

Don't fence me in.  
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Whatever my older brothers got involved in, I had to tag along. Thank you, mom and dad. I realize it was because you wanted to get us out of the house, which was fine with us. That's what bicycles were for. The whiff of April isn't so much lilacs as it is greased baseball mitts, pine tar, and Topp's trading cards bubble gum. Ban those aluminum bats. There's no more thrilling sound than the crack of a Louisville slugger. There's no hollow metal dinging from Northern white ash. Brother Larry joined another team in the Fanwood league, forcing brother Ricky to ignore me on his team. Wherever I went I was youngest and smallest. Ricky played catcher. When I got the rare chance, I ran outfield. I've always preferred being free range. With two older brothers pummeling you, you learn to be fast and quick. Coach used my size and speed to advantage. When he sorely needed a baserunner, he pulled me from the dugout. There's something about a dugout where no parents are allowed, only the guys, slapping each other with dusty hats and spitting water on each other. Coach sternly warned me never to swing. I was guaranteed to get on base because I was guaranteed to get hit by the pitch. I offered a narrow strike zone.

"Hey Andrews, get on deck." Coach had a runner on first whom he wanted to get round to second into scoring position. I'm certain I led the league in on-base percentage because of all those bruises. "Choke up, kid, lean in." After a season of bruises, I was fed up. I swung at the first pitch. The ball seared past the pitcher, leapt over second base, into the gap. The runner rounded third and headed home. I reached second and smiled the biggest smile I ever smiled.

Mike Schmidt's autographed photo sits framed on my library bookshelf behind me. That was when players stayed with a team for most of their career. Schmidt advertised milk because he wanted to be a good role model. Our seminary softball team regularly caravanned to Veteran's Stadium. At one game the announcer reverberated how Schmidt's MVP box in the stadium was occupied by his church's youth group. Seminary softball (back-to-back University League Champions – the grad students underestimated us seminarians) and my teammates kept me sane, even preventing me from dropping out from professional ministry. A decent scatter shot, never a home-run hitter, I was lead-off batter. Sometimes I covered third but loved short-field. Don't fence me in. I could read the batter's stance and predict the hit, often teasing by strolling in the opposite direction.

Ducks on the pond, will you guys just go for base hits, forget swinging for the fences, punch them through the infield fast, rip 'em level, level cut. Let's hold 'em now, no runs allowed, plug those gaps. Right field, not so deep. Talk it up youse guys, let's hear some chatter. Catcher get your mind in the game, stop looking into the stands.

The dugout boys have come a long way from T-Ball and two inning games lasting all morning. Washies is hustling, bustling as it should. It's spring. High-fives as the teams pass each other over the pitcher's mound, kicking dust. Some of the losers spitting on palms first, winners rushing to the dugout. Soft ice cream cones at Hunters after the game, big league pitchers swinging on swings, bazooka wads bulging juicy in the cheek. Said Yogi Berra: "It's deja vu all over again."

The fire company at Atglen, Pennsylvania, where I first served, hosted an annual Father-Son banquet. The menu predictably was ham and fried oysters. As both firefighter and chaplain, I got to sit at the head table next to the speaker who always came from the Phillies. We never did snare Mike Schmidt, but one year we did host Dallas Green, manger. The men drooled and fawned but their sons felt dismissed by him. Our best guest speaker was utility player, Greg Gross. He told me his wife was a Presbyterian elder. The boys for him were reason to be there, including girls who snuck into the banquet. Dallas Green rushed back to mainline Philly as soon as he could, Greg stuck around until the last kid had to be dragged home. Greg loved the game more than the business. He was a Little Leaguer playing in the bigs.

“It's a great day for a ball game,” smiled Ernie Banks. “Let's play two.”