

## The White Sox Game

Never before had I been so zoned in during a baseball game. I could seemingly do no wrong. It was the bottom of the extra inning, and the top of our order had done their job, putting two on base for the cleanup hitter. I opted against using my own bat, electing instead to borrow one from my teammate, Mike. His was lighter and a little easier to handle, and I had a good feeling about it. As I came out of the dugout, as I anticipated, the White Sox went to the bullpen, bringing in their star right-hander, Simon Webb. I took a few practice swings, timing up his delivery, and then made my way to the batter's box. In what had become my usual routine, I tapped home plate with the bat, then pointed it towards center field before bouncing it in rhythm of my right shoulder. The first pitch was a fastball, right down the middle, and I knew it was coming. Off the bat, I thought it was gone, but I knew better. As I took off toward first base, I watched as the right fielder chased after the ball. It landed safely over his head, just in front of the fence. I let up my run, heaved my right fist into the air, and trotted through first base, awaiting the inevitable mob scene that would follow.

Final score: White Sox 9, Diamondbacks 10.

*“The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America's rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It's been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt, and erased again. But baseball has marked the times. This field, this game: it's a part of our past, Ray. It reminds us of all that once was good, and it could be again.”*

-James Earl Jones as Terrance Mann in *Field of Dreams*

My career as a baseball player – if you can call it a career, that is – is more or less a story of father and son, much like *Field of Dreams*. It was my dad who, when I was five years old,

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turned me on to the game that would mean so much to me and my development as a young man. Of the 24 teams I have played on in my life, my dad managed 17. He was my first coach – when I was a five-year-old afraid of the ball – and my last, in a season where I played every position on the field.

The beginning of my baseball playing days gives new meaning to the phrase “humble beginnings.” Not only was I not particularly interested in the sport, but I had absolutely no natural ability. As a left-handed hitting member of the Yellow Jackets tee-ball team, it was apparent I was only there as the coach's son. I struggled to hit the ball even off of a tee, and wasn't any better at playing in the field. I was the biggest kid out there but acted like the smallest (and weakest), and was often more concerned with what socks I was wearing or how tight my belt was than the game itself. In my next three seasons, I made two all-star teams, but only because my dad was chosen to manage.

My dad quickly gained a reputation as one of the better coaches in the league. I used to love eavesdropping on his pre-season phone calls to parents:

*“Hello, is this Nancy?...Hi, this is Scott Bucholtz from North Lincoln...I've got David on the Marlins this year...We're going to have a parents meeting next Sunday at 3 and then a short practice...I'll be the red-head wearing a Tigers hat; you can't miss me.”*

His pre-season meetings later became one of my favorite things. Not only did I get to meet my new teammates and their parents, but it signaled the start of the new season. And they were important to my dad, too. He used them as a chance to introduce himself and establish a few ground rules:

1. Everybody plays.
2. Everybody has fun.

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3. He would quote the late, great Tigers manager Sparky Anderson: “If you don't think baseball is the greatest game ever played, then leave.”

These were principles that my dad stuck to in his managerial career, and they would serve him very well, but he was also great at coaching the skills: hitting, fielding, throwing, running. He taught me almost everything I know about playing baseball: how my wrist should be bent, how to stand sideways when throwing, how to step when hitting and throwing, and how to use two hands when catching the ball. Some things I figured out along the way and adjusted, but the core fundamentals that I relied on for many years were a credit to my dad.

On one cold night in December 2000, my dad set up a batting tee in our garage for me to practice. I was nine years old, going on ten, and a year away from moving up to Little League and live pitching. My dad's coaching emphasis that night was for me to keep my feet squared up both even and parallel to the plate). I, on the other hand, wanted an open stance where my left foot was further back. He tried to convince me that an even stance was better, but I would have no part of it. I was determined to prove him wrong, and was furious that he wouldn't accept my decision. I decided to take my frustration out on the ball. I swung the bat like Paul Bunyan might swing his ax, and made sure that on every swing I hit the ball harder than the time before. When looking back at my career years later, I pinpoint that night in the garage as the moment that I fell in love with baseball. I had a breakout ten-year-old season, and finally earned a spot on the all-star team, as opposed to getting one just because the league asked my dad to manage.

After that breakout year, I struggled a bit as an eleven-year-old, but started learning how to pitch and hit off of a pitcher instead of a machine. Things weren't the same, though. My dad wasn't able to land a team in Little League, and my new manager, Mr. Riley, had no control over the team or his foul-mouthed son, Jason. I only managed a few hits all year, but again I found

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myself the beneficiary of my dad's reputation come all-star season, when I managed to hit my first home run.

