

Play the Game Right

I have a confession to make: I'm an obsessive-compulsive baseball fan. Like many kids, I enjoyed the hours of playing catch and the dreams of hitting the walk-off grand slam in the World Series. But this wasn't enough for my baseball world, so I took it a step further. My world involves changing hats, alone, in my backyard, just so that I am in the right team uniform when I switch innings during my own elaborate 3 round - 8 team tournament of "throw tennis ball against brick wall and dive for it" version of baseball. My world means breaking into tears and begging my computer on my hands and knees, in public, that the Padres didn't really lose that game, because they just had to win! Some people have told me I have a problem, others say it's an addiction; personally, I say it's a charming personality trait.

Whatever you call it, the point is, I love baseball. I have a special connection to this game, which, in a way, was my mentor. You see, being an unsocial, mildly autistic, homeschooled child is not the best formula for making friends. So I enrolled in a course I like to call "Baseball 101," and, like any other student who takes a class for 14 years, I learned a few things. I learned about the frustration from grounding to second as the last out of a game, about the exhilaration of making that diving catch on that flyball behind third base, about the pride of stealing home by reading the pitcher well enough to get the just right jump.

But more than anything else, my learning experiences on the ballfield have taught me a philosophy, one that I have kept as my own for all these years. It may be a bit surprising though it's simple enough, here it is: life... is a game. More specifically, life is a baseball game!

Now before you lock my words into the part of your brain where you keep every other corny cliché, let me tell you a little about the game I love. First of all, baseball is unfair. Extremely unfair. It's the sport where the smashed line drive can be a double play and the weak blooper the double; a sport where the blown call usually isn't changed. It's the world where a guy that's 100 pounds overweight can be a hall of fame athlete; a world where cheaters often win, and where trying harder frequently makes everything worse.

Here's another fun fact: baseball is also all about failure. More than any other sport, baseball quantifies the errors and mistakes each player makes, and remembers them for decades, and no other sport regards failing 6 times out of 10 to do your job as heroic, if not unbelievable. It's a game that champions unfairness and failure, and, oddly enough, it is one of the reasons why I love it so much.

Now that doesn't mean that I particularly enjoy failure, in fact, baseball had its own cruel way of teaching me that lesson. I believe I set the unofficial record at my high school for the number of times being cut from sports teams, simply because I couldn't take no for an answer. But, every time, "No" was the answer I got. Baseball snubbed me, and I didn't think I deserved that treatment at all.

We know the challenge of these moments all too well. They lead to those 0-20 slumps, where we can't stop grounding out from taking the extra 5 minutes in bed, or popping up from putting off that essay another day, or striking out from watching 5 hours of 30Rock before getting work done. And each out, however minor it may be, reminds us of the inevitable fact that we fail more than we succeed. And when we listen to that failure, when we see our batting average, we are tempted to give up, to brand ourselves as the lost cause.

But I don't want to give up; instead, I want to listen to what baseball has taught me. Since it's just not possible to win every battle, baseball preaches consistency: that the current at-bat is the only at-bat. This method doesn't forget the past, but lets go, it says "Move forward."

I believe that taking each moment in life like it's just another at-bat is not idealized fluff, because baseball's strategy of letting go, focusing on the now, is a *winning* strategy. Baseball's approach teaches us perseverance in the face of impossibility; it teaches us how to be heroes.