

Father and Son

A number of papers involving the bonding of father and son have been read at this club. Without researching beyond the author's own recollection, such relationships often revolved around a specific activity with sports being the most frequent. Club papers with strong father-son relationships that came readily to mind have been read by Gibby Carey, Lew Gatch, Alan Winkler, Frank Mayfield JR, and others. Bill Burleigh's wonderful paper tonight, while not featuring a father-son relationship, is very similar as it covers his formative years with the multiple influences including his father that shaped his career.

Several years ago I gave a paper entitled As As As Was, a brief biography of my father, although it did not include much about his influence on me. Tonight's offering does include his influence on me particularly via his interest in baseball.

Indeed, I am the son of a baseball addict. Eslie Asbury played high school, college, and semi-pro, once being offered a chance to go to spring training with the Louisville Colonels. He settled on medicine as a career and had many other major interests in his life. From early on he was hopeful that I would share his baseball interest, as he was bouncing baseballs off me by age 4. By age 6, I was up to being able to engage in a back and forth toss. About this time, I experienced my first contact with a major league player, Eppa Rixey, who was probably the best pitcher ever to play for the Cincinnati Reds. During his career which was divided between Philadelphia and Cincinnati, He won 265 games, a remarkable feat since both teams were chronic losers usually finishing last or near last in the league's standings. For 30 years this was the National League record for most career wins by a left-handed pitcher until it was broken by Warren Spahn, an outstanding pitcher for the old Boston Braves, now the Atlanta Braves. After

Eppa completed his baseball career, he established a very successful insurance agency in Cincinnati. A number of his descendants live in this area today.

To get back to the Rixey story, one Sunday morning in July of 1932, Eppa stopped by our East Walnut Hills home to pick me up to attend an afternoon Reds game. I should say that my father and Eppa were good friends. Eppa took time to play toss with me before we left for the ballpark. I can still remember my disappointment in the fact that he threw underhanded to me, but even so, it was quite a thrill for a 7-year-old to be throwing a baseball with a major league player under any circumstances. Soon we left for the ballpark. Eppa, Jr., about my age, was also with us. Upon arriving at Redland Field, (the name had not yet been changed to Crosley Field; that would occur soon when Powel Crosley purchased the team about two years later). Eppa, Sr., escorted us into an almost empty ballpark as it was more than two hours before game time, and placed us in a box along the third base side. About fifteen minutes later, ushers began to arrive and one of them came over and said, "How did you kids get into the ball park?" Eppa Jr. piped up saying, "my father Eppa Rixey told us to sit here." The usher said, "kid, I don't believe you! You do not belong here and you two must leave." The usher proceeded to take us to the nearest exit where we were left standing outside the park. I am sure we were crying and trying to get the attention of anyone that might help.

In the meantime, Eppa, Sr. had put on his uniform and had come out with the other players. He looked up to where he had seated his two young charges, but was unable to locate us. At first, he thought we had gone to the bathroom or the concession stand and so he was not concerned, but after not seeing us after 15 or 20 minutes, he checked with an usher and found out what had happened. A chagrined and chastised usher restored us to our original seats much to our relief. Eppa already in his forties played one more year, retiring after the 1933 season during

which the Reds finished last again. The fortunes of the Reds were soon to change with their purchase by Power Crosely Jr., a good friend of my father.

My own baseball career could be said to have started in the fifth grade. I had just been transferred to Cincinnati Country Day school (CCDS) and was excited to learn of the school's emphasis on organized sports. I believe I had been transferred there from Hyde Park Public School not only for scholastic reasons, but because there were organized sports activities. Dad once told me that Virginius Hall Sr., father of our Vinginius, was one of those who recommended the school switch. Virginius Hall Sr. was a popular teacher at CCDS for many years. In any event, somehow I was tapped to be on the 7th and 8th grade team coached by our Mr. Chips, Mr. Ash (I still don't know his first name). The school was short of players which partially accounted for my playing with older boys. This being in the 1930's, it was before little league had been established and knothole baseball was just beginning. Most schools, private or public, did not have organized (coached) sports before high school. Country Day was an exception.

