



Baseball is my favorite sport. I love absolutely everything about this game, the way it has often mirrored the best and worst aspects of our nation's history - as beautifully captured in Ken Burns' essential documentary series - as well as the current role it plays in the fabric of my beloved city of Boston. The dramatic shifts in energy during the average regular season game. A two-out rally, a pitcher who is lights out for six innings getting his lights turned out in the seventh, the grandeur of a walk-off home-run or a game clinching closer's strike-out. Damn, it's got it all.

And, it all starts again, today.

I loved baseball when I was a kid. The truth is: I was awful. But, I still loved it. I played catcher, where I was decent, and centerfield where I was also decent. I take great joy in memories of tracking down a long fly ball in center, up against a bright blue Little League sky. I loved throwing it back to the pitcher after he'd struck out somebody who rode the same school bus as me, and putting on those "Tools of Ignorance," as the catcher's equipment was known back way before my day. That term goes all the way back to Harold "Muddy" Ruell who famously stated - based on a career that spanned from 1915 to 1934 - that anyone with the intelligence needed to be effective behind the plate and who would be foolish enough to play a position that required so much safety equipment was likely ignorant.

Fair enough. There was one thing about which I was absolutely not ignorant though.

I could not hit.

I loved catching. Just the chance to be part of the battery of these undersized adolescent cannons. I could follow it right through the futile swing on the opponent and even occasionally throw out a baserunner. But when it was time for me to come to bat, I was lights out. Perhaps it was a series of being hit by pitches as a pee-wee, but I was essentially gun shy. I bailed out on anything inside and slap hit occasionally to the opposite field. I was plain lousy.

Yet, I was fascinated by pitchers, right from the start. The ball was in their hand, they dictated the pace, they were the key to the start of every play. And, as it turned out, both of my younger brothers turned out to be fantastic pitchers.

These two both threw 18 strikeouts, 6 inning, no hitters on the Little League stage, multiple times. That means they struck out every single batter they faced. I'd sit in the stands, feigning indifference but amazed at their command of the juvenile heat they wielded.

My brother, Kevin, once went toe-to-toe with a kid who'd eventually pitch at Old Dominion and be drafted by the Yankees. Going into the bottom of the 6th - the end of a Little League game in those days - both had complete game no-hitters. That was until Kevin took him yard at the plate at Cooney Field and won, 1-0. How's that for the minor drama of baseball?

Mick was a southpaw who was named after my Dad's favorite Yankee. He slung it hard enough to toss a few no-hit games of his own, but who was also athletic enough to catch left-handed with a first baseman's glove and hit a game winning homer once with a broken collar bone though my Dad admonished him to not even tell my Mom he had played in the game. He grinned all the way through his Bliss Dairy ice cream cone on the way home.

Perhaps this all played a part in my love of pitchers in particular in this game that I love so. I would grow fascinated by Nolan Ryan, and how he could continue to confound batters as he aged. Sandy Koufax, Kent Tekulve, Steve Carlton, Pedro Martinez, just wizards. The 1975 Red Sox introduced me to Bill Lee and Luis Tiant and Rick Wise and Reggie Cleveland, not to mention guys like Roger Moret and Jim Willoughby. These were personalities with arms from Olympus. There was Rick "Tall Boy" Kreuger, nursing a Narragansett on Channel 38 after what was then called "Fireman Duty." Today it's called, "The Closer."

My fixation on pitching never wavered as my love of the game advanced and in 2004 it got somewhat more curious when I was introduced to two members of that year's Red Sox pitching staff. By that point I'd somewhat established myself as a music critic in Boston. I contributed regularly to the Boston Globe and other respected local publications, had gotten my first byline in Rolling Stone, and done some other national stuff. My great friend, Ed Valauskas, called me and said he had a couple of folks that I should meet and I was intrigued, as I always am when Ed says something like that.

Anyone who lives music in Boston - and I mean it that way, who "lives" music in Boston - will tell you without hesitation that if Ed V thinks it's a good idea then it's a bad idea not to explore it. That's just a plain regional fact. This guy is just guided by the gods. The gods and incredibly generous and good intentions. He just likes putting people together who make each other smile and he is pretty remarkable at doing that.

A day or so later and I'm in the lounge at Boston's legendary Paradise Rock Club when Ed introduces me to two tall and lean Floridians. Lenny DiNardo and Bronson Arroyo. Little did I

know, as I told them that this was the room where U2 played their first show in the states, that this stage had hosted Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers (from Lenny's hometown of Gainesville) and R.E.M and countless other bands that I was about to become friends with these two for life. But, I was.

I also didn't know we'd rarely talk about baseball.

And... they were both pitchers.

Since then we've talked a little more baseball but a lot more rock n' roll. I have seen shows with both of these guys in a lot of different places. Lenny has crashed on my couch for a run of Pixies shows. Bronson and I have hung out at the House of Blues in LA and I was in the studio when he made a record. I even wrote about it and it's good. They are my friends.

But we don't talk that much about baseball... and yet they both played my favorite position.

So, today, on opening day, Lenny and I got into a chat about Juan Marichal and Warren Spahn and arguably the greatest game ever pitched (link below) about Tim Lincecum and Sandy Koufax and basically how great the game is and how much it has changed. For me, to speak to a man, as a friend of nearly fifteen years, who made his living looking to put his pitch past a guy making \$25 million to drive it past him sort of dawned on me. Wow, this entire time we have have never talked too much about this, and yet, that's what he did.

Which all leads me to this final conclusion.

There are so many things that divide us as Americans, particularly today, but there are things that unite us. They might be comic books or food or cartoons or film. But today, on Opening Day, i once again united with a friend over two things we both love.

Rock N' Roll music and baseball. Hail, hail, to both.

And, to friendship, another great American value.

Did I mention that he's a pitcher...?

-Tom Kielty