

Life is but a short walk on a long journey

By ANDERSON COBB

As read before the members of the Literary Club December 4, 2017

In Cincinnati at least, there is no sweeter sound than the crack of a wooden bat against a baseball at the start of the season. And it is difficult to find anyone who has not, or cannot in some way, identify with someone who has played, or loves, the game of baseball.

I know when I was a young boy growing up down south it was definitely the most fun and exciting game we had. And we played it all summer long. My childhood friends and I could hardly wait for the spring thaw, and that warm sunshine.

And whenever a bunch of us got together, it didn't take long for us to divide up into two teams, choose players, and get a game going. Sometime, there were not enough players for every position. But we tried to make the teams as competitive as we could. In some ways this was a good thing as it allowed almost every player, save for the pitcher... the chance to play at all of the position. So by today's standards baseball for me and my friends back then, was quite a different game.

Considering all of the multi-million dollar contracts thrown at baseball players today it is easy to forget the hardship, and struggles some players of that area had to overcome... just to be in the game.

At any rate my friends and I went about playing the game of baseball... with nary a care. And except for the slight feeling of self pity, that arouses in my heart... as I stand here before you, it is almost funny to look back at our humble attempts to be a star hitter, fielder, or a pitcher of the time.

It was really different, and being the son of a sharecropper didn't help matters. My father having died when I was just seven years old... meant that a baseball mitt, a bat, or uniform was far beyond the budget of a widowed mother raising four children all on her own.

And when I really stop and think about it, even the baseballs we played with were the ones hit over the fence and out of the playing field. We watched the games from a distance, but when they were over, we often found several baseballs. And although... thoroughly soaked, we would sometimes find others days later after a hard rain.

Although, I know now, at the time I did not understand the substance,

or the reason my mother gave when telling us not to wander too near the baseball field during the games.

However, after the games we ventured into the baseball park, and occasionally... on a dare, a few of us would run the bases before scouring the field. On a good day we would find three or four good baseballs.

Looking back, and allowing for the kind-heartedness of some of the grownup players, we may not have been quite the hunters we thought we were. Sometime we would even find a well-worn, or a cracked bat or two that had been left behind. We learned that with a few nails, and a bit of strong tape, they were, for us at least, as good as new. And a generation ahead of the sticks that we used as bats most of the time.

But to recall a saying, of which I have grown fond... "You can't lose a friend you never had". I would add to that... you can't miss what you never had either. So to that end we got along just fine with water-logged baseballs, broken bats and sticks shaved smooth.

As a matter of fact, some of us got good enough to be able to hit, throw and field with the best neighborhood players of the time. It is also well to remember that being sharecroppers' sons, and most of us were, we were stonger and tougher than the kids who did not have to regularly case hogs, rope steers and work in the heat of the hot sun for hours on end.

I am sure you have heard it said, and perhaps it is true after all. That line about... he who laughs last, laughs loudest. I rejoice, and often laugh in gartherings with the few friends, who are left from that time. And although it has been many years, somehow it does not seem so long since we played... what was probably our greatest game. Seemingly, a group of the white land owners had gotten a team together, and challenged our team.

It was really a fun game, and it still makes me laugh... Anyway, we had become so accustom to out-of-round baseballs, crooked bats and no gloves to speak of, that when given the chance to play against the landowners kids who allowed us to share their truly perfect equipment... not to mention those wonderful refreshments they brought!

Well, our leader... coach, if you will, had to instruct us several times during the game to hold back a little, so as not to give the hosting team too rough of a going over. A bit strange now perhaps, but we gave little or no thought to being rich or poor... black or white, and thought mostly of the fun we had.

Interesting enough baseball has been played by rival athletic clubs as a form of recreation for a good long time. And after the Civil War its popularity really increased. Although baseball was pretty much an amateur sport at that time, it attracted players of all races. Of course there were... all-white, and all-black teams, but there were some integrated teams too.

However, black players were barred from participating by the National Association of Baseball Players late in 1868 so that put an end to the integrated teams.

Additionally, by the 1890s African Americans were increasingly excluded from the professional teams, and by the start of the 20th century no black players at all remained in professional baseball. However, in spite of being excluded, black baseball players formed and played on all-black teams.

