



GREATEST SPRING SPORT OF ALL TIME

By Kerry Schmidt 04-18-2004

Not NBA basketball. That's nothing until June. NHL playoffs? Yea, right. Only a few thousand drunk Canuks care about that.

Baseball. That's what I'm talking about!

But most definitely not MLB. Overpaid, steroid stuffed crybabies.

Spring is the greatest time of life for one simple reason. Little League Baseball.

For over four generations, some three months in the spring have occupied the lives of grown-ups and those growing up, and produced some of the most lasting lifetime memories. It is sport at its purest: FUN.

Going through some old files last week, I came across a 1981 picture of my two sons, then 12 and 8, in their LL uniforms. Hours of memories came flooding back, producing everything from tears to laughter.

While they are now 29 and 33, with many accomplishments since then, nothing brings back greater memories than those innocent days of spring.

My tales come from Malibu, California, but from Malibu to Mandeville to Maine, they are mostly the same. And many of the friends I made therein are still so today.

Start with my picture. "Uniform uniforms." Old, passed down, colors pretty much the same: Dirt brown and grass-stained green over bleached out whatever they once were.

Always two sizes to big. Shirts forever half untucked. Hats on nearly sideways. Today, that is "cool," but back then, they just put them on any ole way.

The eight year olds played the game more like dodge ball than baseball. When a ball was actually hit to them, they usually managed to get out of the way of it.

The first hit, first win, first post-game trip to the pizza parlor. Win or lose, they were fine, because every Saturday meant pizza and Pokeman with their teammates. Memories.

In my youngest son Brian's first major season, they were an expansion team, all 9-10 year olds. They were 0-20 with one game left, against the league winner, 20-0.

Somehow, we were ahead in the last of the sixth, 5-4, two out bases loaded, and up came the league's best hitter.

Now, we all remember the kid you put out in right field for the mandatory two innings. Mr. Dodge Ball.

First pitch, the big slugger lines a shot deep to right. This little kid stumbles around like a drunken sailor on leave, sticks his mitt up, mainly to protect himself, and catches the ball as he falls down.

Our kids celebrated like they had just won at Williamsport. Carried him off the field.

Two years later, same team intact, we went 20-1 and won it all. But to all the kids I still hear from, that first year was their favorite.

Malibu was no different than any other place, except for some of the last names. And the fact that many of the kids were brought to the games in Rolls Royce's rather than pickups.

As President of the league one year, I watched this small, shy kid who mostly rode the bench sneak out after every half inning and go talk to his dad, a thin man always off by



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himself with a St. Bernard on leash. I went up to him and introduced myself and he quietly replied, "Glad to meet you, I'm Bruce Spengsteen."

Roy Orbison's son played, and he was usually on hand. He resembled a Halloween costume in May. All in black, huge glasses and skin whiter than white. Sort of like Michael Jackson today, except that Roy was a nice, genuine man.

Two members of the Eagles band had kids play. Lou Gossett JR.'s son played. Our All-Star pitcher in 1979 was Charlie Sheen.

And then there was Gary Bussey. Usually stoked up on something, he once chased an umpire into the snack shack and I had to grab him and hold him back. How Gary acts in his movies is exactly how he is. Crazy. But if you wanted to party at the Baja Cantina – the watering hole in Malibu at the time - after a game, he was your man.

Oh, about that kid in right field who saved the day. His name was Josh Evans, Ali McGraw's son.

I ran into Ali, now living in Santa Fe, when I was out in Malibu a couple of years ago, and she told me that Josh, now a commercial jet pilot, still talks about that moment over 20 years ago.

Memories. Both of my sons still are in touch with some of the kids from their teams, even though my sons now live in San Diego and the teammates are scattered from, well, Malibu to Maine.

Yes, virtually every family, post WWII, has similar memories. Of simpler times. Of innocence. And today, though we are in a different century, filled with technology far beyond our imaginations back then, LL still remains virtually unchanged. The kids today may pull a cell phone out of their pocket between innings, but it still comes from a dirty, too-large uniform.

And the pizza still tastes great.

My youngest son, who went on to star in sports at several higher levels, said it best last summer when I brought them all out here. "Dad," he said, "the most fun I ever had were those years in Little League."

Little League Baseball is America. It transcends all else that happens in life.