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Bullets and Baseball

Baseball or one of its incarnations was around well before 1861, but the Civil War popularized the game and rocketed it on its way to becoming America's national pastime. Just as it helped many soldiers through the insanity of war, baseball's impression on me was the guide that carried me through some tough times.

It has been said that there are many parallels between baseball and war. One was mentioned in a review of the 1857 season in the journal *The New York Clipper*: "Players will be compelled to lay by their weapons of war, enter into winter quarters, there to discuss and lay plans for the proper conducting of next year's campaign" (Kirsh 30). There were winter campaigns of course; however, most of the action took place when the weather was conducive to travel and the movement of armies. Baseball is the same way. It will be and has been played in very cold weather only if it can't be helped. Most soldiers didn't look forward to battles in the spring with bullets, instead, just like me, they looked with anticipation to the battles that took place between the lines of chalk on the infield.

Baseball played an important role in keeping a man's mind focused on something besides death and destruction. You can lose yourself in the competition for hours on end. When you are playing ball it is almost impossible to think of anything else. If you are thinking of

something else, you might get your noggin knocked, especially if you aren't paying attention. Johnny Boggs illustrates in his historical novel *Camp Ford*, baseball helped the men forget that the tree line used as a homerun fence might be hiding fifteen thousand troops that will be getting up close and personal the next morning.

Troop commanders realized early on that playing ball was a genuine morale booster and they did the best they could to provide the boys with the equipment needed to play. Bats and bases and, of course, balls were the main items and if a team could get uniforms that was a very special time in the spring. All the equipment of that time could be made right there in the field but it is so much nicer to have it provided.

I remember that that very thing made me feel special when I played my first organized game in 1963, a little over one hundred years since the war ended. I got to put on a uniform of sorts but the thing that was real cool was I was made the catcher and there were all sorts of neat things to wear. I had shin guards, a mask and a chest protector that was three sizes too large. It didn't matter. I felt special and was able to forget about the abject poverty I was living in at the time. It wasn't as bad as war but life wasn't much fun at the time so baseball became my ticket to another world. Johnny Boggs sums it up when he says "Time passes quicker when there is baseball" (Boggs 133).

As Donald Honig reflects, "There were no team sports in America until baseball was developed. That had a catalyzing affect, bringing people together first in teams and then crowds that gathered around the unfenced grounds. Something about the new game – its tempo, its balance, its potential for individual excellence amid team unity – was deeply

appealing to everyone involved” (Honig 3). Appealing as it was, baseball developed from its beginnings as an urban gentleman’s game to something like we see today. As the rules were combined, so were the players and the concept of “gentleman” went away. Men and boys came from all over the country and were thrown together to make an army. It is amazing how our society sees individual accomplishments as a driving force, and yet there is baseball, where all individual actions benefit the team. It seems to me that this particular team sport fit well with the concept of an army at war. A coordinated effort must be made by everyone if the goal is to be won. As an example, an army will use a relay of men at both ends of a skirmish line as a flanking movement to strike down an enemy. Similarly, my brother Bob and I accomplished the same thing with a relay play in the early 1960’s. On a beautiful Saturday morning, Bob took my throw from the outfield and relayed it to the catcher, throwing out the runner with the potential winning run.

That was a glorious play; however, here is another comparison to be made between war and baseball – they both have their badges of honor. In baseball the badges of honor can be described this way: “The very brutality of early baseball, when brave men donned neither glove nor mask, and wore their bruises, shiners ,and shinplasters as badges of honor”(Rossi 112). War of course was much more brutal and the badges of honor weren’t shiners but missing eyes, and. the shinplaster turned out to be a missing leg. Still, baseball was accomplishing what little else could: men could be distracted, at least for a few hours, from all that was around them.

The U.S. Sanitary Commission also noted correctly that the game of baseball was excellent physical exercise. The Commission recommended that to preserve the health and morale “practicable, amusements, sports, and gymnastics exercises should be favored amongst the men.’ Baseball was listed among the approved pastimes” (Kirsch 30). Running, throwing, and catching baseballs for hours on end will get the muscles into pretty good shape in a short period of time. Now, troops did do a tremendous amount of drilling and marching. When they weren’t marching, they were drilling. I’m sure this instilled discipline and pride of purpose, but baseball and the conditioning it provided was a new, added dimension. Before the game evolved into a nine-inning affair, games were played until a team scored 100 runs. Just think how much exercise one could get if the game ended 100-80! Conditioning is very important to a soldier and could save his very life.

Baseball might have saved my life as well. The sun couldn’t rise fast enough for me to head for the ball field and gather as many of my friends as possible to play a game. We didn’t need to have nine to a side. We adjusted the rules, just as they did in the old days, to accommodate however many players were there. For example, if there was no right fielder a ball hit there was an out. I wanted to play so badly that if there was only one guy there (me) I would hit the ball as far as I could and run after it! I was playing ball, I wasn’t on the street or in an alley doing those things that get you put in jail or worse, killed.

Abner Doubleday, a Major General and hero of the Civil War, was credited with the invention of baseball. James Kushlan tells us Doubleday “never claimed to be the father of baseball, but others claimed it for him, and the myth persists in some circles today” (Kushlan 4).

Whoever or however the game was created, it has given pleasure, pain, and solace to many millions of people. It is for this reason it is called our national pastime. Every spring hope is renewed and our lives have new meaning and everything is right with the world: at least for a little while. The men of the Civil War benefited from the game just as I did. By playing or even watching the game, you can begin to feel like nothing bad can happen to you on such a glorious day. There is no war and everyone lives to play another day.

Works Cited

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