



For some fathers, some of their greatest memories with their sons and daughters are taking them to their first baseball games, throwing wiffle ball batting practice in the backyard, or playing catch until it gets dark. Great grandfathers pass down tales of Ty Cobb, Shoeless Joe Jackson, and Babe Ruth to their children who pass on stories of Bob Feller, Ted Williams, and Joe DiMaggio to their children who pass on stories of Roberto Clemente, Rod Carew, and Pete Rose to their children who will eventually tell their children about Albert Pujols, Greg Maddux, and Josh Hamilton.

As we celebrate fathers this weekend, it's a good time to salute them for instilling in all of us a passion for the greatest sport on the planet. You'll find the occasional baseball encyclopedia without a y chromosome, but it's safe to say that the majority of us got interested in baseball due to our fathers.

Some dads enriched their child's natural talent by paying for expensive travel teams or one-on-one training sessions. Other dads knew their kid wasn't very good, but supported him or her anyway. For those of us who were lucky to have our fathers in the picture and as an active part of formative years, those are the things we will remember forever. If you're reading this column, I know you're a baseball fan, so I know you'll know what I mean when I say that those times with dad are some of the most irreplaceable that we have ever experienced.

As I've said in this column before, I, unfortunately, was never pushed to play organized baseball, even though my father played softball five-to-seven nights per week when I was a little kid. Many of my summer nights were spent at dusty diamonds being a bat boy for whatever bar my dad was playing for. He rarely drank before or after games. He just liked the athletic competition.

He was a good player, usually playing first base and always hitting in a spot where he was expected to drive in runs. Sometimes, I'd tag along with him on trips to tournaments with his Local Steelworkers Union. Even if he was tired from playing a doubleheader on Saturday afternoon, we would still go up to the vacant grass lot up the street and he would hit fly balls to me until I couldn't see the ball off the bat anymore. I never wanted to hit and I think that bothered him because he loved to hit.

Some of my first childhood memories are of running around the yard with my black, plastic wiffle ball bat, pretending I was Candy Maldonado, even though my pasty white skin was nowhere close to Maldonado's complexion. Once I graduated from hitting off a tee, the fenced-in side yard no longer contained the balls I hit. It must have been at that point that I developed a distaste for hitting because I always had to go chase the ball. Even as a child, I found it made more sense to be chasing the ball when it was hit to you, not after you hit it.

My dad kept playing softball and I gravitated toward hockey. He was a goaltender in high school, so playing hockey was just fine with him. We went to more Cleveland Lumberjacks games than Cleveland Indians games. My uncle was a season ticket holder up in Section 554 at Jacobs Field and the nights I would get to go with my dad were a lot of fun. We didn't go very often because he worked a lot and preferred to watch on television instead of in person. He was able to get his brother's tickets for the 1997 Home Run Derby, which was a thrill for both of us, even though his favorite player, Jim Thome put up a zero.



My most memorable time at the ballpark with my father was during the second season of interleague play. It was the year of Mark McGwire's home run chase and the Cardinals were in

town. The ballpark was abuzz with McGwire well on his way to a record-setting season and the Indians in the midst of their sellout streak. We went down to the ballpark early to take in Cardinals batting practice.

My dad had this Regent glove that he used for softball. When he used to hit me fly balls, that was the glove I always wanted to use. It was too big for my hand, but it felt like it could catch grapefruits with ease. It had a 14.5" pocket and was broken in just like a pair of well-worn jeans.

He brought that glove with him to batting practice. McGwire stepped into the cage. The Home Run Porch was packed with people expecting to see a show. On McGwire's second-to-last round in the cage, he hammered a ball to deep left field. My dad had positioned himself up against the back wall next to the souvenir stand that is built in to the area by the media entrance.

The trajectory of the ball was perfect, hitting him right in the pocket of the glove and in a spot where nobody else could get to the home run. With his back up against the wall and his 6'2" frame and long arms, he easily secured the catch and got a smattering of applause from the others on the Porch. I was 11 at the time and it was a big moment for me. In retrospect, as I look back, I chuckle at myself for being so excited over a mere batting practice home run, since dozens of them are hit every day. I don't remember the score of the game or who won, I just remember that catch.

We had tickets the next night as well. We got there early yet again and my dad suggested that we go down by the first base line and see if we can get McGwire to sign the ball. It was a mob scene down along the first base line as McGwire began to sign. My dad, standing in the second row, reached the ball out and said "Mr. McGwire, I caught this last night during BP. Would you sign it for my son?" McGwire laughed and said "Yeah, right," and moved right on down the line. In this case, persistence (or McGwire's apathy) paid off. My dad inched down the line and asked again. "Mr. McGwire, seriously, I caught this last night. Will you sign it?" McGwire took the ball, looked at it, and then signed it.

I shoved the ball into my pocket, kept it covered with my hand, and walked up the aisle with my dad. He asked if I wanted to go back out to the Porch again to see if we could get another one. Again, the Porch was packed. Again, McGwire stepped into the cage. Again, my dad reached up out of the sea of people and caught another McGwire BP home run. We never got that ball signed because it was just a two-game series.

I still have both balls and the memory still means a lot to me, even though I have found out that Mark McGwire was a cheater and the historic 1998 summer deserves an asterisk.

Since those two June days in 1998, I have gone to only a handful of baseball games with my father. In that span, we went to more Cleveland Barons hockey games than I could count. He grew apart from the game when his playing days were over and I grew closer to it and morphed into the baseball fanatic that I am today.

We still talk baseball periodically, though a lot of it dominated by his disgust of high salaries and players who are “assholes”. We haven’t played catch in probably three years. He hasn’t hit me a fly ball in probably eight or nine years. The batting helmet he used to wear to games with a wine cork glued to the top of it in light of the Albert Belle corked bat scandal is still in the basement.

The last Indians game we went to together was May 22 of last year. I remember it because I kept the ticket. It was the first game we had gone to together in probably 10+ years. It was a hot day and the Indians rolled to a sweep over the Reds.

He doesn’t care about sabermetrics or who the Indians trade targets are. He’ll listen to every game on WTAM 1100 at work and flip back and forth between the Indians game and something else at night. He won’t watch every pitch like I do.

But, I know that it was those summer nights on those dusty diamonds watching my hero and idol slug doubles to left center and clear the 325-foot sign on the chain link outfield fence that set the wheels in motion for me to become a diehard baseball fan.

Happy Fathers’ Day to all the dads out there, especially mine.