was informed that his team had lost and he had passed

waivers for good.

Arthritic and forgetful, Flessum spent the next two years out of organized ball, but worked the summer carnie circuit across Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and parts of the Dakotas, demonstrating a big league swing to youngsters who would pay twenty five cents to watch with fascination as the battered ballplayer rolled up his pant leg and lowered his head to show them his scars.

But the thing was, Flessum appears on no team photograph published during the fourteen years he spent in professional baseball. Either he was stuck in traffic while the team picture was being taken, or the player in front of him lifted a glove just as the shutter snapped. Even the high school where a showcase of glittering championship trophies recalled the victories he led his team to burned to the ground one cold February night. As did the town's newspaper, later that May.

"I reckon I gave baseball as much as it gave me," Thad Flessum would tell visitors who stopped him on his riding mower on the big lawn overlooking the lake.

"But the hell of it is, I think I belonged, and there ain't no evidence I was even there."

(1981)

Forget it, Jake

Last summer, when I was helping coach youth league baseball, a boy I was trying to help hit better hit a line drive right at the shortstop. He scowled as he headed back to the dugout to get his glove.

"Forget it, Jake," I said to him as he passed me on the baseline, "it's Chinatown."

The kid couldn't possibly get the reference to the 1974 movie. Every now and then I do that, drop some odd tag-line from some ancient source into conversation. In this case the message was right on: "Don't feel bad about being out, there was nothing you could do about that." But the kid, whose name was not Jake (Jack Nicholson was Jake), would never know that.

This put me in mind of a city softball team I was on in the 1970s. It was barely organized ball. The police had a team, the fire department had a team, and various neighborhoods had teams. Ours was the Fair Oaks Freaks, because we hailed from a stoner's paradise not far from the art museum in Minneapolis. Several on our team were heroin users, lining up for methadone every morning. Our pitcher was an Ojibwe of indeterminate age named Julius, who sometimes seemed to fall asleep on the mound.

I had two roommates on the team, Tony and Paul, and each was a powerful hitter. To my memory, nearly every pitch to them was lifted back over the field and over the chain link fence separating us from the tennis court. They were

good, and we were the number two team in the league, after the cops, who just beat hell out of everyone.

This was in the very early days of gay liberation, and one of the teams was the gay team, and they didn't have one strong player, and they lost all their games that first season, by hideous margins. But what I remember was that the first time I came to the plate against them, the catcher, an overweight young man with the expression of Mary at the foot of the cross, tried to comfort me.

"Don't worry if you swing at the ball and miss," he told me. "Just do your best, and whatever that is, that's OK."

He wasn't trying to psyche me out, like a lot of catchers will. He said this from the heart.

I would like to say I took the advice to heart, but it had the opposite effect on me -- I felt I had to hit the ball, and pretty well, too. I did not want to be consoled, I wanted to get on base.

One of my two roommates, Paul, was a Clark Kentish sort of man, built big, and wearing black-rimmed glasses. Paul was an orphan, his parents having been killed -- this is my recollection -- in a car accident when he was a boy. What I remember about Paul is how hard he worked to stay positive, to perform well, to drive that ball predictably over the chain link fence. He was a full time good guy. I think he felt he had to be extra good to belong at all. Once, he was helping me launch my abortive home soda pop business ("Sonny Boy's Root

Beer" -- had a picture of my dog on the label. We were eventually shut down by the city of Minneapolis for manufacturing comestibles in non-industrial zone.) Paul's job that day was capping the bottles of root beer, but he applied the cap with such force that the bottle shattered, and the glass cut his thumb, severing a nerve. Red blood and brown root beer swamped the kitchen table, and mingled on the linoleum floor.

Paul could never feel his thumb again after that, and as his employer -- I never paid him anything, but it was my root beer -- I have to carry that around with me.

I went to Paul's wedding that year. He married a woman named Paulette. He was the first peer of mine to get married. I wonder what became of him, and Paulette, and his thumb.

Me, I loved playing ball that year. I hadn't played since I was 13, and I was too old for the Pony League, and not good enough to make the high school team. But I was good enough for slow-pitch. I loved to put myself in front of a screaming grounder, snag it somehow, and fire it to first and hear the whap! of the ball smacking the trapper. I couldn't hit, but I was murder on those ground balls.

