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Playing Like a Girl

My father taught me to swing lefty the first time I picked up a baseball bat, although I was already a confirmed righty when it came to everything else. He had high hopes for me; he says today, 18 years later, “I might have eventually suggested you try switch-hitting.” My career ended before I reached high school. Still, I enjoy the attention when I pick up a bat and somebody (usually a male) says, “Oh no, honey, you’re holding it wrong,” and I inform them that I bat lefty.

My life with baseball began soon after birth, as I drooled my pureed carrots onto a Chicago White Sox bib and wore a baby Sox hat with a pompom on top that my mom hated (“It was bush,” she still contends). My love for the sport wavered throughout the years, although beginning in college, I began to connect with the game more than I did before. Perhaps this is because I attend college in pitifully baseball-lacking Washington DC, or because my parents are not around to turn on the Sox radio announcers, Ed Farmer and John Rooney, so I must be responsible for my own baseball intake, checking the scores on the Internet and scanning ESPN’s “Bottom Line.” Although the presence of baseball has been constant throughout my life, my appreciation for it has not always been stable. It has had its ups and downs, and at one point, I’m ashamed to admit, I even rooted for the Cubs.

I relate to Doris Kearns Goodwin, as she says in her ode to the Brooklyn Dodgers, *Wait Till Next Year*, “I could not talk about my experience as a fan without also telling

the story of my life as a young girl reaching adolescence.” I feel the same way, although my story extends past my teenage years.

It was not just baseball that my father taught me to appreciate, however, it was baseball played by the Chicago White Sox. My father inherited the love of baseball from his dad, who played minor league ball, served as second baseman for Chicago’s All-City team in 1927, and even met the great Bambino himself, Babe Ruth. My Polish great-grandparents settled in Bridgeport, on the South Side of Chicago, which meant that they cheered for the South Side team, the White Sox. The Sox were the working-class team, Comiskey Park an oasis in the middle of the hazy stockyards-area of town. John Kass, a columnist for the *Chicago Tribune* since 1983 and self-proclaimed “rabid Sox fan,” describes the contrasting North Side residence of the Cubs, where “trees were in full bloom, the grass was green, and the streets were clean.”

Kass’ memories of the South Side are vivid. “When I was a kid, I remember people would return early from work at the stockyards, sit outside on their porches, drinking their beer and listening to the Sox game. You could smell the stockyards; the air was hazy, and crawling with bacteria.” The site of many ethnic neighborhoods, “The South Side was a place of urban unrest, refugees and displaced people. The White Sox meant more to them than the Cubs did to casual frat-boys.” Almost every time my family traverses back to the South Side to catch a game, my parents take time to point out their old houses, where I can imagine these neighborhood scenes taking place.

Dad grew up in the baseball-worshipping `50’s, his world also centered in the South Side. He, too, recalls Comiskey Park as an island of the South Side: “The grass there was always greener than anywhere else in the neighborhood.” He collected cards,

memorized lineups and batting averages, sneaked in radio wires to listen in on important games during school, and celebrated when the Sox won the pennant in 1959 as city officials set off the sirens in celebration, sending some Chicagoans into air-raid panic. Needless to say, he was eager to pass on his love for the sport and was thrilled when my brother Jack was born when I was two. Not that I would be excluded from participating, but all Americans pledge allegiance to the sanctity of fathers and sons bonding over our national pastime, symbolized in that idyllic game of catch. However, Jack was born with fairly severe eye problems, including almost zero depth perception. He would never play any sports that involved balls in motion, especially those zooming towards his head.

The eye problems were just a technicality, however. Shockingly, my brother gradually revealed that not only would he not play, he would not care. Jack had, and still has, no interest in baseball. To this day, whenever we go to a game as a family, the only way my brother will come along is with bribery in the form of hot dogs and churros.

Thus, my father turned to me when it came to baseball. Soon after I learned to swing a bat at a tee, Dad retained me in the back yard during the warm months for what seemed like hours, offering me helpful but indecipherable advice such as, “You’re stepping in the bucket!” and “You’re throwing like a girl!” (My red-faced retort that I *was* a girl still did not exempt me from throwing like one.) As the sun set and my Carlton “Pudge” Fisk bat with hearts drawn upon it grew heavy, my Dad still wouldn’t let me head indoors until I got “Five more good hits.”

Even after I had smashed a few balls satisfactorily into the neighbors’ yard, we still were not finished until Dad prompted me with, “What did Babe Ruth say about baseball?” and I answered doggedly, “Be good to baseball and baseball will be good to

you.” If my father ever had a mantra in his life, this was it. He later found it absolutely hilarious to apply this saying to any of the other sports I participated in: “Be good to badminton and badminton will be good to you.”

