

Moms & Baseball

John Pinkman July 30, 2006

I want to share a story with you. When I was a youngster Capt. Kangaroo would end every morning TV show with “and remember boys and girls, everyday is be-good-to mother’s day.”

Today is that day. Call your Mom.

Moms have always been a major part of our baseball experience. For all of our lives, moms have always been there to help us play baseball. Moms are the ones who pick us up and take us to the field, put band aids on our knees, and console us when we fail.

There is a saying Tom House uses that if a ball player fell off the mound, his mom would come to his defense after the game and say “my son fell off the mound better than any other boy today!”

For many years our family baseball business has recognized the important role that moms play. In our academies we have gone out of our way to find interesting magazines to preoccupy them when they endure the monotony of repetitive drill. We have always insisted on sparkling clean bathrooms just because they deserve that simple courtesy. We go to them for counsel on how best to communicate with their child. We share their compassion, concerns and joys. We need their inspiration, as well as wisdom, to become better teachers.

It’s fascinating to watch moms at games. Just when you think your mom isn’t paying attention, because she is chatting with other moms, she sees you do something really important. Mom can actually continue her conversation and with peripheral vision see what you did, how you did it, and grasp the feelings you experienced. She does this all at the same time, without skipping a beat in her conversation. Dads can’t do that.

Moms have a unique way of looking at success. Success to a mom is not the fact that you went 3-3 or pitched a 1 hitter, or even whether you even won. It doesn’t matter to a mom whether you won or lost. She knows it’s only a game. What matters to a mom is that you had fun doing it and that you gained knowledge about your life and walked away with more self esteem.

Moms get really irritated at coaches and players who don’t understand that and who take it upon themselves to require proficiency without training; mastery without education. Moms have very little patience, although they conceal it quite well, with the dad, the coach, or the player who places her son in a caste system and won’t permit him to move up because of a preconceived notion.

When I was a boy, I became involved in baseball primarily because of my mother. My dad took me to the local drugstore in Teaneck, NJ in 1956 and bought me a bat that was so heavy and so long Mickey Mantle couldn’t have used it. After that Mom decided that she had better step in! So she got involved all the way. We played catch together after school since my brother was too young to catch a ball. Of course I didn’t have patience for either one of them. But through it all she managed to foster in me, a love of the game and a need to succeed. Whenever I’ve had struggles in my life, I, like many other men, returned to my childhood days and to an understanding of how I succeeded in overcoming the challenges inherent in sports. Above all baseball teaches you persistence, the value to endure. It would give me great pleasure to see young women eventually benefit from the same retrospect experience.

My mom would always put me to bed very early in those days. In the 50’s there were only 4 or 5 TV stations, even in the New York metropolitan area. So there was no need to stay up late.

There were certainly no cartoon channels. You had a choice of watching quiz shows or a symphony from Carnegie Hall on a very small black and white TV; neither of which was very appealing to an aspiring athlete.

Some of the best memories of my life were being allowed to stay up to watch the Yankee games with Mom. And if I was extra good, she would make me an ice cream soda in a glass that I still hold today.

My biggest sadness in professional sports, particularly baseball today, is that major leaguers are not required to spend at least 4 years in one city. For many years I have thought that would be the greatest asset MLB could possibly create. Because when I was little my mom would walk me up to Charlie’s, the corner drugstore, and there they would sell the official Yankee programs sold at the stadium. Mom and I would sit and read the bios on all the players. There are many thousands of men my age today who can still name the 1957 NY Yankee lineup. Not many kids can do that today with their local major league team’s roster.

In those days, we played baseball from morning ‘til night on the street in front of the house. And if we didn’t have a hard ball, we’d use a rubber ball and play stoop ball. If we didn’t have a good stoop ball, we’d play on the tennis court using the tennis wall as home run derbies.

Mom, a good athlete in her own right, would always try to sneak in an at-bat. That was way too embarrassing! That was until she knocked the heck out of the ball; leaving all my friends jaws half way to their chests. Then is was “lets chose sides again—we get Johnny’s mom!” But duty called; the wash, ironing, vacuuming and such as that.

There were other ball players on my block with equally active moms. Jimmy Comis, our next door neighbor, went on to coach for 10 years in the Milwaukee Brewers minor league organization and still is in the game as a coach at Broughton HS in NC. Another friend did quite well too. His mom and mine were our Cub Scout Den mothers, and when we weren’t in Cub Scouts, we were playing baseball. You may recognize his name – General Peter Pace, current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I understand they recently named our old Little League field after him.

All of our moms played a tremendous role in our development through baseball.

Three years ago our roles completely reversed. After my father’s death, Mom, who has been suffering from Parkinson’s disease for many years, came to live with us. For the past 3 years I, along with the rest of my family, have been mothering Mom. It truly became a part time job with doctor’s visits; sometimes 3-4 a week and major medical problems requiring hospital stays. With Parkinson’s, prescription management is vital down to 5 or 10 minutes of when you must take your doses. As the disease progresses, it isn’t uncommon to have to take medications 5 times a day.

During this time people would tell me what a great job my family was doing with our mom. I always felt a little embarrassed about that. Not only was it our honor, it was, in fact, our duty. I’ve learned a lot about growing old by taking care of Mom the past few years. Being alone and failing in health is very lonely and very frightening. You are no longer able to do the things you used to be able to do. Parkinson’s can often, and in mom’s case did, lead to dementia. As that set in it was hard for her to talk. You must depend on your children and grand children for those essential services. That is not easy for moms.

In March (2006) Mom had to move to an assisted living home where there would be 24 hour care for her. She would not have to negotiate the stairs in our house. That was very difficult and emotional for both of us but we adjusted because we had to, there was no other option. As it turned out (as many advisers said) it became a very good option.

During that time, we went back to the old days. My sister, in North Carolina, would call and remind Mom when the Yankee games were on TV. And during our visits we would sit and not talk a lot because, at this point, Mom’s

ability to put cohesive sentences together was difficult. But it was clear to both of us that we were sharing an unmistakable bond; as we had for so many years by watching a baseball game.

During a recent visit, we did watch a game. I don’t know what game it was. I can’t remember who was playing or what the score was, but I just know we were together watching a ball game. As I left I turned the TV off and she said she was going to take a nap. As usual, I instructed her not to fall asleep in the recliner, but to get up and go to her more comfortable bed, because it was difficult when I wasn’t there for her to get out of a laid back recliner. So she said, ‘oh yes, oh yes’. I kissed her on the forehead and left.

Yesterday, Saturday, July 29, 2006 Mom died suddenly. It took less than 45 minutes from the time the call came in until the time I met the ambulance at the hospital. I had recently made a trip in an ambulance with her and had been by her bedside quite often in the past few years. I was prepared with a funny story to ease her tension. But as the ambulance door opened, I knew that she was released from the virtual straight jacket that Parkinson’s envelopes. I knew immediately that she was with my father and all her relatives that truly defined her life. She was the youngest of seven and the only living member of her generation.

At our Springfield Academy’s grand opening celebration, Thanksgiving weekend of 2005, with Mom present, we dedicated our Academy in her honor. Because none of us would have been there to carry on the baseball tradition, enlarge the baseball family, and honor the game, if she had not played catch with me on the front lawn in Teaneck, NJ so many years ago.
Call your Mom.

John went to the Academy to teach the next day because it was his duty and his mom wouldn’t have wanted it any other way. He dictated this on the way to work. It is almost entirely verbatim.