The only good thing that came out of my eleven-year-old season was that I developed a relationship with two of my best friends in baseball, Toney Wilson and Johnny Schweir. I had played with Toney before, and his dad was a coach for my dad on a few teams. Mr. Wilson was a very outgoing, encouraging father who made it his goal to inspire every kid on the field. He had a habit of coming to games barefooted, something that became even more recognizable than my dad's red hair and Tigers cap. Toney, or T-Bone as he was known around the park, was the complete opposite of his father. He was tiny, shy, and quiet, but nobody doubted his abilities as a ballplayer. He was so fast he could hit the ball back to the pitcher and beat the throw to first, something he did routinely. My dad made use of his speed and groomed him as a star center fielder.

Johnny was a character. He had a history of getting injured doing routine things, and my dad coined the phrase “he schweired it” whenever Johnny showed up for practice with a crazy story describing how he bruised his knee cleaning his room (or something like that). Despite this, Johnny Schweir was, and still is, the greatest raw talent I have ever shared a baseball field with. His swing looked like it came from the “don't do this” section of a baseball how-to book; instead of swinging level to the ground or with a slight uppercut, he chopped at the ball, swinging in a downward motion. He was a catcher, and a pretty good one, which is surprising given his long, winding throwing motion.

When I was twelve, I entered what I consider to be my baseball prime. My dad inherited my team, the Cubs, from Mr. Riley, and through the draft built a deep roster around Johnny, Toney, and I. Out of nowhere, I harnessed an ability to throw the ball very, very hard, and

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became the most dominant pitcher in the league. I was an animal on the mound; I wore my hat sideways, kicked my leg high in the air, and could barely stop all the momentum I'd build up delivering a pitch. The rest of the league, even the older players, were afraid of me. Johnny was my catcher, and a pretty darn good one, too. He had a wide base, and used my own catcher's mitt to create a perfect target for me to aim at. He was the ultimate teammate, too: during a game that year I had two strikes on a kid, and when I threw the next pitch down the middle Johnny yelled "strike three!" and turned toward the dugout before the umpire called "ball" and received a puzzled look from my catcher.

The highlight of my twelve-year-old season was a game against the Giants and their star shortstop, Mike Bartels. Bartels looked and behaved like one of those guys on *Jersey Shore*: a cocky, self-centered egomaniac. The game was canceled in the morning because guys would be missing it to play in a three-on-three basketball tournament, but when my dad recruited some younger minor leaguers to fill in, the game was back on. The game was tied going into the sixth and final inning. We had already lost two players who left early for the basketball tournament, and were down to eight players. One of the players who left was batting fifth, after Johnny and I. The manager of the Giants decided to intentionally walk Johnny and I to force an automatic out. After Johnny walked, my dad came out to ask the umpire to check the rulebook for a policy on missing players. The league commissioner was there, and my dad gave him a rulebook to read, insisting that the fifth spot in our lineup should not be an automatic out. As we were waiting, Bartels came over to ask me what was going on, and when I told him he rolled his eyes and said, "that's a bunch of shit."

Mrs. Bartels, who was just like her son only worse, was nearby in the bleachers yelling at my dad for cheating. But, the commissioner sided with my dad, stating that the league had no

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rule in place for such a situation. The Giants decided to pitch to me, and I made them pay, lining a double into left field that rolled down the line far enough to score Johnny from first base and win the game.

By the end of the season, my once-dominant velocity had started to fizzle out, and my arm was getting sore in-between games. I went to tryout for a traveling team in the winter, and when the pitching coach had me throw, not a single pitch didn't result in sharp, intense pains shooting up and down my entire arm. It was diagnosed with tendonitis, the kind of injury that sidelines a major leaguer for two or three weeks. It's been seven years and I still have problems with it.

The injury to my arm changed my life on and off the baseball field. I had to completely change my mechanics, and nothing I tried was working. Either I could throw pain-free with no accuracy or keep my old mechanics and endure the pain. There were many days when I couldn't play catch with someone without throwing the ball over their head a dozen times. Thank goodness I had Toney on my team the next year to play catch with me; I think he understood that it wasn't my fault and that I was basically learning how to throw all over again.

The pain was so bad, and the arm apparently so damaged that doctors recommend I rest it as much as possible. I started doing routine things left-handed, like carrying heavy objects or holding the telephone. I even learned how to shoot a basketball left-handed and stopped writing with pen and paper, letting the computer ease my pain. I had to ask teachers to print out notes for me because I couldn't copy them down. Even to this day, I wake up every once in awhile with my arm going numb.

