



## Sometimes it Really Isn't About Winning



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"Baseball has marked the time."

Do you remember when Jim E. Jones said that in "Field of Dreams?"

I believe it to be true. And for me and the thousands that trek to Dreams Park in Cooperstown, N.Y. every summer, I am certain that it is true.

I have just returned from a weeklong journey to the place that James Fenimore Cooper made famous a couple hundred years ago, but it is now known for housing the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. But 15 years ago some folks built themselves a multi-diamond ballpark (currently 22 mini ballparks) and run tournaments every week all summer. The business aspect of this starts to boggle the mind and might make you consider building one of your own, but this piece is not about business. It's about baseball and coming of age and trying to hold on as time passes by.

We, and by that I mean a group of dads who followed our baseball guru Rich Phillips and took two teams of 12 boys each to Dreams Park for baseball. The baseball was good. Many if not most of the teams there are All-Star teams. We took our little Kirkwood bunch and went to battle. Our top team did very well, winning a bunch of games. Their one-round robin loss came to a pumped-up squad from California, the Clowns. If I may borrow from my Fast Lane partner Randy Karraker, "I hate the Clowns. The F-ing Clowns."

Our second club was a little short of pitching and could have used another bat, but scrapped all week and were very tough.

This week was about much more than baseball though. Do you remember the classic film "Cool Hand Luke" and the barracks that housed the inmates? Then you understand my situation. Eight bunk beds in each unit. Twelve boys and three coaches and none of the boys could be out of your sight 24 hours a day. Does the thought of herding cats come to mind? The only difference in our situation and the movie is that instead of chain gang road work we had baseball. Fortunately, nobody tried to eat 50 eggs, but there were a couple of boys that did try to eat everything in sight.

I did enjoy a joke that only my son and I enjoyed ... until, as I typically do, wrung it to death. And that is reprising Carl the floor walker's count each night. If somebody was in the bathroom or at the infirmary or out eating *again* I would call out, "Eleven in the bunk ... one in the box." Hey, when you're jammed into a non-air conditioned bunk house with a dozen half-crazed almost teenagers, you look for anything to keep you sane.

The thing that will stay with me forever is watching boys turn into young men. Let me explain. Mid-week, as we were preparing for a game, one of our assistant coaches had a serious medical incident. Our head coach went to the hospital to be with him. That left another assistant, Tom and me, to run the show. As I said it was right before game time, we were still at the barracks and with concern for our friend and the surrounding emotions running high, we still had to play a game.

As I had to shuttle between the barracks and a different field to get equipment, Tom did a smart thing. He asked the boys to grow up under difficult circumstances. Two boys stand out. Tom told Colin to take the squad to the field and we would follow shortly. He and Luke G. suddenly transformed into young men right before our eyes. Leadership is a strange thing. You can earn it, but I don't know if you can learn it. When I got to the field and told the boys what was up with our assistant coach, I think I was more shaken than they were.

While Tom and I were doing our best Moe and Shemp Howard routine, Colin took the guys onto the field and ran pregame like he was Whitey Herzog. And then, with no prompting from adults, gathered the squad in a circle in the outfield and led the team in a prayer for coach. It's a moment that chokes me up every time I think about it. Boys to men, right?

Our assistant recovered and was back with us the next day but Colin and Luke G. stood tall and remained clear leaders the rest of the week. Recognizing that, we gave them more responsibility and they delivered.

Now don't get me wrong, there were fun and games. One evening we had to get out of there or go stir crazy. We gathered the squad and went to a pizza joint and made so much noise that if we hadn't been spending so much money we would have certainly been thrown out. The best was the guys doing impressions of each other and then as steam built and courage grew impressions of the coaches. I don't believe I have laughed harder especially as the boys paid homage to my absurd antics in the coaching box. And team parents, don't ask why suddenly your boy can beat you at blackjack ... don't ask.

The end of the tournament was significant for a number of reasons. For our team though it marked the end of an era. Not only seeing boys make a transition but because our team is breaking up. So this trip to Cooperstown represented the end of a journey. My son has never had another baseball coach other than Rich Phillips. Nine years with one coach. I can't imagine being any luckier. Rich groomed players and parents. He taught the boys the game and the rest of us the ropes. Brad is my first child and son. The years we spent together with Rich on the field, for nearly a decade, will be cherished forever. Give your little league coach a hug, will ya?

Cynics might say that we had two teams in a tournament and came away with nothing.

I say, "Sometimes nothin' is a real cool hand."