

The Home Run

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Chapter 1

This first story was suggested by Fran. It is one about me – when I was in grade 6, so that must have been when I was 12 years old. This means it is a story that took place in Vancouver during the last year I was at Kerrisdale school.

We had a school baseball team that year – with uniforms, including the funny pants that only went part way down our legs, long socks that pulled up to our knees, and shoes with cleats that helped us to keep from slipping in the dirt and grass (although, as you know, there isn't much grass on the baseball diamond at Kerrisdale school).

I used to play shortstop on the team. It was a nice position because I got more action than if I was playing in the outfield. All of the positions around the bases are called the infield but the three people far out from the batter are in the outfield. Maybe Steve or Daegan can draw you a map of where the players are in a baseball team.

I didn't like playing in the outfield much, because a lot of the time was spent standing around waiting for someone to hit the ball a long distance. Most of the time, though, the batter would hit something to the infield since we were just young school kids and weren't very strong yet. Hitting to the outfield was a big deal.

Even though I liked shortstop, I liked being the catcher better, though. This is the player who stands behind home plate. When the pitcher throws the ball, he or she throws it directly to the catcher. The batter, of course, tries to hit in on its way, but this doesn't always happen. For that reason, the catcher is one of the busiest players on the team. The catcher has to be ready for every pitch and must be sure to try and stop the player from coming to home plate and scoring a run.

The catcher is also the person who directs the team (other than the coach, of course). Since the catcher has the best view of all the field, he or she is the one that tells the players where to stand and what to watch out for. The catcher also signals to the pitcher about how to throw the ball and what kind of a ball to throw. Sometimes, when you are watching baseball games, you can see the pitcher and the catcher signaling to each other – the catcher showing the pitcher 1, 2, or 3 fingers (hiding the signal in his or her crotch), and the pitcher shaking his or her head to tell the catcher that they would like to throw a different kind of pitch.

It's great fun to be catcher, since that's where the action is in a baseball game!

Chapter 2

I loved to play catcher, but I didn't like it when I messed things up. When I played outfielder it felt like no-one noticed if I didn't run fast enough, or just missed the ball, or didn't stop it when it came bouncing over the dirt and stones. I could try hard, but still feel okay if I failed, because there was always the sun in my eyes, the bad bounce to the ball, or the distance I had to cover as an excuse for my failure.

Behind the home plate, however, things were different. There were plenty of eyes watching if I missed the ball and they were close enough to see that it was because I was too slow, or too busy with my mask, or just not good enough.

Not only that – I was the one who had to keep an eye on the rest of the players, pay attention to the pitcher, and listen carefully when Mr. Walsh told us about the best strategy to use or what to watch for with the next batter. If I didn't do my job, then all the team would know – and all the team would suffer.

I found this rather hard to live with, but I was encouraged by the times when I did something right. I remember the excitement when we would close off an inning with the other team scoreless, or when we were able to get the bases loaded with still only one out. I particularly remember the times when I had helped to make it happen.

So it was with this mix of excitement and apprehension that I climbed into Mr. Walsh's car for the trip to the final game of the season. We were finishing off a great season, but we still had to face the most difficult team in the league, and we had to do it on their home field. It didn't help that the Shaughnessy team had made it clear they viewed us as the poor cousins of the league – smaller somehow, and certainly less well equipped.

It also didn't help that we had to get there in Mr. Walsh's car. Mr. Walsh was a great coach, but he was a terrible driver. He had a way of driving that took all the fun out of getting places. It was fast and slow, back and forth, as he pressed hard on the gas pedal, then let go. I later learned that it was because he always used a gear that was too low for the speed he was traveling. It was like he would throw the car forward – just enough for our bodies to reach the right speed, then he would pull it back – throwing us forward in time to be jerked back for the next acceleration.

By the time we reached Shaughnessy school, I was wondering whether I could play in ANY position. The excitement and apprehension of the event had already filled my stomach with butterflies and the back and forth movement of the ride seemed to whip them up into a frenzy. I climbed out of the car with my mind totally preoccupied with keeping my food where it belonged.

I was still feeling unsure of myself as I put on the thick chest padding and shin guards of the catcher, so I wasn't playing my best as we went through the warmup procedure.

