

The Girls of Summer

Written by Garry Lee Wright
Tuesday, 01 May 2001 18:00

The grass on the field is still wet from a rainstorm earlier in the day. Good thing the skies have finally cleared, because there's a ball game scheduled tonight and I happen to know the starting pitcher personally. Tough competitor, too, warming up now with a bit of a swagger and enough chaw to out-cheek Dizzy Gillespie, shooting me a glance every once in a while to make sure I'm still watching. Which I am. It isn't every day my eight-year-old Smiley takes the mound for the home team.

For a moment on this warm night, my mind rewinds to my own youth, and I realize that baseball is properly played, eagerly watched, and truly understood only by kids.

I grew up in Wrigley Field (via black & white TV) glued on weekday afternoons to Jack Brickhouse setting the scene: "Here we go! Bottom of the ninth, Cubs are down by ten runs, but — wait a minute — this game isn't over yet!" And I believed every word. You had to. No other team before or since ever fielded two MVPs and still finished last.

Smiley and her teammates have managed to put the first three batters on base — not a good beginning in a league where an inning is either three outs or seven runs, whichever comes first. Where three pitches outside the strike zone prompts the umpire to set a tee on home plate to let the batter take a well-aimed swing. Which she does and ... whoosh! Luckily, the tee is a screaming liner, but the ball itself escapes unscathed. One down.

If there's nothing as disposable as news, there's nothing as timeless as baseball. From the Civil War through the first 100 days of George W., whenever the headlines have gotten too dicey, news junkies have found relief just a few pages away. In fact, when World War II plunged the globe into darkness, the game's fathers told FDR they were ready to suspend play for the good of the country. But he said: Keep playing. People fighting to save the world need a little down time, too. Baseball was democracy's face.

Somehow Smiley gets out of the inning — a combination of sharp fielding and the seven-run rule, with at least one future All-Star bursting into tears — and now she's up at the plate herself. The opposing pitcher is also having control problems, and here comes the batting tee again. Smiley swings and ... *it's a well-hit ball!* Smiley stops to admire for a while (making contact of any kind is still pretty much of a novelty at this point) but she finally reaches first, and is called safe on a close play when the throw goes approximately 15 feet over the first baseman's head.

By the way, 1945 was the last year the Cubs got into a World Series. And the fact that everybody in America who could run, hit, throw, field, or stand up straight was in the service by that time is strictly a coincidence. A champion team is champion team, even if everybody in the league is 4-F. And we're going to do it again this year, so shut up.

On Smiley's field, though, the manager needs to make a lineup change, necessitated by a coded signal from one of his players: "Daddy, I don't *wanna* play catcher anymore!" So Smiley gets the nod, and enthusiastically suits up in full behind-the-plate regalia. She saunters by me proudly, looking like she's equally ready to stop a wild pitch or defuse an explosive device.

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(You never see that look in the pros now. Ask any major leaguer who's been retired 20 years or more, and he'll tell you what went wrong with baseball: money ruined everything; we used to play it for *fun*.)

By the third inning — that's three-quarters of a complete game — Smiley's team has pulled to within five runs of the opponents, a virtual tie. But then the bases are cleared by a Texas leaguer which eludes approximately six different fielders, compelling one spectator to begin screaming hysterically at the umpire for not calling back the runners, until he realizes that all the actors in this Olympian melodrama are still in the third grade.

Nobody blames him though; he just got confused for a moment. Pretty easy to do in an era when baseball is usually played between negotiating sessions at some stadium named for either a multinational corporation or a light beer.

Not here, though. This is the real game, and when Smiley's teams loses — and loses gracefully — it takes a heartbreaking play in which the first baseman outraces the runner, only to forget the next step. The crowd shouts a reminder: "Step on the bag, Janey! Step on the bag!" Janey complies, but doesn't understand when the runner is called safe anyway. She stepped on the bag just fine; in fact, she got rid of the ball so it wouldn't slow her down on the way there.

Gee, I love this game. Let's play two tomorrow.

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