I started going to Met Stadium about that time, and discovered it all over again. I would drink too much beer and scream deliriously as the mediocre Twins ground into one double play after another. The names of greatness: Bobby

Randall, Paul Thormodsgard, Pete Redfern,
Willie Norwood.

It's great when the Bambino busts one and the ball dwindles to a dot and drops behind the Marlboro ad. But I always found meaning in the muffed pop-up, the dribbler to first, the swing and the miss. In the players' misery at having failed, I wanted to tell them, Hey guy, I understand.

Like the man said, it's no disgrace. In Chinatown, or any other place.



The Coach's Daughter

The coach loved his daughter dearly, but she never played ball, not even T-ball. Now here she was, ready for college, and unsure what to do.

"So I guess majoring in parks and recreation is out of the question?" he asked as they idled at a red light. That was about all the career counseling he had in him.

"Dad, you know how I feel about sports."

He grunted. "How about teaching then?" He was a teacher, if you counted health.

"I see what it's like for my teachers. They're all dying for someone to show interest, but none of us ever do. I couldn't put up with that."

"Maybe something to do with computers," he said. "We got you that computer."

"I hate computers," the daughter said. "I especially hate mine."

"I don't know," the coach said. "But, it seems to me, there's got to be something you would really like that you aren't thinking of, or are crossing off the list too soon."

He noticed the oversized tokens in the dashboard coin tray. "I took your brother to the batting cages Saturday. He was hitting 'em pretty good."

The daughter rolled her eyes.

"It's a funny thing," the coach went on. "Most experts tell you that if you're a big strong hitter, you stand way back in the batting zone. That way you can extend your arms and get the most muscle on the ball. You hit it with your arms way out like that, the ball's gonna travel."

The daughter looked out the passenger window. It was going to be one of those conversations.

"But that's not such good advice if you're a poor hitter, or you're in a slump, or you're afraid of the ball," he said, mainly to himself. "That's when I tell 'em, 'Put yourself in danger a bit. Get up close to the pitch. Nothing happens if you miss the ball. But up close, anything can happen. You get a dribbler, or you beat one over the infield. Heck, you get hit, that's as good as a single."

The daughter grimaced. Was her father encouraging young kids to step in front of fastballs? "Is there a point to this?" she asked.

"A point, right. Well, OK, so your brother is swinging away. The first few times we went to the cages he's missing everything. But I move him in close, and he starts to make contact -- foul tips, ground balls and stuff.

"Then he does something interesting. He starts getting mad at the pitching machine. Or pitchers generally. Or something. Because he steps back in the box, and extends his arms. Now he's really getting around, and the ball is rocketing off his bat -- bam, bam, bam. And all the time, he's saying stuff like, 'Didn't think I could hit that one, did you?' and 'Just give me what you

got.' The ball is flying out of there.

"It was kind of cuckoo," the coach said, "but it worked out okay."

The daughter sighed. "So what you're saying is, I have to put myself in harm's way and commit myself to success for good things to happen?"

The coach shrugged. "It's just a story."

"Right, pops. OK, here's my stop, I gotta go."

"You have a good day in there, little girl" the coach said, giving her the thumb-up sign.

She patted his forearm. "I love you Daddy," she called over her shoulder. And ran up the stairs to school.

(1995)



The Three Strikes of Life

The Organic Produce Little League team was taking pre-game batting practice. The stars were smacking the ball hard. Everyone else was missing. After a bit, an old man in brown suit pants put his fingers through the chain links of the backstop. He looked eighty, though his shoes looked only half that.

"You kids want to hit the ball better?" he asked. The better players laughed. What did an old man know about hitting? But a handful of the lesser players tentatively put their hands up. They were willing to try anything.

"Listen up," the old man said. His hands trembled until they fastened around an aluminum bat. Then they seemed strong. His eyes were red, and complexion was mottled, with a stubble of white whisker.

"You get three strikes," he said. "Each one's different. Each strike, you change who you are."

The kids squinted.

"The first pitch is your rookie pitch. The pitcher doesn't know you. Anything can happen. Maybe you close your eyes, you get

lucky, and beat one back up the middle.