Chapter 3

After 8 innings it looked like our fears were being realized. The Shaughnessy team was ahead by 2 runs and keeping their pressure on us. It was their turn at bat during the first half of the ninth inning and they had two people on bases after a hit to right field and a batter being walked. We were encouraged when the third batter struck out, but that only meant that their fourth – and strongest batter was now up. I signaled to our pitcher for an inside pitch to try and limit the chance that he will be able to hit the ball and was pleased when he swung hard but only connected with the air. The next 2 pitches were wide and high so we were now worried that the bases might get loaded and our problems increased.

I decided to try the inside pitch again, but this time, the batter was ready. He moved back just enough to connect solidly with the ball and sent it flying out over second base. It didn't take long for the runner on second base to take off in a full sprint and by the time the centre fielder grabbed the bouncing ball, he was already rounding third and on his way home.

I had thrown off my mask even before the ball had landed and was standing in anticipation just behind home plate. As the runner rounded third base, the centre-fielder had already grabbed the ball and was clearly going to try catching the runner at home base. I was ready.

The ball and the runner were flying toward the same point – where I was standing at home plate. I braced for the point where they came together, but I had to make a long stretch to the right in order to grab the ball. By the time I swung back to the plate, it was covered in a swirl of dust as the runner slid in to avoid my reach. I could only shake my head as I listened to the umpire shout his judgment: "SAFE!".

Now we were really in trouble. They were three runs ahead and only one person out with a runner on second and third base. We were lucky, however, since the next several batters were not their strongest and so we were able to finish the first half of the inning with the runners unable to get home. The possibility of winning this game seemed too remote.

Now it was our final turn to try and win the game. I must have just about given up hope since my mind began wandering to the drive home with Mr Walsh and how I would have to prepare myself for the upset stomach that was bound to follow. In fact, I was feeling it already as I sat dejected on the bench. I was so preoccupied by worrying about my stomach, that I was startled when Glen turned to me and pushed me to go and warm up for my turn at bat. I was also surprised to see that we had two players on the bases.

I jumped up to grab a bat just as I saw our batter take a hard swing and heard the umpire yell "STRIKE THREE!". A groan went up from our bench as the next batter took his place by home plate. This was getting much too close for comfort now, since my turn

was next, and I dreaded the idea that the final result of the game would depend on me. Of course, I wouldn't mind it if I turned out to be a hero, but I had too often failed to come through in the pinch. Besides, I didn't feel like a hero at the moment – I was scared, had an upset stomach, and generally was wanting to be somewhere else.

So when the batter before me was walked, it took all I had left to get to home plate. What a dilemma – the bases were loaded, it was the last half of the last inning of the game, I was the last hope for winning, and I was not feeling well. Was I just going to end up like Mighty Casey?

I was so nervous that I swung at the first pitch even though it was high. “STRIKE ONE!”, the umpire yelled. I stepped back out of the batter's box - the small rectangle in which the batter stands when waiting for the next pitch. As long as I wasn't in the box, the pitcher couldn't throw the ball, so I nervously shuffled my feet and hesitated to move back to the plate in my state of confusion and fear.

I couldn't wait long, though, so I somehow found the strength to get back in position and turn my eyes to the pitcher.

I'm not sure how to explain what happened after that. When I look back on it, I still feel bewildered about how I hit the ball, where it went, or what was going through my mind as I ran around all the bases. What I do know, however, was that my team had all moved off of the bench and were waiting for me as I headed to the home plate. What a celebration we had!

That was the first time that I rode in Mr Walsh's car without thinking about the stop and go, back and forth motion. Instead, we were too preoccupied with recalling the game, congratulating each other, and enjoying our win over Shaughnessy school.

Even when we came to the story of the home run, I never felt like a hero, though. I guess I must have been, however, because they treated me that way, but it didn't feel quite right. I still didn't know how I hit the ball and I certainly couldn't count on doing it again – two things that seem to me to be necessary qualities of heroes.

That was why I was so surprised when 28 years later, when JP and I were in the Dunbar Hardware, I heard a call from across the isle: “Billy – Billy Reimer!”. It was one of my baseball buddies from Kerrisdale school. He came over, shook my hand, and immediately started recounting the tale of my home run at Shaughnessy school.

I didn't feel like a hero even then – but that didn't stop me from feeling very proud and thoroughly enjoying the fact that my son was there to hear the story from someone else - how Billy Reimer had hit a home run with the bases loaded, in the last inning at Shaughnessy school.

Stories for My Grandchildren

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