Today many of the great players come from Cuba, and this is fitting, as the first black professional team was the Cuban Giants, their team was formed back in 1885. And until the organization of the first black league in 1920 the newly formed black teams played as independent ball clubs.

Rube Foster, perhaps better known as the father of black baseball, founded the Negro National League in 1920. However, things didn't stop there, in 1923, Ed Bolden formed the Eastern Colored League. Both of these leagues thrived for several years, but eventually declined mostly due to a lack of funding.

A new Negro National League was formed in 1933 and the Negro American League was chartered in 1937. These two leagues prospered until the color line was broken with the signing of Jackie Robinson in 1947 and he became the first black baseball player allowed in the all-white professional leagues in the 20th Century. At their height the Negro Baseball Leagues held both World Series... and all-star games.

These teams were especially successful during World War II when black urbanites, with money to burn from their well-paid defense jobs, crowded into stadiums across the nation. In a culture of... separate, but equal, the Negro Baseball Leagues provided African Americans with their own American pastime.

However, the end of the Negro Baseball Leagues came quickly after World War II when for the most part the baseball leagues were reintegrated.

The signing of Jackie Robinson was soon followed by the signing of other leading Negro League players, and the Negro Baseball Leagues

quickly, and quietly folded.

Now for the most part I don't suppose my friends and I ever contemplated the fact that we were an all-black team... as I said earlier, we just loved playing baseball.

In that day and time, we were content just being who we were, and most of us never realized that a professional baseball career was possible, or even thought of the rewards it could offer. Still, sometimes I ponder the thoughts I had as a young man growing up down south on the farm. I did imagine just how nice it would be able to play baseball, and get paid for doing it.

Never-the-less the years went by and other thoughts consumed my imagination. When I think back, I can also remember just how different my hopes, and dreams were from those of my childhood friends. But, as we grew up, we grew apart, and in the broad scheme of things... playing baseball as kids, became merely a past chapter in our lives.

Still, for me, even in the best of times I could never quite put to rest the fact of how hard we worked, and yet, how little we had. I was never one to really complain, but it got increasing difficult to overlook the lack of opportunity... and, fairness offered people of color during that time.

And as I grew older... and perhaps a bit wiser, seemingly I recall having once asked a prominent deacon of our church if God was real, and if he was aware of what mankind was really like. I asked him... if it even made a difference whether or not, we followed the teaching of the scriptures. And I also complained about the fact that we had so little, and almost no hope of ever becoming rich.

Even today, I remember his answer as clearly as if he was standing here beside me... after a long pause, he said, well... Brother Cobb, a lot of us have probably wondered about that too, but... you have got to have faith. And you have got to rely... on that faith to guide you. And more than that, you... must find a better way to ask these kinds of questions.

Learn to talk in a softer voice when you say these things he said. He rambled on a bit... something about the sheep walking along the path near the gate at sundown, being closer to a warm night in the barn, than those still grazing in the field.

At that time, I didn't really hear what he said. I did give him the courtesy of my ears... as I had been taught to do when talking to elders. Still, although he was uneducated and somewhat slow in his

delivery, thinking back... his words carried a deeper message. Particularly when he said, sometime a whisper... is heard louder than shout.

Today, I realize the spot my question probably put the old man in, but at the time, I really was just seeking answers. To be truthful... his response sounded kind of dumb, but over the years I have mostly come around to his way of reasoning.

However, thereafter pretty much every newspaper want ad I answered, and every door at which I knocked... lead to a dead end. And I found myself walking on a rough road with obstacles, and hurtles at almost every cross-section and turn.

But what bothered me the most was... at the same time the children of the landowners, the same kids that I grew up with, got great jobs, and went zooming by in their fancy cars.

Still, more touching than anything that ever happened to me... was seeing the joy, and excitement fade from the face of one of my former schoolteachers when his application for a small business loan was rejected.

It was them, that I began to question my purpose and to a degree, life itself, the how, the why, and the reason for it all. I looked at the little neighborhood in which I lived, the people who controlled it, and the world at large. I looked at how grand was some of the homes where the rich people lived. And admired the lavish, and luxurious churches where they worshiped.

And silently, reckoned that if I was a god... and was offered the choice between such nice structures, and the rickety old two-room church where I first confessed my faith... Well, I am drifting too far away from the counsel of the deacon again. But, I did think the things.

