

I Love Baseball

By Curtis Jerry Smothers



I love baseball. It is a visceral thing that is nearly impossible to explain rationally, but I shall try.

One explanation is that I was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri, a true baseball town where idols like Stan "The Man" Musial, Ken Boyer, Wally Moon, and that incomparable pitcher Bob Gibson remain imprinted in my psyche like holy cards from my early Catholic school training.

When my brothers and I were boys in North St. Louis and the Cardinals were in town hosting another National League team on a Monday, we would take the bus to Sportsman's Park on Grand Avenue. Mondays were "ladies' day," and the ladies, along with any kids they had along with them, would get free admission.

The strategy was for us to ask some kind looking woman to "be our mother" for that day. It was a ploy that went straight for the maternal instinct, got us free entrance to a baseball game, and sometimes the lady would even buy us a bottle of soda (yes, in a bottle) and maybe a hot dog.

Those were the days before baseball players made millions, before free agency removed all player hometown loyalty, and before steroids made a hulk out of the previous normal-sized Barry Bonds.

Despite the erosion of all those halcyon days, the game still has my total loyalty. Here are the reasons:

Baseball is orderly.

It has a player lineup in which each person brings a statistical record that provides a usually reliable predictor of performance. Except for the loopy designated hitter rule (see the link at the end of this article), each player has to earn his individual turn at bat by playing for the team in a defensive position on the baseball field. Bad fielding is forgiven by good hitting and vice versa.

Baseball is difficult and sometimes dangerous.

The batter has less than one second to decide whether to swing at the pitch. The fielder must gather in a struck ball with split-second reactions. If the fielder happens to be a pitcher who has just tossed a 90 mile per hour pitch at a batter who strikes it straight back at him, you have a potentially dangerous situation.

Baseball is, in short, a difficult game to master. Watching professionals muscle a fast ball into the center field gap or the agile fielder jumping seven feet in the air to rob a batter of a home run make the game a joy to watch.

Baseball is forgiving.

Even the best professional baseball hitters fail to reach base about seven out of ten times at bat. The game is stacked in favor of the pitcher, who from 60 feet 6 inches from the batter, hurls a small, hard sphere at a player holding a baseball bat.

Chances are the batter will strike out, miss hit the ball to the ground; or, even if he succeeds in hitting the ball into the air, a fielder will most often catch it before it hits the ground.

The game is forgiving because, when the player actually hits a line drive or knocks one over the fence, fans forgive all past failures until the next time.

Baseball is an equal opportunity sport.

Sammy Sossa, that great ex-Chicago Cub, hails from the Dominican Republic, where baseball is like a religion. Sammy once said, "Baseball has been very, very good to me." Sammy no doubt played in the slums of his Caribbean Island home with a makeshift baseball glove fashioned from a milk carton.

From his humble beginnings, Sammy earned millions, and he has, no doubt, improved the lives of many, many people in his family and community.

The game is multigenerational.

I gained my love for baseball from my grandfather, who was a lifelong St. Louis Cardinal fan. During the summer, he never missed a broadcast game. The man was an encyclopedia of baseball statistics and would complain, criticize and moan at failed batters or muffed fielding opportunities. When I remember my long dead grandpa, I cannot help but recall his love of the game.

Finally, baseball means that winter is done, that summer has arrived and a new season of my beloved game has begun.