SANDLOT SPIRIT

E. Michael Brady

I grew up in the church of baseball.

It's also true that I had another religion during my youth. Being in an Irish, working-class family in the 1950s meant living dutifully under the rules and rubrics of traditional Roman Catholicism. Like our other Catholic neighbors, we Bradys attended Mass every Sunday and holy day, never ate meat on Friday, kept rosary beads and statues of saints in the house, and made faithful pilgrimages Saturday afternoons to Fr. Dyer's confessional box.

But my deeper spiritual life was played out on a small, mostly grassy field encircled by oak trees set a hundred yards behind our house. It was there, with about twenty of my neighborhood friends, that every afternoon after school—and all day long during summer vacation—we played sandlot baseball. Sometimes our appearance, and even the rules by which we played, would seem "disorganized" to the casual observer. In my mind, however, our sandlot practices and traditions had the same weight of authority as doctrines handed down by the Pope himself.

Unlike our formal Little League attire, our day-to-day baseball uniforms were a motley assortment of T-shirts (without corporate logos or catchy slogans), dungaree or khaki trousers (always long pants—ballplayers have to be able to slide), variously colored caps, and U.S. Keds. Our playing equipment consisted of Rawlings and Wilson leather gloves and several wooden Louisville or Spalding bats. And, at least at the start of the season, a small supply of new white baseballs.

As spring blended into June, followed by the heat of summer, our gloves gained in suppleness and remained in good working order. But other equipment required attention. When a bat cracked, we interrupted play and raced to one of our dad's well-appointed basement workshops to perform minor (in some cases, major) surgery. The operating table was usually a sawhorse, the surgical supplies a handful of metal screws and electrical tape.

Balls fared worse. The sparkling white Christmas gifts or start-of-season splurge of paper-route profits aged quickly under the pressure of wet grass, dirt, glances off tree trunks, and endless innings. Our baseballs, unless driven to premature death by a towering home run or foul ball into the oak groves and their carpets of undergrowth, had five

predictable life stages: in early childhood, they were white and smooth, with sharp, red stitching; adolescence was marked by small cuts and burgeoning brown and green blotches; in middle age, stains grew darker and stitches began to unravel; early senescence brought swathes of black or gray electrical tape (God bless that stuff); and finally decrepitude and death. Thanks to the generosity of a grandparent or a timely birthday, new baseballs were occasionally introduced into play. On our sandlot, one boy's baseball soon became every boy's baseball.

On Friday nights and Sundays, we sandlot kids, mostly Jewish and Catholic, would worship with our families at Beth Hillel Synagogue or Christ the King Church. But through the remainder of the week, to both Christian and Jew, our temple was the sandlot. Similar to our other religion, baseball had rules and traditions we respected. For example, as in the earliest years of the game—when players like Mike "King" Kelly ruled the diamond and one major league actually bore the name "Beer and Whiskey"—in our game three strikes made an out; three outs made half an inning; a batter had to advance three bases and return home in order to score; and nine players constituted a team (we were flexible on this final point—sometimes we had six, eight, or even twelve on a side . . . whoever came, played).

In my other church, we had centuries-old traditions of major saints (Mary and Joseph), minor saints (Philomena and Christopher, both being so minor that after the Second Vatican Council they were decanonized), and an underworld consisting of Lucifer and his army of devils. We sandlot kids had our legions of saints and demons, too. Famous ones we knew by the color of their uniforms. Since most of us were Red Sox fans, the home whites with red and blue trim—worn by men such as Jackie Jensen, Frank Malzone, Mel Parnell, Ike Delock, Pete Runnels, and Sammy White—drew devotion. And the leader of this cast of demigods was none other than Mr. Theodore Samuel Williams.

The bad guys wore stripes (just like jailbirds) and bore the nicknames Moose, Whitey, Yogi, and—worst of all—Mickey. Just to say these names inspired spit. These troglodytes were said to file their spikes before games, throw at hitter's heads, bribe umpires, and trip runners as they rounded bases. Naturally they won a lot. The difference between heaven and hell, righteousness and unrighteousness, good and evil, was clear to us—Red Sox and Yankees.