Now whereas, I never stopped trying... to some degree I did begin to lose hope, and started getting that feeling that maybe, hard work and dedication may not be the best the way to get what I most wanted out of life.

I examined all that I owned, my humble furnishings, my ragged clothes, and worn out shoes. It was not that these things were not adequate, but they were far below the luxury that adorned every place where I was not welcomed.

And although unhappy... I never joined marches to protest the prejudice, and injustice of the time, and never threw rocks, or hurled Molotov cocktails, and I never blamed my white friends for my plight.

Still, my heart sank each time I heard of the mal treatment suffered by friends and acquaintances arrested in the south during the Civil Rights area of the sixties.

I am sure you have heard it said many times, and probably, most of you have... thought, it is all just talk. But this really is something you cannot judge, understand, or have a true feeling of... until it has either happen to you, or to someone you love.

For me personally, my hopes were shattered many times... and it did not hurt any less, as time went on. But, maybe after a while, rejection was kind of expected.

So I went back to the counseling offered by the church deacon years before. And I learned to speak softer, and to choose my words more carefully. I also added a smile, and cheerful demeanor, that would be hard to ignore... or hate.

This taught me to be humble, it taught me not to wear my feelings, and or accomplishments on my sleeve. And it taught me... in a strange way... to better to understand life, and how to live... and let live.

I set about in life thinking that... "It is better to set a high goal and fail to reach it, than to set one, where victory is certain". So for me, I have always set my sights high, and my determination strong and resilient. The point is... I never thought of myself as less, just because others thought less of me.

Victory has never been certain for anyone, and for me... it may remain a taste unknown. But not for my lack of trying, I can count again and again the times I have had my hopes raised, and then dashed. I have studied past, and present wars, and still wonder why nations fight.

I have examined weapons of war, from rocks and sticks... to the atomic bomb. Still, I have found only hate, and the love of want. I have looked back to a time when I even came to question my own faith... and the very purpose that I am.

From a young boy growing up and playing stickball with my friends, life was somewhat of a disappointment. Then again, during all of the fun, I never really thought of the perils... that might lie ahead. Love, hate, war, and growing old... were thoughts that almost never entered my mind.

And long ago my wants in life were pretty much a BB gun, a bicycle, a car and a steady job. And although... I am kind of ashamed to admit it now; my yearning for the comfort and joy of the fairer sex arrived a bit late too. And, as with so many other things in my life, I didn't fair

too well with that either.

Maybe I was too ambitious, maybe a bit too trusting, and maybe, I forgot the meaning of a phrase that so often I had heard. However, it is really clear to me now, and probably says it best.

It goes something like this. "All in love is fair". All in Love is a game. So the writer takes his pen, writes it down again... All in love... is fair.

So all-in-all there is really no reason to lament the past, no reason to ponder the future. For...

Life is but a short walk on a long journey.

And yesterday I walked along the banks of the river in Cincinnati... down where the land is untamed and ever-changing. Down where neither concrete nor steel invade the meandering shore, down where the wood duck lives, and wild rabbits feed.

While walking amidst this quiet beauty I saw sun-dried skeletons of birds and small animals long dead. And although these sights caused my heart to weep... I questioned not, whether they were fell by the force of nature, or the hunter's bow.

Yesterday I walked along the banks of the river in Cincinnati, and saw the dark fertile earth move beneath my feet. Then noticed, that in my moment of pleasure the mud has speckled my shiny new shoes.

I looked high into the deep blue skies above me, at tall skyscrapers and crowded office buildings, where in only minutes I would return. And for an instance, I thought of New York, I thought of mothers... I thoughts of fathers... I thought of Heros... who along with all of the children, in time, will be but a memory.

So, let us tip softly around this space in history... least we awaken bitter memories, make restless the sleeping body of hate, and disturb the dreaming revenge.

Yesterday I walked along the banks of the river in Cincinnati, thinking of life, and the wonder that it can bring. I relived happier times, of not so long ago. And those memories will live forever...

You see, "Life is but a short walk on a long journey." And many, be the times when I have trod upon muddy paths. But, I find that when I walk back home thru the tall grass... my mud speckled shoes are scrubbed clean.

So I walk down by the river in Cincinnati. Down where the land is untamed and ever-changing. Down where the wood duck lives and wild rabbits fees... and for a time, I am free.