By the eighth grade, I was the high school varsity short stop were I held my own as a fielder, but was usually over matched batting. Fellow eighth grader Eric "Buck" Yeiser was the varsity third baseman who more than held his own against our older opponents. We lost only one game that spring as we had several talented seniors especially an ace pitcher.

CCDS had a fairly good team in my 9th grade (1940) even though several good players had graduated. I played short stop and did some pitching. Many of the regulars were ninth graders since most students had left for prep school by the tenth grade. In our class of 20, 18 went to prep school leaving only Steve Marvin and Cornelius Hauck to graduate. It was at least another fifteen years before this trend changed and more students stayed at CCDS to graduate.

Another notable baseball experience occurred when I was 14 years old. Somehow my father, probably with some kind of bribe, had gotten me on the Paris Kentucky semi-pro baseball team for the summer. This was a typical Kentucky town team that played on Sundays before a crowd of 1,000 or so. There was no admission, but the hat was passed among the spectators and the take divided among some of the players. I was really too young to be a regular on this men's team, but nevertheless I was the shortstop. I could hold my own defensively, but was definitely overmatched as a batter. Our team did very well that season earning the right to appear in the state tournament which was being held in the small eastern Kentucky mountain town of Beatyville, County Seat of Owsley County, where baseball was the main entertainment. This was a two day, four team tournament with each team playing one game Saturday and the winners playing on Sunday. We won the Saturday game, although I did not get to play since the team had imported a man to replace a boy for the tournament. The showdown game was against the local Beatyville team on Sunday. There was much gambling on the outcome and Beatyville pulled out all the stops to weigh things in their favor. A number of young ladies from the area had been recruited to see that the visiting Paris players had a very good time Saturday night. They succeeded admirably as most of the players got quite drunk and many of them did not end their celebrating much before the sun came up.

As our team warmed up before the Sunday game, most of them looked pretty bedraggled and our star, Rube Arnold, did not appear until right at game time. He was dressed in his uniform, shirt tail out, cap askew and not wearing shoes. He looked around and said, "I have lost my spikes and I need to borrow a pair." He spied me, took one look at my shoes and said, "I'm sure your shoes will fit me." I had no choice but to lend our star my shoes, thus ending any chance I might play. Unfortunately, our hung-over forces could muster very little opposition for

the Beatyville team, losing 16 to 1. Rube Arnold struck out all four times he batted. There were many recriminations and finger-pointing as team members showed remorse about the outcome. They vowed to come back the next year, resist the local temptations, and redeem themselves.

The next year we again qualified for the Beatyville trip. I was now up to carrying my own weight for the team as the regular shortstop. I remember several noteworthy teammates particularly the centerfielder, George Washington Case, who was the lead-off hitter and batted cross-handed. Case was a good outfielder, covering centerfield extremely well and because of the immobility of Theo Butler, the right fielder, he also covered most of this area too. There was a weeping willow tree in left center field with low branches. When balls were hit in such a way that they rolled under the tree, it was often difficult to find the ball quickly. Case solved this by having a ball planted just under the edge of the tree branches so that he never had to look for any elusive balls.

Our manager, one Theodore (Theo) Butler was the right fielder and weighed over 300 lbs. One wag said he covered a small amount of the field very well, but did not have much range. His obesity could be attributed to the fact that he ran the local pool hall where he drank more than his share of beer. In spite of this he was a very good hitter, batting cleanup as well as handling his duties as team manager very well. I still remember his Smokehouse Pool Hall on the main street of downtown Paris, where I had my introduction to billiards and pocket pool at an early age.