The spirit of the sandlot allowed for local options. Day in and out through our long and luxurious summer months, we met after breakfast at the field and chose teams by first selecting two "captains of the day." One of these would toss a bat upside down to the other, then, with alternating hands climbing up the handle, the one who managed to fit his fist at the knob won first pick. We umpired our own games and tried to make daily practice of God's mysterious ability to simultaneously balance justice ("You're out") with mercy ("Okay, next time if it's a close play

you'll be safe"). Despite having been introduced to this justice vs. mercy conundrum in an abstract way in Fr. Dyer's sermons, I approached an understanding of it only on the sandlot.

Sometimes, during peak family vacation times or summer flu epidemics, we didn't have the requisite number of kids to play full games. Nonetheless, baseball lived via the timeless rituals of "pepper," infield and outfield drills, "hit the bat," or alternate games in which we created our own parameters of play. One of the alternative games we claimed to have originated involved playing with a partial infield and outfield and forcing batters to "call" their field. If the batter declared he was going to hit to the left side, the short-handed defensive squad would shift players to third base, short stop, and left field, keeping one player on the right side of the infield to cover first base in the event of a ground ball. If the batter did not follow his own directive and hit to the opposite field, he'd automatically be out. Thus, in these celestial sandlot summers, we learned, in good part through necessity, the art of improvisation.

The demigod status of Ted Williams inspired a special event with the aim of helping those less fortunate. Williams, during many of his playing years, volunteered as chairman of the Jimmy Fund, the fundraising arm of Boston's Dana Farber Children's Cancer Institute. I learned about this when my brother and I listened to Red Sox games on Hartford's WTIC-AM radio with my dad. One year, when I was about nine, brother Steve and I came up with the idea of involving the sandlot kids to help out.

The two streets in our neighborhood that supplied most of the sandlot players were Ellsworth Drive (where I lived and behind which was the field) and Daniel Boulevard. We thought that perhaps we could organize an "All Star" game—like the one on TV every summer pitting the American League against the National League—with players from these two streets competing against each other. We'd sell tickets and snacks and donate revenues to the Jimmy Fund.

We recruited our little brothers and sisters to make popcorn and Kool Aid and charged fifty-cents admission to parents, grandparents, and whoever else in the neighborhood wanted to watch brilliant baseball. By the end of this effort, we had earned a grand total of $22.50. My parents deposited the cigar box filled with quarters and dimes into their checking account, rounded up to $25.00, and, with an accompanying note, sent a check to Boston on behalf of the sandlot kids.

Months later, a surprise came in the form of an envelope mailed to our home. Enclosed were twenty wallet-sized Jimmy Fund membership cards—one for each player. They were individually numbered and included a black and white photograph of Ted Williams with a bat on his shoulder. We learned that day that is was possible to do both good and well in a single act. And we also learned that even demigods, notwithstanding what John Updike would later write about them, do, on

occasion, answer letters. I kept my Jimmy Fund membership card in my wallet all the way through junior high school to prove the point.

Now when I travel back to Connecticut to see family, I make a point to visit our old ballfield. It's still there, where it's always been, behind the small ranch houses on Ellsworth Drive, although one must now strain to imagine the base paths and the spots where rags or shirts served as bases. The large, seemingly ancient oak in left center field, toward which we aimed our home run swings, is still there, gnarled as the grizzled veteran nostalgically looking up at it.

Often during such visits, I bring my son to the sandlot with me. Ryan is now sixteen and has played years of baseball, albeit always, like most kids nowadays, in organized leagues with adult management and supervision. Now, like on other such visits when he was younger, we make a point of getting in a game of pepper or a long catch on the old ballfield. I tell him stories about some of the neighborhood kids with whom I shared that time and place: Brian went on to a career in the military; Shawn is a teacher in Texas; Joey sells insurance; Jimmy works in corrections; Bobby owns a cleaning business in Florida; Brucie is a mathematician; Alan works in food services, and his younger brother Larry is dead. I tell Ryan about the choose-ups and "uniforms," the twenty-inning afternoons, and the theological lessons derived from umpiring our own games. And, as dads are apt to do, I point to the place in the old oak where I hit some of my most memorable home runs.

None of the kids in our working-class neighborhood had much money, but we were rich in play, friendship, and community. These combined treasures played out during lusciously long summer days. In my mind, the spirit of the sandlot, our own Elysian field, has endured the decades in better shape than the other church in which I grew up. It is both source and destination as now, in my middle years, I round second base on my way home.

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