

These Baseball Years

Sharing a love of baseball with his son brings a proud father more in return than he could ever imagine.

I got it! I got it! I got it!” If I had a dime for every time my son said this—his gaze skyward, his mitt upraised, his free hand waving off real or imagined teammates as he snags a fly ball—I’d be a wealthy man. As it is, I’m awash in the less tangible treasures the two of us share through the pass-along glories of baseball.

Jake, a newly tall and wiry 11-year-old, basks in his prime Little League years. I’ve thrown countless pop-ups, line drives, and grounders to him since before he turned 3, often playing until long after others considered it too dark outside. We started at a comically close range, me practically dropping the ball into his glove. As he gained confidence, we backed away toward opposite corners of the yard, wearing patches in the lawn and increasing our conversations’ volume to bridge the distance. In these busy times, I’m thankful for such regular talks, however loud. When various aspects of our lives get rocky and complicated, we always have baseball in common.

Jake’s first glove, a scuffed Easton Black Magic, sits in a trophy case beside my own frayed version, a 1958 Rawlings bearing Mickey Mantle’s faded signature and the smells of infield dirt and outfield grass from a generation ago. Those leather keepsakes embody more than a sporting tradition. To us, baseball is a grand metaphor for the game of life.

We plan family vacations around Jake’s park league schedule and his call-ups to all-star teams. We slip away to Florida each March to watch the pros during spring training. On a map in our den, we keep track of Major League cities where we’ve seen games—hoping someday to check off every one.

Through baseball, we explore weighty issues too: winning and losing gracefully; getting along with others; setting goals; playing hard and by the

rules; rolling with the punches; the value of physical health and the treachery of drug abuse. He’s even learned math from the game—calculating batting averages and win-loss percentages as well as studying the complex geometry of fielding for any given hit.

Good times together over baseball seem as endless as the clock-free sport itself: sitting side by side in the bleachers and shelling peanuts; breaking in new gloves with mink oil and use; collecting baseball cards; reading box scores over breakfast; watching televised games and baseball movies; retelling great moments—from Babe Ruth calling his shot and Hank Aaron piling on homers to Jake smacking his first triple or pitching an inspired set of three-up, three-down innings.

When I work the parent-staffed press box at our local ballpark, I take great pride in announcing Jake’s name as he steps into the batter’s box and recording his performance in the score books we keep religiously.

I don’t know how long this obsession with baseball will last. Jake sleeps on sheets printed with team

logos, underneath a ceiling fan with baseball-bat blades. His bedroom walls hold orderly ranks of pennants. Uniform jerseys from size extra-extra-small on up fill his dresser drawers. Gleaming trophies, autographed balls, and shoe boxes stuffed with allowance-money trading cards line his shelves, and posters of favorite players paper his door. When asked what he wants to be when he grows up, Jake invariably answers, “a baseball player.”

Whatever he does later, I’m happy for these baseball years. Forget about “if-I-had-a-dime-for-every-time” laments. I’ll take memories of lazy summer days, facing each other across the grass, and late nights dozing off as the play-by-play of extra innings drones from his bedside radio. These times and this amazing bond far outweigh any amount of piggy bank fodder. Long after my son settles into being whatever kind of man he’ll be, I’ll still see his upturned chin and hear his sweet voice shouting across the backyard, “I got it!”

JOE RADA