"But usually you don't. You miss, and all the weaknesses of the rookie come down on you. You're thinking about failing, and getting ready to fail. You're scared of the pitcher, scared of the ball. You get revved up. You forget what your coaches say and swing crazy, hoping to get lucky. Or you stand like a statue while the umpire calls a strike.

"Most young hitters give up now. They swing at the next two just to get it over. They don't grow in the at-bat. The bat's a white flag, and they're waving it to surrender.

"To have a good rookie pitch, you have to be good inside. Good rookies go up to the plate respecting the pitcher, and humble about their odds. They respect the ball, and shut out everything else.

"You need courage on the first strike pitch, because you're a stranger in a strange land. You put yourself in harm's way, close to the ball, close to the plate.

"Maybe you'll get drilled. It'll hurt. But only a bit. You stand close anyway, because good things happen when you put yourself in a little danger.

"You need faith that if you do it in the right spirit, things will work out.

"That's the rookie pitch.

"By the second pitch, you're in your prime. Now you know what the at-bat is about. You've seen the pitch. You know what you have to do to turn on it. The first strike filled you with adrenaline. Now you're strong. You feel electrified. You feel good. You grip the bat tight.

"The prime pitch is when good things usually happen. You're

ahead of the pitcher, even with the first strike. Because you know what he's got, and you feel good. If you fail on the prime pitch, it's maybe you felt too good. People in their prime get overconfident. They swing too hard. They miss.

"That's the prime pitch." The old man spat, and the spit dripped out at about five points, and he had to wipe some off his lip.

"Third pitch. Now you're a veteran. You're at the end of your rope. If you fail now, there won't be another pitch. It's life or death. You're like an old prizefighter, and you stand almost perfectly still, waiting for your moment. The bat's loose and tight at the same time.

"You're not relying on luck, like the first pitch. Or talent, like the second pitch. Now you're calling on your guts, and everything you've learned.

"You mess up on the veteran pitch when you're angry at the pitcher for making you miss the other two pitches. The bad veteran is always making excuses. He's making up excuses for missing before he misses.

"But the good veteran welcomes the battle. It's serious, but it gives him joy, too. He knows that baseball means pain, and he welcomes the suffering. He may go down, but he's grateful he ever got up. If he goes down, it will be swinging."

"Sir, what if you strike out?" asked one kid, shielding the sun from his eyes with his glove.

"You just hope there's another game, and you're in it." The old man scanned the horizon to the western. "I gotta go, kids. Good luck out there." And he turned and was gone.

The kids mumbled as they got their equipment together. Did anyone know who that guy was? Maybe a retired sportswriter, someone suggested. Or an ex-player. Maybe even a Hall of

Famer, one wishful thinker said.

"No, it's just my dad," said a slender infielder. "He was in the Sixties."

The players nodded sagely and they took the field. In the game, the Organic Produce team skunked the Subway Sandwich team 14-3. And every kid who listened got a hit.

(1996)

The Boys and Dads of Summer

My 10-year-old son Jonathan has been vacillating all summer between his two great loves, baseball and computer games. One day he's digging out ground balls for his team the Comets, and the next he's locked in interstellar combat in a long-ago galaxy far, far away. He's lucky, because he can switch back and forth.

Last week he couldn't switch back and forth, because he spent it bunking in Centennial Hall at the University of Minnesota, as part of the Minnesota Baseball Instructional League. The kids spent five days at Siebert Field and one evening in the Metrodome refining their fielding and hitting techniques, videotaping and critiquing their playing.

The heat was horrible all week. I remembered from my college days what a Dutch oven a dorm could be in warm weather. This was also the week that the Brazilians lost the World Cup finals to France, so Jonathan was treated not only to the 100-degree heat of the dorm room, but the 100-degree anguish of the 300 Brazilian preteen soccer players also staying in the dorm. The wails in Portuguese lasted long into the night.

The first night, arriving late to deliver an oscillating fan, I opened his dorm room door to

see two shiny-faced boys who hardly knew one another, with no TV and no computer games -- nothing to do, really, but inhale, exhale, and perspire.

His roommate Jacob was lonesome for Louisiana, and Jon was half-afraid Jacob would leave him alone in that awful room, but half-willing to quit college himself. He begged me to take him home, talking earnestly about home cooked meals -- the scrambled eggs at the U leaked water -- and the loving embrace of his mother.