While teaching me how to play baseball, Dad taught me about the White Sox as well. Whether I wanted them or not, the names of the players, minute details, and major events have stuck with me over the last 22 years. My water cup for grammar-school paintings was a 1984 Sox souvenir mug, featuring '80's players like Ron Kittle (I was always amazed that somebody so nerdy-looking was supposedly such a good player), Greg Luzinski (who went to high school with my Dad), Carlton Fisk (my all-time favorite), and Harold Baines (who also can't seem to detach himself from the Sox, after playing for them on three separate occasions and even having his number retired although he is still on the team...again). Every trip to Dad's downtown office was like visiting a Sox memorabilia museum, filled with bats, balls, ticket stubs, clipped articles, a membership card to the Nellie Fox Society (an organization that successfully lobbied for the Hall of Fame inclusion of the '50's second-baseman), and an actual seat from the old park. My family went to the last game at the old Comiskey Park on September 30, 1990, when the Sox beat the Mariners. I saw the Sox lose at the first game at the new stadium, too, as the haunted shell of the old stadium lurked across the street.

Dad forgets or garbles the names of people, movies, stores, even food (how hard is it to remember “couscous”?) but he remembers plays, players, and batting averages as if they were his address and social security number. “In 1959 I could look at a Sox game schedule and tell you whether the Sox won or lost each game.” Even though I was too young to witness many of his fondest memories, the enthusiasm of his stories has made

teams such as the South Side Hitmen and the Winning Ugly Sox unforgettable. He details the origins of the nickname of the '50's "Go-Go Sox:"

"I remember watching [shortstop] Luis Aparicio reach first base, and then the entire park would start chanting, 'Go, go, go!' The pitcher would throw to first base 20 times, but we all knew that he was going to steal that base, and he always did."

Even immersed in Sox-education, I still was not enamored of baseball when I was younger. I didn't mind playing, but I was sensitive about attending the games. They were boring. Boorish people behind me would spill stinking beer on my head. I was so afraid of the booming fireworks that leapt from the exploding scoreboard that I prayed that the Sox would never score home runs. I even attempted a stint as a Cubs fan, which ended after my parents informed me that I was entitled to my choice, as long as I moved out of the house. My relationship with baseball may have hit its all time low at an ignominious moment when I was about five, during the waning time when you could still do whatever you wanted at a baseball game and not be shooed away by ushers. The Sox's hideous orange mascot, Ribby, danced on top of the dugout, and my parents, apparently eager to humiliate me, thought that it would be cute if I danced with him. I stood on the dugout for about two seconds before I decided that Ribby was not fun, but scary. As he tried to hug me, I squirmed out of his grasp, making him fall down as I ran back to my seat in terror. Fortunately, my parents and Ribby were not the only ones who shared in the fun; the entire moment was captured on the scoreboard screen.

Gradually, through means both honorable and shallow (and probably partially through osmosis), I went from a girl who had parents who loved baseball, to a girl who loved baseball. Playing with my friends in grade school, I increasingly came to like

baseball; it became fun and less of a chore. I began developing my own interest in the game, not just going along with it because I had to; I would actually ask my father what an R.B.I. was, or why somebody would decide to bunt, instead of hating all the obscure terms I didn't understand. The Sox became even cooler when they shrugged their geeky and boring red-white-and-blue uniforms and adopted the cool-yet-classic black-and-white pinstripe uniform, which was made popular by various rappers who sported the caps.

I feel a bit shameful to admit this, but as I learned my way around the sport and its language, I also realized what a novelty a girl who could talk baseball was. Most girls I knew in eighth grade would shut up and walk away when boys would talk sports in school, but I could yap right along with them. Goodwin phrases it perfectly when she writes, "Being able to talk at length to a boy was something special. And it was my passion for baseball that made it possible." I remember how jealous my friend Donny was of my *Sports Illustrated for Kids* Bo Jackson card I had taped inside my desk. He tried, futilely, to buy it from me.

It is a unique position in life, and a privileged one, to be a girl who loves baseball. It must be so difficult to pretend or to try to take an interest in the sport with no actual care for it. Here I am thinking of those ubiquitous trophy wives at games, who sit rigidly, overdressed, and delicately try to sip their beers. It is easy to root for a team just because they are from your city, but it takes finesse to *know* your team and to *know* the game. I don't know many girls who appreciate both the sport and its legacy.

I was lucky enough to have a roommate my freshman year at Georgetown who loved the sport (a Yankees fan, but one of the few good ones). Sophomore year, Liz and I watched Mark McGwire break Roger Maris' home run record. We clutched each other

and choked up, watching McGwire's joy and his emotional encounter with the Maris family. When one of our other roommates, Brooke, walked into the room, we tried to articulate to her why she should watch this amazing moment in history, but we might as well have been French people trying to convince an American of the comedic genius of Jerry Lewis. Brooke yawned, said very clearly, "I really couldn't care less," and sauntered from the room. I felt disappointed, the same way as I did this year, when my current roommates overruled me and watched reruns of "Friends" instead of letting me watch the Sox lose to the Mariners in the playoffs. I missed Liz.

