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The One Constant

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The One Constant

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How one family hands baseball down through generations.

When I was a boy, my father and grandfather fought for my soul, taking me either to Cubs games at Wrigley Field (Northsider Dad) or White Sox games at Comiskey Park (Southsider Papa). We went so often, I thought the national anthem ended with “Play ball!” Paternal love won out: I became a benighted Cubs fan. I adored Ernie Banks, the irrepressible Mr. Cub.

Our last Wrigley game together occurred in 1967, when I was 10 and dad was 40. Then we moved to Wisconsin, but I still followed the Cubs on our massive radio, even when they played late-night West Coast games.

That’s how I witnessed one of the most stunning collapses in modern sports. In 1969, the Cubs blew a nine-game mid-August lead and missed the playoffs. I was so invested in that team, in Ernie Banks finally playing in a World Series, that when it fell apart, I basically had a nervous breakdown.

When the Brewers arrived in 1970, I thought I had to choose between my new home-state team or remaining loyal to those lovable, anguish-inducing losers. But I learned something: I could love two teams simultaneously. I could back a team in each league, and though the chances were less than Olivia Munn dropping Aaron Rodgers for *moi* (hey, a boy can dream), each spring brought hope that come fall, the Cubs and Brewers would meet in the World Series.

Did I mention that a boy can dream?

So I rode both teams’ ups and, more often, downs. The nature of baseball is that of both failure and hope. After all, a great hitter only averages three hits every 10 plate appearances. George Carlin had a classic bit on the differences between football and baseball, one being that players, when they score, are going home. “Home! I’m going home!” And, yes, I can love my Packers but still agree with George Will, perhaps for the only time: “Football combines the two worst things about America: It is violence punctuated by committee meetings.”

By 1974, I had a new reason to cheer the Brewers. They brought up a young shortstop, Robin Yount, all of 18 – my age! And in 1982, he spearheaded a great team, one that finally played in a World Series. Yes, we lost in seven games to the Cardinals, but hope sprang eternal. Next year! With Yount and Cooper, Thomas and Vuckovich, Molitor and Oglivie and the rest, we could not lose!

We lost. Years of mediocrity followed. Still, I kept cheering them on. Surely one –or, God in heaven, both! – would someday win the Series, right? Hope springs eternal. And even if they didn't, what kept you going was the belief that they could. Play ball!

After college, during my peripatetic years, I cheered other teams, including the Twins when I lived in Minneapolis. I experienced sweet triumph when the Twins won two Series in '87 and '91, made more poignant by my two oldest children being born those years. I thought of writing the Twins and telling them of the corollary, offering to keep having kids if they could give us Series tickets. But my wife dissented.

Things come full circle with baseball when you have kids. By the time Roman, my second child, was born, I'd returned to Wisconsin ("Home! I'm going home!"), and we lived close enough to the ballpark that we could bike to games. Or take the train to Wrigley. In a bit of symmetry, my older son Tosh's first game there came when he was 10 and I was 40. His first Brewers game was three years earlier, April 1994. I felt the great chain of being: As my father had done for me, I did for my children.

Perhaps the highlight of trying to teach my loves to my children came in September 1998. I took all three – it was my daughter Hania's first baseball game – to see the Cubs and Brewers at County Stadium. Surrounded by Cubs fans, we cheered, too, when Sammy Sosa, chasing Mark McGwire for the home run title, hit homers 64 and 65. But we cheered louder when we won the game, as the Cubs (bless them) committed a three-run error in the ninth.

And that's when I knew where my sympathies lay – I'd been using "Brewers" and "we" interchangeably.

But my kids are modern kids, and for a while, baseball's allure was lost on them. They thought it too slow; they had other things to do. I went to a lot of games with friends, not my kids. I missed having them there, but how could I complain that they'd rather play sports than watch? Soccer, swimming, volleyball, cross country – I drove them to practices, attended a thousand games, matches and meets. It was a joy seeing their joy, their determination, their being so entirely themselves, striving, winning, losing. I loved to watch them play.

I just had to accept how they weren't as passionate about baseball as I was. That trip to Wrigley with Tosh – it wasn't the Cubs so much that mattered as it was baseball and being with him. I still get choked up when James Earl Jones sonorously declares in *Field of Dreams*: "The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball."

Hope springs eternal. And maybe some of it did rub off. Two days after Tosh's wedding, with the relatives still in town, he and his bride and a bunch of us went to a Brewers game, the last big family gathering before everyone scattered. There they are, Tosh and Elizabeth, beaming in their Brewers shirts. It was family. It was baseball. And with luck, I'll be at games with them and my grandkids a decade hence. Play ball!