After a couple of 93-degree days I started bringing him home for short stints. We were hot there, too, but he benefited visibly from being around his stuff, especially his Star Wars games.

And I took him out the last night to play for the team I help coach, the Comets of the Highland Groveland Recreation Association. Jon was hoping to light up the night sky with his the sophisticated new baseball skills. We won the game with a score something like 20-12, but Jon felt he didn't do his best. He threw a ball to Casey, our first baseman, too hard to catch, and you could see the error haunted him. He wants so bad to be good.

So now he's home again. Thursday is his last game of the tournament that ends his baseball season. With a few timely hits, his Comets could

end the season unbeaten, something to remember all their lives. I know it is something I will remember. I've coached four other teams, and this team is very unusual. We practiced or played eight hours every week this summer. In this age of competing activities, that is unusual. The Comets are a throwback team -- kids who love to play ball.

So Saturday Jon asked if he could get a new game with the allowance we always forget to give him, and I was surprised to hear he did not want a Star Wars title. He wanted EA Baseball 99, a 3D baseball action game that sells for about \$50. We drove to CompUSA, picked up a copy, took it home, and were unable to get it to perform in 3D -- the program was so new that our video card manufacturer has not released new drivers for it yet.

The killer was when I mentioned to him that stores don't like to take opened software back.

Jon was bereft. Fifty dollars is a chunk of money, and he felt he was being punished by the gods of baseball yet again. Rachel told me that while I napped in the afternoon heat, he sobbed quietly at the screen.

So she had him call CompUSA and ask what his options were. The store guy said bring the program in and he could exchange it for another -- a glimmer of hope in a razed world.

When I awoke, he apprised me of the opportunity. I sensed he wanted quick closure on the issue, so we drove back to the store just before it closed and made the switch, to a slightly less-new baseball title, Hardball 6 (from Accolade, also about \$50). Wonder of wonders, back home it installed perfectly, and soon Jon was smacking the virtual ball against the walls of the imaginary stadium. The 3D, Jon assures me, is sensational.

What's it all mean? It was just a warm week with a growing boy. When I nap on the couch now, and Jonnie is in the next room, and I overhear the voice of announcer Bob Costa doing the play-by-play on Hardball 6, it could almost be another time, my time.

And I think how sweet it is to be ten, in the heat of the summer, and the tender moments that are going, going, gone.

I Don't Want to Hear about Dimaggio

Been watching Ken Burns' epic about Baseball on PBS? I have, and something's been eating at me.

At times it seemed that all the stories, all the commentators were New Yorkers.

The players most mentioned all played on New York teams -- Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Joe Dimaggio, Mickey Mantle, Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, Murderers' Row, Roger Maris.

The people on camera a talking were nearly all New Yorkers -- Billy Crystal, Roger Angell, Mario Cuomo, Doris Godwin Kearns, Stephen Jay Gould.

Subliminal message: the history of baseball is the history of the joys and sorrows of New York fans rooting for New York teams. Forget about us hayseeds out here -- our joys and sorrows, played out to smaller audiences, with less press coverage, don't cut it.

Grrr.

All my youth I railed against New York City for getting all of life's gravy. When I finally visited there, late in life, I thought the city and the

populace were perfectly wonderful. But that didn't give them the right to interpose their dreams over everyone else's.

I believe that the most important technological trend of our time is firmly rooted in this resentment of New York and its Yankees. It is the great migration from centralized systems to decentralized or distributed systems.

Jimmy Durante called his city "Da Hotta Da Woild." And that's how New York has functioned to the corpus of the U.S. Wall Street has long been the financial center of the country. Midtown Manhattan houses the corporate headquarters of over a hundred Fortune 500 companies. It has long been the Mecca for the publishing, newsgathering, and telecommunications industries.

Through fifty fledgling years of computing, New York City was the mainframe for the entire world. IBM, AT&T, the new York Stock Exchange.

But look what's happening. IBM is a wreck. AT&T is besieged by hornets. Increasingly, technology analysts predict the demise of the trading pit; there is nothing happening amid the tumult and scraps of paper that could not be done for efficiently, with fewer errors, and 24 hours a day by an intelligent system. (NASDAQ is a virtual trading exchange already, its tasks done completely by computer network.)

