

SWING FOR THE FENCES

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The best time in the life of an eleven year old is the summer. There is no school and the days seem to last forever. . .

For a boy back then it was also a time for something he and his father could share, baseball. His dad played as a kid and was a big fan of the game. The boy not only adored the smell of the horsehide on the ball, but also the smell of the freshly cut grass that covered the little league ball field. As soon as he stepped onto the field for the first time of the summer, he stuck his nose deep into the grass to smell it. The dirt flew into his nostrils and the young man delightfully sneezed out about three or four blades of grass. It felt great. He rolled in it and loved the fact that the back of his neck itched like crazy. He took off his

baseball cap and squinted at the sun daring it to blind him. Standing perfectly still as long as he could, he then took off and ran across the grass. It seemed to stretch for miles as the boy's short legs chugged through the plush greenery. He jumped for joy, happy as a kid could possibly be. It was baseball season and the crack of the ball against the bat was Christmas and his birthday all rolled into one. He loved it all, from the tryouts to being selected on a team, to meeting teammates, to getting a uniform, and leading to the grandest of days—opening day!

Opening day held special magic. There was something so . . . *American* about it. He would stand on the foul line between first base and home plate, a clean uniform adorning his small frame. His heart beat proudly as from somewhere the National Anthem played. Behind the wire mesh screen separating the stands from the Little League players, fathers stood. The boy's father was there, in his trademark

orange jumpsuit, hair slicked back and dark sunglasses. His father pointed a whirring movie camera.

"Hi dad, I'm number twenty!"

The boy turned to show the camera the number on his back. He made an exaggerated motion like he was pitching a ball. Then he pretended to drift way back and catch a fly ball. His dad turned off the camera, and waved at his boy to stop.

"Stop horsing around and go warm up. And clean your glasses," said dad.

The boy took a moment to clear his glasses like his dad said.

Those glasses. Black on black. He hated them, and that's all there was to it. They were thick and geeky. He would try to wear them as little as possible, but without them it was like looking through the front window of a car in the rain. His teammates would always tease him, calling him "four

eyes." It made him angry. Those glasses; they made him angry.

Still, what he really cared about was being the best ballplayer he could be. But there was another, bigger obstacle in his way.

"Hit it the hide off it!" the boy heard his father bellow when he was up to bat. "Show it who's boss!"

The problem was. . .what really, really bothered the boy. . .what he had tried to deal with on his own, at night, alone with just him and the hardball was. . .the boy was afraid of getting hit by the ball.

He would talk to it in his bed at night. "Hello, Mr. Baseball. Please don't hurt me tomorrow. I like you. Do you like me?" He would take a ball with him everywhere, hoping to make friends with its hardness its hurting side. He would hug it kiss it. But when it was *batter up* that ball scared the daylights out of him.

His father saw that the first time the kid played the game. How could you miss it? The boy stood at the plate bat in hand. When the ball was pitched the boy would flail with the bat as he jumped four feet back. The black rimmed glasses would fly off and the bat would miss the ball by at least feet. The boy would pick up his glasses and leave the plate with his head down and the bat dragging behind him. And he would always notice his father's slight headshake.

Still, the boy loved playing. He just wondered why the ball didn't like him. Then he seemed convinced the ball hated him. He didn't know his father was out to fix the problem.

It began one late Sunday morning as the boy sat at the kitchen table eating a bowl of Frosted Flakes. The boy felt his father's hand on his shoulder. "Come with me," is all his dad said.

His dad led him outside to the back of the house. He was carrying a bat, two hardballs and a glove. "You're afraid of this little ball, right?" The boy nodded, not knowing what was coming next. "Stand in front of the garage door," instructed his dad, pulling the sunglasses off his greasy black hair and pushing them over his eyes. He handed the bat over to his son.

The boy took it, palms sweating already. His father was pacing off his steps. At a tin bucket filled with hardballs his father stopped and turned toward the boy. He slipped on the glove and gripped a hardball. The boy still didn't know exactly what was coming.

His father was just staring at him then went into a slow pitcher's windup, and then threw the ball at his son's left leg. The boy couldn't move fast enough and the ball blasted him on the shin. The boy fell to the ground in pain. Tears came down

his face right away as he searched for his stupid glasses.

"It will never hurt more than that," yelled his father.

The boy got up, rubbing his leg. He saw his father in the windup again and—wham! With a hard thud the boy was bashed on the shoulder. This time he didn't fall he simply clenched his teeth to keep from blubbering.

"It's just a lousy ball!" yelled his father. "What can't kill you makes you stronger!" and he began his windup.

The boy bit on his lip and quickly took an angry stance. He wanted to smash that on-coming ball. He wanted to belt it so hard it would forever shut up. He swung—and missed. A ball flew at his head. He ducked just in time. A ball whizzed by his face. Just as quick followed another, just missing the tip of his nose. The boy's rage came quickly. He swiveled but a ball nicked his hip.

"Stay in the box and swing!" yelled his father, as he impatiently threw another ball at his son.

The boy didn't care that he was blubbering he just didn't want to be hit. *Whoosh* and a loud *crack* as a ball barely missed him and then hit the garage door. How many balls were left? Maybe he could out last him. No, his father would just collect all the balls and start over. Another windup, another ball coming.

The boy firmly planted his feet, bent his knees slightly, and watched the small hardball getting bigger as it came toward him, waist high. He swung with all his might. The sound of the bat hitting the ball would echo in his head forever and a day! He watched with an open mouth as the ball sailed a hundred miles away. He looked at his father who removed his sunglasses and smiled.

The boy was no longer afraid of the ball. His dad had taught him that. The boy spent the rest of that Little League summer swinging for the fences.

Many years later, after the boy himself became a father with a son who loved baseball, he rubbed at his shin and shoulder and wrote down this story.