The next year the Paris Merchants once again qualified to go to Beatyville. This time the team was determined to make a good showing and not succumb to the temptations of the night time delights of Beatyville. We won on Saturday and had a good close game on Sunday in which we managed to beat Beatyville. I had a pretty good game at shortstop to go along with my three

hits. As I was walking off the field, a middle-aged gentleman approached me. He said, "I am Eddy Reis, a scout for the Cincinnati Reds, I see you are wearing a Reds baseball cap. Where did you get it?" Indeed, my father had gotten me a Reds cap with the head protecting helmet sewn into the sides of the cap. This was one of the first protective caps and within a few years, they were mandatory for all major league players. All the Reds players were glad to have this protection, except Bill Werber. He is to be remembered as the opinionated and talented third baseman on the Reds championship teams of 1939 and '40. I told Eddie Reis that I was wearing Bill Werber's cap which, as you can imagine, he found unbelievable. How could a youngster in the mountains of Kentucky be wearing the cap of a major league baseball player? About that time my father came over verifying the story. He explained that he had obtained the cap through his friend Powel Crosley, owner of the Reds, when Werber chose not to wear it. Within a few minutes Reis had been invited to come back to Forest Retreat Farm to spend the night, and for me this was the beginning of a lasting friendship. Over the years, Eddy placed me on summer league teams in Cincinnati and even tried to sign me to a professional contract.

The Kentucky semi-pro league was certainly a good training ground for future baseball experiences. Prep School at Andover was next where I played for three years on the varsity. Our opponents included a number of games against college freshman teams in which we more than held our own. George H. W. Bush was our first baseman and captain of the team in his senior year. He was an excellent fielder and an average hitter who went on later to be captain of the Yale baseball team. "Poppy" as he was known in those days was a school leader, an honor student, and a very affable person. Someone asked me recently if there was any indication that he would someday be President of the United States. My answer was that one would not have thought in such terms, but it if were known that there was a future president in his class of 200,

he would certainly have been in the top 3 of being most likely. It should also be remembered that his father was a Senator from Connecticut at this time which might have planted the political seed in George early.

An interesting experience occurred in the spring of 1942 when most of the seniors would be going into the service within a few months. I was in the eleventh grade so that it would be a year and a half before I would enlist. The war had only just begun and some of the parents thought that a trip to Florida during spring vacation was a good idea, something like a last fling before military service. It turned into what amounted to a 10 day spring training with over half of the Andover team able to assemble in Orlando, Florida. My father was the organizer and several Cincinnati boys attending other prep schools were included; namely Cliff Wright, Pete Geier, Eric Yeiser, and Jack Hollister. Arrangements were made to use the field that the Washington Senators used for their spring training. When we arrived, the Chattanooga Lookouts, a farm team of Washington, was using the facilities which we shared with them. Toward the end of our ten day stay, the Andover Varsity played the Chattanooga Lookouts. We were of course overmatched but we able to keep things reasonably respectable with the final score being 10 – 4. During the game, Poppy Bush made several outstanding plays at first base and also had two hits. Sitting in the grandstand was the legendary 85-year-old Clark Griffith, owner of the Washington Senators. As the game was ending he sent one of his emissaries to have Bush brought to him. He offered him a contract saying that he realized he was still in school, but if it were possible he would like him to play as soon as school was over. Poppy was flattered and said, “Mr. Griffith I appreciate your offer very much, I am interested in baseball but a war is on and I plan to sign-up in the Naval Air Force on my 18th birthday.” Bush did enlist on his 18th birthday which is the

earliest date that the Naval Air Force would allow enlistment. His outstanding war record has been chronicled many times.

Not so well known is the fact that baseball was not George Bush's best sport, soccer was. I played soccer with him for two seasons at Andover, the second of which he was captain and the best player. That year Andover was undefeated. I succeeded him as captain for the fall season of 1942. We had another good season, but not as good as the previous one. In those days soccer was played only in schools and colleges in the north east. I thoroughly enjoyed it, much preferring it to football although one can readily see why football is the preferred spectator sport over soccer in his country.

After graduating from Andover, I was accepted in the Navy V-12 program and sent to Yale. The main objective of the Navy program was to insure a steady flow of scientists, engineers, physicians etc in the event that W.W. II lasted longer than it did. V-12 students were enrolled in many universities as enlisted men in the regular navy, but were treated more like college students than service personnel. For instance, we were allowed to complete in inter-collegiate athletics as well as join fraternities. At the same time students had little free time except on weekends, when it was possible to be away over Saturday night. Discipline was stern, so that violation of rules or poor academic performance resulted in a student being expelled from college and sent to Navy boot camp to begin an enlisted man's career, having failed in the officers training program.