Declining attendance in the 1950s spurred Gotham baseball owners to look westward, to Candlestick Park and Chavez Ravine. But it was the development of air travel, reliable air mail and telephones that allowed the Dodgers and Giants to prosper on the West Coast (and the Washington Senators to reinvent themselves as the Minnesota Twins).

Think of all the mailed metropolitan fists losing their grip. CBS losing football to Fox. All the New York-based networks losing market share to country boy Ted Turner. The Yankees improbably shedding their mantle (note dazzling wordplay) as America's team (it's in their name) to upstarts from unbaseball places like Atlanta and unbaseball teams like the Cubs.

There is no place on earth that information can not get to and get out of. PCs, cable, wireless and cellular technologies have made New York a charming antiquity. If King Kong came back from the grave tomorrow, he would have to climb the Sears Tower in Chicago. And so it goes.

Some years ago, oh maybe 1978, I met a friend at the airport, and across the concourse I spotted George Steinbrenner, standing by a gate marked "Tampa."

My friend, a brash fellow who thought himself better informed than he in fact was, insisted on introducing ourselves to Steinbrenner. So we ambled over. My friend introduced himself as a great Yankees fan and shook hands. Noting the departure sign, and unaware that Steinbrenner lived in Tampa, and additionally unaware that there were no big league teams in Florida, my friend said, "So, heading down to play the Tampa team?"

Steinbrenner looked at me and said, "Who is this person?" Only, he used a different word than person.

Well, ha-ha to you George Steinbrenner, because your team may have finished first in this strike-abated season, but that will go in the record books with an asterisk.

And there is a Florida team, only it's in Miami, and on any day they could kick your team's behind, even though they are a lowly expansion team, whose fans are not quite human enough to merit a line in Roger Angell's missives to God, who does not hear the prayers of Floridians.

And when this strike ends, I wouldn't be surprised if the big loser is George Steinbrenner, because he represents everything about New York that the rest of the country is sick to death of.

The melodrama "(Joe loved Marilyn as no man ever loved a woman.)"

The self-centeredness ("Phil Rizzuto was the greatest shortstop to play the position.")

The big money. ("So what if I get paid more than President Hoover?" Babe Ruth said. "I had a better year.")

All the johnny-come-lately, three-skyscraper towns like Milwaukee and Kansas City and Seattle and Minneapolis-St. Paul will grab their share of New York's glittering media revenues. Like barbarians at the western gate, we will buy really good players, from Canada if necessary, and our teams will come play your team.

And then you'll know true baseball sorrow.

A Modest Baseball Proposal

The Minnesota Twins, in case you have been encased in a pulsating pupa the past couple of months, have been soldiering through another difficult season on the field. This year, it's hard for them to hit the ball.

Their onfield tribulations have been made more difficult by a stadium funding crisis which threatens to drive the team into the arms of some outstate billionaire who can get his legislature to do what our billionaire can't get his legislature to do: underwrite with taxpayer dollars a big new building in which to play games.

The rationale for this turmoil is that the team just can't make enough money, and thus be competitive, and thus fire the hearts of locals with victories, without a nice new building. The old building, in which nothing good can happen is, what, 18 years old.

Throughout the controversy, it has struck me how obsolete it all seems. Here we live in an age that is delocalizing like crazy. I can chat on the Internet with a correspondent in Burma as easily as hollering across my neighbor's fence. A surgeon in Johannesburg can direct the slicing open, via satellite, of an esophagus in Minot. A billion dollars can circle the entire globe electronically in half a second. Using ordinary

phone lines, people on six continents can munch caramel rolls and talk.

But baseball pretends it is this unchanged sacred tradition, requiring stadiums. Tradition has nothing to do with it, or Ebbets Field would still be ringing up ticket sales. It has to do with sports economics, an industry protected against competition, and a targeted, captive, local market -- us.