I don't know why I feel disappointed by girls who dislike baseball. "It's so *boring*," I often hear, and I try to explain the beauty of the slowness and deliberation of the game, but it's useless. The long, quiet stretches of the game are what make the exciting moments so much sweeter. It gives you time to take in the details, the emerald-green grass, the surreally-bright lights, the primal thumping and hollering of the vendors, and the exhilaration (mixed with terror, in my case) of a nearby foul ball. Many girls assume that nobody but boys likes baseball, so they are free to express their distaste for it as bluntly as they please, although they would never say to me, "I hate writing, it's tedious," or "You know what? Chicago is a very ugly city." Most girls would be mortified if somebody said something so rude about anything that they cared about, but why do they have no thoughts about attacking baseball?

The problem is that too many females do so because they feel that they should inherently like shopping, makeup and relating to each other, but not baseball. Don't get me wrong: I also like shopping, makeup, and relating, but I consider myself more enlightened than the automatic baseball-haters.

It's fun, sometimes, then, to be a female baseball fan because we are not *supposed* to be fans. I am thrilled about the growing popularity of women's sports, but I think it's a hard stereotype to break: sports (the all-American prototype for sport being baseball) are for men. Sometimes my baseball talks feel like I am trying to join the boys club, posturing myself as I discuss overpaid players and the benefits and drawbacks of different fields. One guy once asked me to stop talking baseball, saying, "I just think it's weird." This brief feeling of displacement can be shocking, but I have also had some wonderful conversations with guys who seemed surprised by my zeal and enjoy my distinctive point of view: I love the sport, but my emotions infiltrate that love. For instance, I truly can't worship a player, Frank Thomas as an example, unless they are a notably admirable person, what my Dad would deem as "classy" (like Harold Baines.) My friend Steve, a Dodgers fan, is always happy to talk about Paul Konerko's last game with me, as long as he doesn't mind my occasional opinion that Konerko is also very cute.

To this day, I'm still not sure what my father had in mind when he decided to craft me into a left-handed hitter. Was I supposed to eventually play for the Sox? I did not even play baseball into my teens (and the fact that only the biggest, scariest girls at my high school played softball did not help convince me of a return to the sport). However, I realize that in order to express his love for baseball, he had to teach somebody to swing, catch, and throw, and I'm glad that he taught me. Meanwhile, as I developed my knowledge of the White Sox, so I did of my family, the city, and even of all the other Chicago teams, because once I learned about Luis Aparicio and Minnie Minoso, stories of Ernie Banks, Dick Butkus, Bob Love, and Bobby Hull were to follow.

This was not just sport, this was history. To me, learning to love baseball was similar to learning to love art, or music, or literature.

Meanwhile, I've realized that cheering for the White Sox means that I know more about baseball than just enough to squeak by in terms of social acceptability. Everybody knows the Cubs: they're famous for Harry Carey, for Sammy Sosa, and for consistently stinking. This silly, casual familiarity does not jibe with Sox fans. Kass words perfectly the difference between Cubs fans and Sox fans: "Being a Sox fan and seeing them lose is much more disappointing than to a Cubs fan. You work in a factory, or in the stockyards, and it's not 'cute' to lose, like the Cubs do."

"Sox fans live and die more with their team than Cubs fans do," says Bob Vandenberg, the author of several books on the White Sox and an editor for the *Tribune*. "The Sox should own Chicago," he laments, yet the Cubs remain the well-known baseball icon of the city. Anybody who watched TGIF TV in the early '90's could count upon seeing a shot of Wrigley Field in the opening credits of the sitcom "Perfect Strangers." I'm not saying that the Sox are perfect (hello, Black Sox and Disco Demolition), but choosing the Sox is like drinking Pepsi or picking George as your favorite Beatle. For taking the road less traveled, for not picking the popular choice, a person needs to be well educated enough to explain why. John Kass says "Sox fans are bitter that the Cubs can consistently fill up their ballpark with a mediocre club." One of Kass' triumphs as a Chicago columnist was finding a Cubs fan who realized that he had "wasted his life," cheering for the North Side team, and successfully "converting" him.

I spoke with an older cousin of mine a few weeks ago who reminisced about how heartbroken my father was when he found out that Jack would never play nor love

baseball. My first reaction to this information was anger: what, I'm not a satisfactory child? and then sadness: poor Dad. Then I realized that my cousin was being overly dramatic. If my Dad felt that his baseball experience was lessened just because his daughter, not his son, was the baseball fan, then he would not be a true lover of the sport: he would be caught in what Kass disgustingly refers to as the "Church of Baseball," typified by the golden aura in "Field of Dreams." He would just be following another cliché: that his baseball experience was not complete unless he played catch with his son and took him to games (although he does cry at "Field of Dreams"). You cannot force somebody to enjoy baseball, and Dad never excessively pushed baseball upon Jack. The only reason Dad encouraged me to enjoy White Sox baseball is because I think he always thought I would, and he was right. As Goodwin writes about her father and the Dodgers, I also feel about my Dad and the Sox: "I could no more have conceived of rooting for another team than of rooting against him."