

# Baseball and beer, that's what brought me here?

by Randal Smathers

It is the time of year again, when spring rituals begin: birds and crocuses arrive, the Stanley Cup playoffs start, girls shed those heavy winter clothes, and young men's hearts beat to thoughts of . . . baseball!

I don't know why I fell in love with baseball. Maybe because it is a great way to spend a summer evening — propped in the third-base bleachers, sipping on a cold beer, chewing on a Ducey-dog, or some peanuts, and alternately watching the Trappers or the cute fans in

shorts.

Maybe, but I doubt it. After all, the beer is usually lukewarm, the hot dogs undercooked, the peanuts rancid, and the setting sun blinds you for the first five innings. But don't get me wrong. I enjoy going to Trappers' games and have a great time when I do, but I don't think that's why I fell in love with The Game.

Watching the bigs on TV didn't do it either, although I have passed many a lazy Saturday watching the Game of the Week and listening to Vin Scully, Tony Kubek, and Joe

Garagiola.

There are just too many things wrong with the majors these days though. The DH, plastic grass, batting gloves, cocaine, millionaire players and owners who don't care, are just a few. Base-running gloves and statistics on the shortstop's slugging percentage against right-handers-who-drink-Miller-Lite-coz-it's-less-filling, when the air-conditioners are blowing out to left in the Bozo-Dome in suburban Minneapolis-St. Paul represent some other less-than-perfect things about Major League ball. Nope, not a love affair there.

I don't love baseball because of beer-and-slowpitch leagues either, but if anybody needs a leadoff hitter who can play third, give me a call.

I think I might have started to love baseball because of Little League — a field of combat where even the runts have a decent chance. I was just such a kid and new in town to boot. But after a short penance — if half a season in right field and batting eighth counts as penance — I began to be accepted for what I could do. I'm sure a lot of kids went through similar trials, and probably most of them found their own paths, but for me baseball was the great equalizer.

When you grow up in a small town, sports are limited; in my case the choices were hockey, basketball, rugby, baseball and box lacrosse. Although I tried them all except lacrosse (if God had wanted me to play lacrosse, he would have made me bigger, stronger and a lot dumber than I am), baseball held the best chance to the little guy who worked hard. Hey, look at Pee-Wee Reese.

Now I know that the average major-leaguer is about 6'2" and 185

lbs., and that a good big man still has an advantage over a good little man, but that really doesn't matter.

Every time I see a professional game I just know I could have made the majors "If I'd'a bin scouted, if I'd'a bin a little faster, if I'd'a bin able to hit da coive ball..."

Obviously I never had a shot at pro ball. In fact, I didn't get close. Most of us don't but somehow with baseball, like with no other sport, the game seems similar on T.V. to the one we played as children.

It is often said that to hit major-league pitching is the most challenging feat in sports. The fact that the ability to succeed at it one time in three will make you a rich man proves its difficulty. But it doesn't look hard: "Hell," thinks the fan, "I could've hit that pitch."

Therein lies the charm of the game. It looks so simple on that level, then you start to see the complexities develop. First in the batting order, in fielding position, then in strategies like the hit-and-run versus the steal with one out. If you can handle all that, chances are you're hooked. Simple as that — from casual fan to ardent, leather-lunged "Throw the bum out!", second-guesser.

Ah, baseball! No other game quite like it. Excuse me now, I have to check up on who the Reds have to platoon with Buddy Bell at third.

You see, Buddy has a problem hitting righties on turf at night, and hard-throwing lefties give him fits in the day games. But that's another story.



Baseball fever — they're warming up in the Butterdome.

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Tuesday, April 7, 1987

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