The insistence on same-time/same-place plays right into the hands of the bad guys. They say we need a stadium to celebrate our community's greatness. But baseball about the relationship to "the community" that a crow has to a run-over squirrel. In every other sense, locality in sports died ages ago. It's been over a century since professional ballplayers, wearing a city's colors, were expected to hail from that city. In ordinary life, these people would be called outsiders, "ringers." To keep fans inflamed and turnstiles turning, baseball calls them the "home team." Free agency forever sundered whatever faint threads still connected loyalty and locality.

What we need is a new structure that moves baseball away from the idea of a home team. If it's too expensive to play in \$400 million stadiums, let's find a more affordable medium to play in.

One such structure is getting a workout in California this month. A minor league team based in Fresno, the Fresno Grizzlies have begun to broadcast games not just to local viewers and listeners, but to the entire world, via the Internet.

The game's lazy pace is what makes it perfect for the wired world, says an organizer of the first live Internet video broadcast of a professional baseball game. "Baseball is not like the Indy 500 or basketball, in that there's movement but not on a level that requires a high level of resolution," said the producer of the Internet broadcast.

The first game was broadcast on Memorial Day, between the Grizzlies and the Albuquerque Dukes -- AAA teams for the San Francisco Giants and Los Angeles Dodgers. Anyone with an Internet connection was free to watch, and I did, at the Grizzlies web site (<http://www.fresnogrizzlies.com>). It was also shown on The Interaster (<http://www.amintercast.com>).

It wasn't quite like watching a game on TV. The system showed images of ballplayers running, hitting, and sliding at up to 10 frames per second. That's better than the choppy video standard you are familiar with for cheap teleconferencing, which jerks along at only one frame per second.

The action scenes, speeded up so you felt you were missing something, suffered the most. The rest of the game was pretty good. Certainly, it was less social sitting at the screen than sitting behind the visitor's dugout.

Still, it was baseball. On the Internet. And the first-place Grizzlies extended their winning streak to 10 with a 5-1 victory. Go, Grizzlies.

Now, big league teams with lavish cable deals won't want to go this route. But it points toward a new way of communicating for smaller clubs with far-flung fans. And it opens the possibility of a team with no home stadium at all. A game could be shot anywhere, in a corn field or back alley. Or it could be made up entirely, like Rotisserie League play, using computers to let probabilities churn out virtual results.

I say, go local, and have a real hometown team, or go loco, and don't let your imagination be fettered by a little thing like a 100-million-ton stadium. Rotisserie baseball, and now Internet baseball, have shown us the way, cheering plays that may "happen" only in the cyberspace of the mind.

For years we've felt that high-priced players are phoning in their plays anyway. Let's let them do it for real.

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Death and The New York Yankees

When I was a kid things mattered more. Like baseball. You listened to the radio hopefully, anxiously, as each inning drew you closer to life, closer to death. Of course, my team was Cleveland, and this was the late 1950s, so we're talking death here more often than life. And as my heroes fell, one after the other, it was like something from the House of Atreus, something out of scale to my own life in small-town Ohio, a sense of the annihilation of the valiant in plain view of their loved ones.

In Cleveland, that's just the way things were. We'd look at our roster and match it against the opposing teams, and we'd think that man for man, on an excellent day, we could beat anyone. I recall Rocky Colavito, Larry Doby, Tito Francona, Jimmy Piersall, Herb Score, Minnie Minoso -- demigods, all right, but no cigar.

We should have won lots of games, and I guess we did win sixty or seventy every year out. We were passionate, and good, we burned with the pure flame. But sooner or later the drone of the New York Yankees charter plane would sound overhead, and a terrible shadow would pass over the city.

The Princes of Death, that's what they were, the dark side of Nature, in gray visitors' pinstripes. Mantle and Maris, Larson and Ford, Lopez,

Kubek, Richardson, Skowron. Gray knights,
extinguishers -- their killers could kill our killers.

As a child I blamed the city. My family visited
New York when I was four, and I screamed when
my father held me aloft from Rockefeller
Center's observation deck, and I gaped at the
magnitude of that city of spires and obelisks. It
went on, forever, and up, forever. All we had
back home was the tower over the train station.
Power resided here, as Pluto did in Dis.

They even made our aches and pains seem pale
and puny, or silly. We had Jimmy Piersall,
tortured by life's competition and unfairness,
biting his glove, scaling the backstops and
calling out for pity. Whereas they had Mantle,
broken and bruised from head to toe, wrapped
like the Cid, playing beyond life, beyond any
earthly need for victory. We wept because we
lost, they wept and they won.