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I still managed to have another good year, batting .400 and leading the team in walks. I was an effective pitcher, albeit without my old velocity and with the occasional wild pitch. My success came with a prize at season's end: I made the "A" all-star team. I had made the "B" team the five previous years, but this was the first time I made the A team. My dad was chosen to manage, and his first act as manager was to name Mr. Wilson as a coach. It was, of course, payback for all that Mr. Wilson had done for us through the years, but there was no question in my dad's mind that Toney deserved a spot on the team.

My dad also picked Mike Bartels for the team, against my wishes. Mike was a cancer; when my dad recited the Sparky Anderson quote in his first team meeting, Mike raised his hand and said, "but, Coach, I don't even like baseball," but he was one of the most talented athletes in the league and the team could use him.

Mrs. Bartels, though, became a distraction that was almost too much to put up with. She disagreed with my dad on a lot of his managerial decisions, and was especially critical of Toney's addition to the team. She even went as far as to make some racially-charged derogatory remarks to Mr. Wilson (the Wilsons are black), prompting a league investigation in which my dad stood up for the Wilsons and defended Toney's roster spot as a reward for his play and not a show of friendship. The funny thing is that Mike Bartels was one of our worst players in the all-star season.

We lost in the championship game of our first tournament, which was something the A team rarely did. My dad was motivated to win the second and final tournament (on our home field) in order to prove Mrs. Bartels and the other naysayers wrong. It was then that Johnny Schweir proved himself as the greatest player I ever shared a field with. In six consecutive at-bats over the two games before the championship, Johnny hit a home run in every at-bat, and

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none of them were cheap shots. He propelled us into the final round, where we had to beat the team that won the first tournament twice to claim the title. The first game was an easy win, but the second was close into the very end.

I had begged my dad to let me pitch the last inning of the championship game if we had a chance to win. It was my dream come true to pitch in a championship game, and to get the final out would make up for all the pain I had been through with my arm. Sure enough, in the last inning and clinging to a lead, my dad went to the mound to make a pitching change. I was playing first base, mentally preparing myself for my chance. But my dad instead opted to bring in another pitcher. It worked out; we won the game and got a nice championship trophy out of it, but it took me a long time to forgive my dad for not putting me in. I understand the move in hindsight: I was too unpredictable because of my arm and my new mechanics. My dad had put his reputation on the line already and was under a lot of heat from the parents, especially Mrs. Bartels. That championship meant a lot to him, and at the time it was the best moment of his managerial career.

Baseball as I knew it was about to change. When I was thirteen years old, my dad found a new job a couple hours away. My mom wanted me and my brother to finish school before moving, so while my dad left to go start his job I was back home and stuck playing on someone else's team again. I don't think it's a coincidence that I had another bad year once my dad left. My arm problems escalated and I was struggling as a hitter, too. Nothing was right anymore, and I believe that to be the result of my dad's absence. The year prior to this, I had a serious battle with depression and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. Medicine and therapy could only do so much; baseball was my therapy. I had so much fun as a thirteen-year-old that I was able to

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forget about my problems and escape in the game. As a fourteen-year-old, it wasn't fun anymore. I quit one team and joined another toward the end of the season. I had some fun with the new team but still couldn't rediscover my skills. The only good baseball moment from that year was seeing the 2005 Major League All-Star Game in Detroit. Of course, it was with my dad, who managed to pick up some tickets the morning of the game.

The next year (I was now fifteen), I earned a spot on the freshman team at my new high school. Again, I sucked. The coach told me at the start of the year that I was too wild to pitch, and because I still couldn't throw properly I was limited to a total of seven innings in the field over the entire season. Most of my time was as a designated hitter, and I only had five or six hits all year. I tried my hand in the recreational league after the high school season ended, but was no better; the only thing harder than adjusting from hitting Little League pitching to hitting high school pitching is doing the opposite.

I was fifteen, going on sixteen years old, when I first considered leaving baseball for good. It was apparent to me that the skills I had mastered as a twelve-year-old were gone. The intimidating leg kick, crooked hat, and blazing fastball were gone. The home run power, likewise, was nowhere to be seen. But worst of all, the magic of that comeback against the Giants and that controversial championship run were gone, too.

