

*Chapter Six-
Baseball,
more Baseball,
and even more
Baseball*



It was a given that if you lived in Sharpsburg, were male, and could walk, you played baseball ALL the time. Even my friend Ray, who had had pollio as a young boy, and wore a brace, played, and fairly well at that.

During the summer, we played from the moment we finished our household chores until dark, with only a break for dinner. I was even known to be told to walk my little sister and not to go to the playground and NOT to play baseball. My brother would grab her and the stroller. Meanwhile I would crawl out the coal chute (we had a coal furnace, like everyone else) with the gloves, the ball, and the bat. And off we'd go to the playground, where she watched for hours (with the help of a bribe - candy bar, cookies, pepsi) while the mighty Pirates would trounce the demonic Yankees, Giants, or Dodgers.

We played in an asphalt playground next to Madonna Church. I remember when we started to pop the windows in the Church. The young assistant pastor, Father Vecchhio, was understanding UNTIL I hit a huge homer to center that went cleanly through the window exactly where the picture of Jesus was holding his hands apart. (This clearly showed that JC wasn't a great center-fielder: probably a great QB and Steeler fan!)

I covered up to the rectory sure that I was going to be beaten by his cane or crucified! The understanding priest worked out an amicable arrangements for the repairs but insisted that, henceforth, the field be turned about to prevent us hitting into the Church. Fair enough. And from that day on anything hitting Madonna was an out.

Unfortunately, this created a new series of problems. The new field configuration put the Regina Coeli in a short porch in left field. Not only were the thirsty patrons now treated to a constant beating of baseballs on the walls, but balls

were lost on the flat roof. The patrons could be silenced about the noise, since Father Vecchio has decreed it. But they wouldn't allow us to retrieve the balls from the roof.

This was a serious problem; balls were a rare commodity. We played with balls taped with electrical tape - until Tony's dad found out where all his tape was going. So we moved to rubber balls which cost 10 cents - Outrageous!! And the asphalt and the Regina Coeli tore them to pieces.

Something had to be done. We (read me) devised a scheme to retrieve the balls. I would run through the Regina Coeli, causing a stir and get the proprietors to chase me. While I distracted them (a great covert op, eh?), Tony and Chuckie would sneak up to the second floor bathroom where there was a trap door to the roof. They'd collect the balls and drop them to my brother or Ray, who would gather them and guard them.

Once the job was pulled off, I'd make one more run through the bar. The proprietors would chase me. The two cat thieves would come down through the trap door and make their exit. Always worked like a charm. Ingenuous, wasn't it?

The covert team would take the cache of balls home and work on them, making them usable. Tape worked on the hardballs. The rubber balls, if waterlogged, had to be put in an oven or an hairdryer, which required further deceit and planning.

Finally, we would have a month or two supply of balls. So we had to pull the great heist twice a summer and plan it so that the balls weren't up there too long and became rain-soaked.

Thus armed with taped balls and a taped-up broken bat, we were ready and played constantly. We went to great lengths to keep the game alive. Summertime, we played from noon until five and from seven 'til dark.

Were we upset that we had to work with such primitive tools?. NO! On the contrary, we took a perverse pride in it. Being able to fix a bat or ball was viewed as one of the greatest God-given gifts bestowed upon man.

We played football in the Fall, but without the single-mindedness. There were obstacles to that as well.

If wanted to play tackle, we had to crawl under the fence to get into the lumber yard and the end of the street. That was the only grass within nineteen blocks. The only problem was that the soil was black and loaded with cinders. Boy, would it hurt getting tackled. and would our mothers fuss when they saw us after the game. No concern about the cinders embedded in our bodies, but fussing about how dirty we were.

We could opt to play tag in the street. Problem: cars would interrupt the game. We would play between the parked cars that lined the street. So we didn't do a 10 yard down and out. Play calls went like this: "After you hike it, I'll run to the

Chevrolet. You run down to the DeSoto, then cut to the Buick and I'll hit you." Remember the rage with big fins in the 50's? Ever run into the fin of a Chrysler at full speed? Ouch!! Fortunately, most of us couldn't afford one!

Then there was the problem of balls bouncing off cars. So out of bounds included all the cars, the Chrysler and other nice cars whose owners became exorcized when a punt would careen off their windshield. The solution was to find places where there were open parking spots or to play in the intersection. Or we'd just ignore all the screaming.

The short version: we took a lot of pains to create our little play spaces and things. We also created a lot of irritation as well.

As we used to say, "That's Tough!". We got our sport games played!