They say children have unfettered imaginations,
but that's not so.

Laws bound me -- I could no sooner imagine
Mantle playing for the Indians than I could
imagine Cleveland itself tearing free from the
lakebed and rising to join once again with the
planet Jupiter. I could no easier imagine Johnnie
Antonelli just winning a game in 1959 than I
could imagine all the stars we had traded away
or given away returning to Cleveland out of

loyalty to the town, to me, for all I had given them -- my unsullied panache.

Now, as a grown up, I do think of Mantle in red and white. How we would have celebrated him. We would not have held him up against Dimaggio or Ruth for comparison. We would never have booed him as he faltered in his bandages and splints. We would have hailed him daily with trumpets and timbrels. He would have been the greatest player to ever don the Indians uniform.

Instead, in New York, he's a curious half-finished figure, swathed in ambiguity and misgivings. When he took a job as gladhandler at Atlantic City, he was banned from baseball. We think of him, perhaps thanks to Jim Bouton, who could not have sold his book unless he had once been a successful Yankee, as the first superstar we knew the unglorious truth about.

Up and down the roster, the greatest stars are seen in subdued light. Dimaggio -- should he have played in Boston instead, with its looking left field fence? Maris -- would he have been better off in Kansas City or St. Louis for the entirety of his career? Gehrig -- so durable he was utterly leveled by the disease that takes its name from him. Thurmon Munson -- he was flying into Cleveland when his small jet splattered on the runway, killing him.

The Truth of Ruth -- only he could taste of the Big Apple and not be poisoned. The day after the Bellyache Heard Round the World, with its two dozen hotdogs plus umpteen sodas, beers, etc. ad nauseam, he rose again. The magic was at it most powerful at that moment.

I believe it was a deal with the devil which lifted New York to its level of play, and of being. I am thinking of the year 1920. New York had never won a pennant then. Neither had Cleveland. In the final weeks of the season the two teams were duking it out for all they were worth. It was hit and run baseball all the way, with all stars like Cleveland's scrappy Ray Chapman leading the way in a scramble for life.

In the final series of the season, the two competitors squared off for the killing round. And New York turned to its most lethal weapon, pitcher Carl Mays. Mays has been called "the most underhanded pitcher of all time," which you could take either of two ways. One was, that's how he threw the ball, underhanded and with great wickedness.

The other was, he was a crook -- he could throw a whole baseball game as easily as a baseball, and was reputed to do it regularly, for cash. Years later he would take bribes in a World Series game.

And he was the king of the beanballers -- "No Mercy Mays" they called him. So picture this figure taking the mound, tweaking his mustache. He will be the priest. And for a pure sacrifice, put Ray Chapman into the batter's box. A Hall of Fame candidate by any measure, Chapman had been tearing up the league with his steady glove and with his spray-style of singles hitting.

Why Chapman dug in against Mays as the low pitch rose and headed toward his temple is a mystery no one has answered, not those in the Polo Grounds stands that day or in the history books since. But the ball found its target, Chapman crumbled and was borne away, and died shortly.

He was the only fatality in the millions of professional baseball games ever played. At the hands of a team which would go on not only to win that pennant, but dozens and dozens over the next sixty years. Cleveland would never again, except for a pair of uprisings in the '40s and '50s, be much more than the pale corpse of the fallen shortstop Chapman. Our future would be to forever stand in against the riser, coming at us. Mays would always have two Manichean meanings for baseballers -- that of the giver of life (Willie) and that of the taker away.

And the Yankees, who would the following year buy outright a big pitcher from Boston named George Ruth, a messiah who would build a new

temple in the Bronx, in and of himself, had offered up the pure oblation, a blood object.

I was just a boy, and could not fathom that deals could be cut involving seven generations, that the gods were so interested in the affairs of men, that the heavens would appoint Exterminating Angels here on earth, and fly them to our cities to put us and our boyish hopes to the sword.

A few years ago word circulated that Joe Dimaggio had discontinued sending his daily rose to the grave of his wife. We winced. Just as tragedy was the price of godliness, so was the rose an atonement to the world -- not for Marilyn but for all the rest of us who had also brushed too close against the power of the contest. Baseball had been the game, but mortality was its outcome.

