

Triple Play
A Story I Like to Believe Is True
by

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(Yeah! Yippie! He's pretty great, don't you think?)

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The greatest sports play of the mid-seventies went largely unnoticed by the mainstream media, or even those present at the moment, but I noticed and I remember, for it was the single greatest sporting moment of my life, and it happened in second grade.

The sixth graders had decided -- and although I am uncertain of most of the facts surrounding this event, I feel certain that only the sixth graders themselves would have decided this -- that on that fateful day it would be sixth graders against everyone else during the daily game of kickball that occurred right after lunch during the noon recess. I feel confident that this idea originated with the sixth graders as it was common practice for a few of the best -- most gifted athletes -- to say, It'll be him, him, him, and me against everyone else, because this would afford the star players the glory of having multiple at bats, while at the same time avoiding the liability of having an inept player -- someone such as myself -- on their team. Let's just say, the only time I ever heard anyone say, It'll be him, him, him, me, and Brett against everyone else, was when my best friend D--- was playing, for loyalty was one of his most supreme virtues. But don't think that for this brief period of

time when my friendship with D--- elevated me to the ranks of the chosen went to my head. Invariably when it was, him, him, him, D---, and Brett against everyone else, the aforementioned him, him, and him tending to wonder -- quite loudly and belligerently at times -- why Brett was required for the effort. Calls like, "They can have Brett, and, "We don't need him," tended to be put forth, but D--- would always stand firm. Like I said, his loyalty was beyond reproach or compromise.

Anyhow, I don't even know if D--- lived in the neighborhood on this fateful day, but it hardly matters. The point is, it was the sixth graders against everybody else, because they said so... and well, they were bigger. This was a playground, not a democracy, and so might prevailed.

As the game progressed, it had all the typical earmarks of a one-sided slaughter. We were getting creamed. The sixth graders would kick in a dozen runs, and then when Everyone Else -- i.e. my team -- got their turn at bat, maybe four of my teammates would actually get the opportunity to touch toe to ball before three outs were made and the sixth graders once again continued their merciless rout.

And then that's when What's His Name was up to bat again. Clearly, I don't remember What's His Name's name, and if truth be known, history will show that his skill wasn't as good as his reputation. Nonetheless, in preparation for his kick a full two thirds of our team exited the playing field -- the tennis court on which we played -- and took up positions on the other side of the fence in anticipation of another home run. It's actually an odd little rule that we played by: If you kicked a ball over the fence it was a home run, unless someone caught it on the fly, in which case it was an out. The whole game of major league baseball might change if they adopted such a rule, but for with us, there was always a fine line between spectator and player. Take me for instance, it had likely been a good week -- or more -- since I'd been at bat. Not that I missed the experience of grounding out into the pitcher's waiting hands, and in fact, upon looking back, one

wonders why one (meaning I) was drawn to the game so compulsively, considering how little one (once again, meaning I) actually played.

At the moment however such thoughts did not go through my mind, and -- unlike nearly everyone else -- I did not go behind the fence. Not because I didn't think the ball would go that far, but more because somebody had to stay behind, and being a fielder where any action (and therefore error) on my part was likely to cause grief to those who played on my team, staying put where I was seemed to be the wisest course in order to maintain that all important harmony of spirit amongst my teammates.

So there we are? Ah, yes. Sixth Graders 24. Everyone Else 0. It's late in the game, bases are loaded, and What's His Name walks to the plate. The pitch is bouncy. It might be one of those tricky spin balls you hear so much about, but What's His Name is cocky. He runs. He kicks. He connects. The ball goes flying into the air. And I mean like really flying into the air. One hundred, two hundred, three hundred feet straight up into the air. That ball would not have had any trouble clearing the fence and the dozens of waiting outfielders if it had gotten just a little more horizontal motion going, but as it was, it went almost no where. It was what we in the kickball field like to call a pop fly, my friends. And that infield pop fly was heading straight for second base, which just so happens to be where I was standing.

At first the guys on the bases didn't know what to do. If they ran, and the ball was caught, all someone has to do was touch the base they'd started from and they'd be out. We didn't play with any of that sissy stealing crap bases crap. If you didn't have the guts to run when the ball was in play, tough. This is important not to show off my long term memory of the trivial minuteness of the rules that I remember, but because as the ball hung endlessly in the air -- and I do mean endlessly -- a decision needed to be made by the runners that loaded the bases: stay by the base they were on, run, or take some sort of halfway action. Sometimes, when I recall this blessed event, I like to imagine that I hear the school bell ring

announcing that recess was over as the ball hung in the air -- as if the ball was in the air that long -- and at others I simply hear the catcalls of my schoolmates, "Run! It's going to Paufler. He can't catch. Run!" And accessing the situation like only children can, the lot of them ran.

Now, granted, I was surprised as everyone else when I actually caught the ball. I was sure a ball launched that high into the stratosphere would simply bounce out of my outstretched arms, but it didn't, and in fact, as I remember it, it was an easy catch. Piece of cake. Nothing to it. Just concentrate. Catching the ball was a glorious feeling. I didn't even bobble it. I mean, I made that catch solid, it was perhaps the best fly ball I ever caught in my entire life, but it only gets better.

Like I said, they had all had run, so now after my catch, they had to go back to the base from where they had started or they would be out. Thinking quickly I touched second base pointedly with my foot. No matter that I was already standing on it. I wanted it to be clear, I had tagged second base, and that runner was out, and then I saw the runner from first. He was only two-three-four feet away from me. Boy was he surprised I caught that ball. I ran to touch him, but he was bigger, faster, and need I say stronger. He deftly outran me and was well on his way towards first, but we were kids and throwing the ball was allowed, so mid step I took aim, and threw the ball. It hit him in the heel a full two steps from first base. He was out!

One in the air! One from tagging second! And one from beaming the guy running back to first. Three outs! A triple play! The only documented triple play ever achieved at A--- ES during lunch recess!!!

No matter that the bell had rung. No matter that the sixth graders probably already had two outs. The boy had run. I had thrown, and the out had been made. In these things, that was all that mattered. He had tried to avoid the play and he had failed. Case closed.

Sadly none of my teammates seemed to notice my brilliant performance. Had they ever made a triple play? For that matter had anyone ever made a triple play in the history of our school? No. Certainly not that I knew of, but my teammates simply walked past me as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. No one even threw up a cheer. The bell had rung. It didn't even matter to them that Paufler had finally caught a ball, let alone made a triple play. No one seemed to notice at all... except for that guy who had been running back to first. He informed me that he almost tripped when I hit him with the ball, and that he should just pound the crap out of me on general principles alone.

Even after all these year I can feel that boy's rage and indignation. Poor kid. You really got to feel sorry for him. He was thrown out by Paufler. I mean, Paufler? I think that says it all folks. I mean, can you imagine the crushing humiliation? Throw out by Paufler?

When I'm feeling particularly vindictive, I like to imagine that the experience haunts him to this day. You know, If it wasn't for that Paufler, I could have been a contender, I could have been somebody, but then most times I'm too busy basking in my own glory and greatness to worry about him. Did I mention I made an unassisted triple play once? Now those where the days!