My dad convinced me to give it one more try. He took over a team in the recreational league, the Diamondbacks, and like he did with the Cubs six years before, he drafted a team that on paper was built to win. We had made a list of all the players in the league and ranked them. Mock draft after mock draft followed, and when the time came, my dad drafted every player we wanted, and then some. We had pitching, speed, defense, and hitting. Our first practice with the new Diamondbacks was on a cold April evening. I was bundled up in a sweatshirt. My dad

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introduced me to the team as the captain, and I took the title and ran with it. With my dad at my side, I started making contact, striking out fewer times than anyone else on the team and driving in a lot of runs. I was pitching regularly for the first time in three years, too, and it was as if the last three years never happened. I had to shut myself down a few times to rest my arm, but I made it through the year relatively pain-free.

We struggled during the regular season, entering the playoffs in the bottom half of the standings. We set our goals high: to play in the championship game. It was a double-elimination tournament, and so we knew if we were going to go far our first game was very important. We played the White Sox, a team carried by their two star pitchers, Kevin Heinrich and Simon Webb. Heinrich started and held us scoreless for three innings. We fell behind 5-0 early on, and I sensed that my teammates had given up on winning the game. That's when I stepped into the captain shoes and took over.

“Nobody sits down!” I was screaming at the rest of the team at the start of the fourth inning. “Everybody will stand and cheer their teammates on!”

I went up to Sam, our best player, who was about to take over as the pitcher. “What time is it? It's Sammy time. You understand?”

He nodded and, at my urging, repeated the lines to me. I gave him a pat on the shoulder and took my spot at first base. Sam pitched his best game of the year, keeping it close for four innings while our offense, backed by my encouragement, rallied to mount a comeback for the ages. After the standard seven innings, it was tied 9-9.

Sam started the eighth inning but was clearly out of gas. My dad knew it, and when Sam walked the first two batters, he made a decision three years overdue: he brought me in to close out a very important playoff game.

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I walked the first batter I faced, loading the bases with nobody out. The next batter was a little guy, and I struck him out easily. A few pitches later, some guy had made contact on one of my pitches and sent it deep to left field. The runners were all running, not bothering to tag up because they were sure nobody would catch the ball. Our center fielder, a linebacker-type with two surgically-repaired knees, chased it down and made an over-the-shoulder catch, and fired a strike to the cutoff man, who threw to second base to force out one of the runners who got ahead of themselves. The White Sox's manager came out to argue, but the umpires declared the inning over, with no runs surrendered. And we had the top of the order up in the bottom of the inning.

*Never before had I been so zoned in during a baseball game. I could seemingly do no wrong. It was the bottom of the extra inning, and the top of our order had done their job, putting two on base for the cleanup hitter. I opted against using my own bat, electing instead to borrow one from my teammate, Mike. His was lighter and a little easier to handle, and I had a good feeling about it. As I came out of the dugout, as I anticipated, the White Sox went to the bullpen, bringing in their star right-hander, Simon Webb. I took a few practice swings, timing up his delivery, and then made my way to the batter's box. In what had become my usual routine, I tapped home plate with the bat, then pointed it towards center field before bouncing it in rhythm of my right shoulder. The first pitch was a fastball, right down the middle, and I knew it was coming. Off the bat, I thought it was gone, but I knew better. As I took off toward first base, I watched as the right fielder chased after the ball. It landed safely over his head, just in front of the fence. I let up my run, heaved my right fist into the air, and trotted through first base, awaiting the inevitable mob scene that would follow.*

Final score: White Sox 9, Diamondbacks 10.

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We went on to play in the championship game, losing via the mercy rule. It was fine; we achieved our goal. And I celebrated on the field with a smile on my face, and my dad at my side. It was, by far, the greatest experience of my baseball career, surpassing even the statewide North/South All-Star Game after that season, which my dad nominated me for. The next two summers were filled with my dad and I putting together teams for tournaments and scrimmages, squeezing every ounce out of my playing days before college. And we certainly did.

Looking back on my career as a ballplayer, if you can call it a career, I remember names like Wilson and Schweir and smile at the the thought of the friendships I had. I look at trophies mounted on a shelf in my room and reminisce about specific games like that White Sox game. I look at jerseys hanging in my closet and remember all the teams I played on wearing them. But when I hold a ball in my hand or slip on a glove, the only things that comes to mind is how much I miss having my dad to play catch with, and how much I miss having him at my side all those years. He is now one thousand miles away in South Carolina, where my family has moved while I study in Michigan. Whenever I go down to visit them, I pack my glove and insist that my dad play catch with me when I get there, which he is more than excited to do.

The last time we played catch was something really special. My arm still hurts, and I've learned to accept that it probably always will. But this time the pain was minor. And for the first time since I was twelve, every throw was on target. I'd wind up, launch a ball as far as I can, and it would land, perfectly centered, between the shoulders of my dad.

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