I was able to play baseball at Yale in the spring and summer of 1944 and the spring of 1945 when I became team captain. We had a good team coached by ex-major leaguer Red Rolfe who has been an all-start third baseman for the N.Y. Yankees during the 1930's, playing with Ruth, DiMaggio, Gomez, Gehrig, Dickey, Gordan, etc, a period in which the Yankees won

several world championships. It was fun and very instructive to play under Red's guidance. I do vividly remember one game in which we were overmatched. It was against Army at Yale field where we suffered a humiliating loss, 25 – 1. Late in the game with the score 25 to nothing against us, I managed to hit a home run. A mini-headline in the New York Times sports section the next day read "Asbury homers, Yale loses 25 – 1." I still have the clipping.

I was scheduled to enter medical school in the fall of 1945. The Navy's policy was to send students as near their home as possible which was sensible particularly from an economic standpoint. Although I would have preferred Yale, Harvard, or Columbia medical school, I was assigned to The Medical College, University of Cincinnati which in the long-run worked out very well. As the war was over, we were mustered out of military service in late 1945.

Eligibility rules were lax in those days, especially at U.C. The next spring, I decided to go out for the U.C. baseball team. I managed to play the spring schedule with only moderate conflict with the medical curriculum. It worked well enough that I played three years (1946, 1947, and 1948) for U.C. As far as I know, I have been the only medical student to ever play varsity baseball at U.C. The team was average at best and was made up largely of service veterans, but I certainly enjoyed the experience. I do remember we beat Notre Dame a double header, but generally the team played about .500 ball.

A highlight for me at U.C. was being exposed to a volunteer assistant coach, Jimmy Shevlin. He had played at Holy Cross and later for about six years in the National League, mostly with the Reds. He encouraged me to try professional baseball in the summer of 1948. Billy Southworth, the standout manager of the Boston Braves, now Atlanta Braves was a particular friend of Shevlin. It was arranged that I join the Braves who were in Pittsburgh at the time which was the middle of June. I took batting and fielding practice in Forbes Field with the

Braves. This was the first stop on a western swing road trip that also included Chicago and St. Louis before ending in Cincinnati so that I was with the team for ten days. What made it particularly memorable was that the Braves were winning regularly and took over first place during this time. The catch phrase "Spahn, Sain and pray for rain" was born that summer although the Braves had two other good starting pitchers; Johny Beasley and Jim Turner.

The team leader was second baseman Stinky Stanky. Also prominent were Alvin Dark, the rookie shortstop, later to be a manager and Bob Elliot, an excellent clean-up batter. Yankee cast-off Tommy Holmes played left field and earned the nickname "two-fer" since he usually went 2 for 4 or 2 for something. He hit about .335 that year as the Braves won the pennant easily.

The end of my Braves story occurred in Cincinnati. I had looked good in batting practice, but had avoided fielding practice mainly because of a sore arm. Manager Southworth ordered me to engage in fielding practice anyway where my weak arm was apparent. Afterward, he asked me if I were in school. "You talk like a college kid". I told him I had completed three years of medical school. He immediately said, "kid, I strongly advise you to finish your medical education. Baseball is iffy for anybody." It should be remembered that salaries were still very low in this pre-television era with established big leaguers making in the ten thousand range and a star such as Stan Musial making thirty-five thousand.

As it turned out I did not sign with the Braves, but was able to sign with the Reds. I was sent to their team in Sunbury PA in the Interstate League. This was 2 or 3 levels down, but the competition was well above the college level. I enjoyed that summer of minor league ball, even though I earned only \$250 per month, plus five dollars a day meal money when on the road. The late night bus rides and the third rate hotels were not always fun but such towns as York,

Allentown, Hagerstown MD, Harrisburg, and Wilmington had their redeeming features. OF course I returned for my last year of medical school which was the plan all along.

In many ways the game, the rules and the strategy have not changed much in the last hundred years, despite the higher finance that has permeated the game. One rule change that seems to me to be an aberration is the designated hitter. I hope this rule is eliminated and the time honored National League rule is universally adopted. It is now been over 60 years since I played. My love for baseball has not diminished with the passage of time nor has my gratitude of my father for making my baseball career and many other things possible.

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