

Sidearm

Our father has enrolled a brother and me in a summer baseball league. I don't think our father has asked us if we wanted to play baseball. One of his friends is coaching our team, and I figure that's why we are going to play. My brother and I ride in our father's pickup out to a dilapidated practice field carved out of the weeds next to the old National Guard Armory building. There is a swampy pond nearby, optimistically called College Lake, where teenagers come at night to park and smoke cigarettes and drink beer. At one end of the lake is an area called Motorcycle Hills, a spider's web of undulating dirt trails that wind through red clay gullies and around mesquite trees. The kids who aren't old enough to park and smoke and drink ride their bicycles and minibikes here.

The baseball field is an expanse of rocky ground bordered on the west and south by the dirt road leading to the Armory, and the Armory's parking lot; and on the east and north by mesquite trees and cattails that lead down to the lake's edge. The town sends out a few men occasionally to mow the field, but it is not one of their top priorities. The backstop behind home plate consists of rusty chicken wire strung across three long metal pipes inserted into the ground. The wire droops and sags tiredly on the pipes; it has been hanging here in this lonely place for a long, long time.

Our coach retrieves three canvas bags of sand from his pickup and places them at what he thinks are the correct locations for first, second, and third bases. Home plate is a rubber mat cut into the proper shape: a square with a triangle added to one side. It, too, is retrieved from the coach's pickup and plopped on the ground a little distance in front of the backstop. The pitcher's mound is not a mound at all. It is just an area where the weeds have been worn away a little, roughly on a line between home plate and second base.

I know only a few of the boys on our team. The few that I know have, like me, just finished the second grade at Oliver Elementary. Most of the other boys on the team are bigger boys from the third grade, and there are a couple of first-graders, like my brother. Some fathers decide to stay and watch us practice, and they stand off to the side talking with one another. They yell at their sons when a fly ball drops behind them or a ground ball goes through their legs, which is often. Our players are not very good at baseball. The fathers must have been great baseball players when they were boys, because they yell out to us everything we are doing wrong.

The coach wants to know if I can pitch. He takes me to the pitcher's mound that's not really a mound and says, "Let's see how you can throw."

I'm not sure what he wants me to do. I throw the ball to the boy who is playing second base, which surprises the boy. He throws the ball back to me and looks at the coach.

"No, no, throw it to the catcher," my father yells from outside the third base line.

I can't remember which one of the players is the catcher. I throw the ball back to the second baseman.

"No, for God's sake, throw it to the catcher!" my father yells, exasperated. I've never heard him say the word "baseball" before today, but he always wants my brothers and me to be good at whatever we are doing.

The coach gets the ball from the second baseman and walks back to the pitcher's mound.

"Right there," he points to a third-grade boy who is crouching behind home plate and frowning at me. "Throw the ball to him, he's the catcher." He hands me the ball.

I throw the ball to the catcher, and the catcher throws it back.

“Keep throwing the ball, and throw it pretty hard right to the catcher,” the coach tells me. He stands behind me and watches.

I throw the ball to the catcher for a while. The catcher holds up his mitt and I try to hit it with the ball. It’s not that hard to do. I’ve thrown a lot of rocks at empty beer bottles and through the windows of the old bus parked in back of my grandparents’ house, and it’s just about the same thing.

After a while the coach stops me. “Where did you learn to throw like that?” he wants to know.

I can’t remember having learned to throw. Throwing is just something everyone can do, although I know some people are good throwers and some people are bad throwers, like my mother. “Don’t know,” I tell the coach. I think I must be doing something wrong.

“You throw sidearm, did you know that?” the coach asks me.

I don’t know what sidearm means. “No,” I say. “Is that okay?”

He smiles. “Oh yeah, that’s just fine. Lots of kids that start throwing balls and rocks at a young age throw sidearm because they can throw harder that way. Best way to skip a rock on water, ain’t it?”

I know this is true. “Yeah,” I say.

“Fellow name of Walter Johnson, a long time ago, won over 400 games in the big leagues, second all-time to a fellow name of Cy Young. Threw sidearm like you,” the coach tells me.

By the time we play our first game, against a team with some other boys I know from Oliver Elementary, I am one of our team’s pitchers. I have learned to wind up and throw the baseball as hard as I can. Over the course of the summer I learn that throwing sidearm scares some of the batters on the teams we play, and some of their mothers yell out for our coach to tell me to stop throwing like I do.

“He’s gonna hit my boy!” they holler from the seats behind the backstop, their embarrassed husbands wishing they would sit down and be quiet.

My coach yells out to them, “It’s alright. He only hits some of them.”