A Web Page for the Riverdogs

My son's summer baseball team has not even met as I write this, but as coach I have already created a web site for the team, called the RiverDogs. It lists the kids' names, when and where the games are played, and asks parents to help out with the weekly treats. You can see it, if this sort of thing fascinates you at <http://mfinley.com/baseball/riverdog.htm>.

Why a web page? Because it's fun, and kids are into that. You can create a newspaper in which you are the star, or your kids are stars. In a group like a baseball team, which doesn't really see one another very often or for very long, a web page can be a unifying device, like the red tee-shirt my RiverDogs will wear, or like a class ring or school yearbook.

And because it's easy. Putting up a web page used to be pretty frightening. You had to master at least a little of the language of the web, HTML. And you had to understand how to upload material to the site via ftp -- not difficult, but not a snap for casual computer users, either. Now you can edit and load a page directly from your browser, Microsoft Internet Explorer or Netscape Navigator.

And if you use Windows 95 or a Macintosh, you are freed from the filename strictures of eight

characters plus a three-character suffix. This is important because the "home base" file for your site must be named index.html, which is an impossible filename for a pre-Windows 95 PC. So after uploading it as index.htm, you had to rename the suffix to give it that last "l." And you had to do this every time you made the eeniest, beensiest change. A small thing, but enough to fry the grown-up mind.

But this home page is for kids. When I was a kid, the local paper managed to report the scores of even peewee baseball. I remember once I pitched a game and won (memorable in itself), and savoring seeing my name in 5-point type among the boxscores in the Lorain Journal.

My plan isn't to publish scores; we could lose every game, after all. But I think the kids will enjoy seeing overnight reportage of the good things that happen during the games: the kid who surprises everyone by getting a hit, good plays in the field, anything funny that happens during a game, like a dog running onto the field, or buying pizza afterwards. The website will be our own private sports page.

I can scan a Polaroid picture of the team, or even do individual pictures, and make a fancy program for everyone.

This will be my fourth year coaching. I started when Jon was 5, at the T-ball level. I explained

the basics of the game to the kids but I overlooked the basics of the basics. The first time an opposing batter hit the ball through the infield, every player left his or her position and headed for the ball, where they fought among one another for the privilege of picking it up. I called it our "swarming defense."

But by the end of the first season, the girl who showed up in tears her first time at the plate was getting on base every time. She and another girl made a nifty double play in the last game, and I almost burst.

I once had a boy make an unassisted triple play at second base that was so complicated and so comical and took so long that I can't describe it. People who had gone weeks without seeing a conventional out stood around with their mouths open, trying to comprehend what had happened. The triple play didn't count anyway, as the other team gets to bat around regardless of "outs."

What a different game than the one I played when I was nine. We met on a playing field behind the U.S. Automatic plant in our Ohio town, and the umpire might be drunk, and our coaches -- our fathers -- might get arrested for fighting. Winning was everything, and the game was often played to placate estranged parental egos, not so kids could have a little fun chasing a ball.

Not every kid thrives. I remember one boy who got zero pleasure holding a bat. In the field his attention was everywhere but on the game. He seemed sullen and out of synch. One game, an Army Reserves training troop carrier from the airport zoomed overhead, though, and this kid started bubbling over about what kind of plane it was, its capacity, and how he had a model just like it hanging in his room. He never did quite glom onto baseball, but it was nice knowing there was something he loved and was good at.

When another 7 year old, named Cooper, found out I wrote a computer column, he battered me incessantly with his insights into the latest Pentium chip, the C++ language, and asynchronous communications protocols. Here was a kid who was up to his ears in diodes, who might need an extra dimension to stick with baseball another year, or two.

Cooper, this web page is for you.

At the Ball Park

Ball Day at the ball park
and before the game
Lyman Bostock throws
out a couple dozen balls,
and all us fans
stand on our seats and
reach for them.

When Carew's turn comes
everyone cheers, even
the kids stop scouting
for ice cream in
a cup for a minute.

And when the vendor
does come by he stands
in everyone's view, so
we watch him instead,
pouring two bottles
of beer at a time, holding
his dollars in his teeth.