

On A Very Big Regret  
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When I began writing this thought, I was going to call it “On My Biggest Regret,” but it took half of the first sentence to see that that title wasn’t going to work. My truly biggest regret came flooding in on me: a former wife and two little boys I let down many years ago; that is my biggest regret. I’ve told myself over the years that I did the best I could do given who I was and what I knew then and what I was capable of doing at that time, and there is some validity to that. But still, I failed them, and it hurt them in ways that lasted. At some level, that regret lives with me at every moment of my life as a sadness, a weight to bear, a gnawing even if very slight, pervasive ache that I can refer to at any time. One reason to stay vigilant in life is the past is irrevocable. What you do lives on in the consequences of your actions for others and yourself, and as memories that don’t die until you do and that affect how you live now. So what I’ll talk about is *a* very big regret in my life and not *the* biggest regret. Since everything’s connected to everything else in our lives, I’ll get into the connection I see between this very big regret and the biggest regret.

A very big regret in my life: being deeply involved in organized sports as a teenager and young adult. This was in Minnesota and it was a half century ago. From the time I was 11 to 23, sports was it for me: baseball and basketball as a participant, and football a bit as a player but primarily as a fan. I gave time and energy to sports and, for all practical purposes, nothing else. I went to practices played organized and pickup games, watched games on television, and read the sports section of the newspaper and sport magazines and sports-related books. I looked upon the successful players on the pro and college and high teams as special people, heroes, exemplary beings. I fantasized about becoming a professional baseball player and had no other aspirations, say, to become educated or attend a good college or be successful in a profession or create a loving family of my own or own a home or serve other people. My family meant nothing—and frankly, I believe I meant very little to them. I had no religious or spiritual impulse or connection to a church. School meant nothing—I never opened a book and yet somehow I got through my classes. Nobody

seemed to take notice or care what I did in school except a couple of my elementary school teachers when I was six and seven who made me stand out in the hallway for being bad (to this day I don't know what I was doing wrong at that age, but I was doing something, or was something, that put these teachers off). What happened in the world meant nothing. Travel meant nothing. The arts meant nothing. Girls were enticing but foreign creatures, "over there," and basically meant nothing. I hung out with a gang of guys who played on my teams and nobody else, and we talked about sports and nothing else.

Was I any good at the sports I played? Not particularly. I was good enough to make the teams and start right away in baseball and eventually in basketball, but mediocrity was my upper end of achievement. In my last year of high school baseball in Saint Paul, the local newspaper named me to the honorable mention all-city team. Not first team all-city, and not second team, and not third team: honorable mention. In basketball, I sat the bench until my senior year and then started. I suppose I averaged about five points a game. In my junior year, I didn't get in one conference game (I played a bit in the early-season, non-conference games and scored in all of them); not one second of conference action, even if we were way ahead or way behind. I was the only player on the team that didn't get into a conference game. Did I think to ask the coach what was going on, or consider the possibility that there might be something better to do with my time than sit on the bench and watch the others play? Never.

I was put ahead a grade in grade school. I never went to the fifth grade. The school officials told my parents they had decided that my problem was I was bored and that being in a higher grade might motivate me. I wasn't bored but rather damaged by the situation I was living in at home, but the school people didn't get close enough to me to find out what was going on with me. No adult ever spoke to me about anything through college. I figured out something was up with the grade skipping—nobody actually told me it was going to happen--because the last day of the fourth grade my teacher gave me a fifth grade geography book and told me to read it over the summer. And then my mother told me during the summer that they had told her I was going to the sixth grade in the fall, and that was that.

So I was a year younger than the others in my class the rest of the way through school and graduated from high school at just-turned 17—my classmates were 18. I immediately joined the army for two years. Why? So I could play baseball in the army and be older and more mature when I played for the University of Minnesota baseball team. I was planning on going to college, but it was to play ball, not to learn anything or set the stage for a future career. My interest in the U of M baseball team was one-way—neither the coach of the team, Dick Siebert, nor anyone else representing the team expressed any interest in me at all. There was no offer of an athletic scholarship. I'm sure Siebert didn't know I was alive. But there I was, seventeen and eighteen years old, in Fort Lewis Washington playing second base on a battalion team and hitting about .260 and leading the world in errors and counting the days—there are a lot of them in two years—until I would get out of the army and go play college ball.

One of my most notable failings was a particular way of blowing double play chances. The way it would work is there'd be less than two outs and a runner on first. Ground ball to the shortstop's right. He'd scoop it up and flip it to me at second to start the double play, but my hands would be locked in place—nerves, apprehension, I never did this in practice--and the ball would sail past my shoulder into right field as the two runners stormed around the bases.

Another failing was my ineptness catching pop flies—I don't think I caught one in my life. I would weave around under them like a drunk on payday and the ball would land with a thud about five feet from me. Nobody would jeer; there'd be silence. I would pick up the ball and toss it to the pitcher, who would have a grim look on his face and sort of snap at the ball with his glove and turn away fast and stride toward the mound to face the next batter. I would try to maintain some semblance of dignity as I went back to my position at second holding up fingers to let the outfielders know how many outs there were (as if the outfielders wanted to hear anything from me). I'd get into my fielder's crouch and yell encouragement to the pitcher as he faced the next batter, hoping the next ball wasn't hit to me because I'd sure as hell kick it (make an error)--and when the next one was hit to me, I did kick it.

Army ball was in Tacoma at night and invariably it was cold and rainy. I had torn up a hip swinging at a baseball in high school

and in cold weather my hip would lock up, although I never mentioned it to anybody; so if the ball wasn't hit directly at me I wouldn't reach it and I'd hear the ten or fifteen people in the stands go "Ohhhh" in disappointment. With my hip as it was, I probably wouldn't have had to go into the army at all, but the physical exam was perfunctory and I was able to accomplish my goal of playing army ball to prepare myself for playing at the "U," as the University of Minnesota is called.

I got through my two-year army hitch and at 19 tried out for the U's team. This was in the fall—the university practiced outside in the fall, inside in the winter, went to Florida to play college teams in the early spring, and then played its Big Ten season in the spring. Practically all of the players played in a summer leagues. So that is year-round baseball. In those years, freshmen weren't eligible and I made the cut and was on the freshmen team. Basically, if you could stand upright you didn't get cut. I played second—weak arm, shortest toss to first—along with about five other guys. We didn't play other teams, just a few intra-squad games.

As for my course work my freshman year, I signed for some classes haphazardly and occasionally went to class. I decided that I was majoring in political science—not that anybody ever asked--because one of the guys standing around second base with me on the freshman team said that's what he was doing and it was a good major. That was good enough for me. I had no idea what political science was. It had something to do with politics I assumed, although I didn't know a Democrat from a Republican. I could name the two Minnesota senators, though.

The U is a huge place—I think it has 35,000 day students, 50,000 total--and as far as I know, nobody knew or cared that I was there or what I did. A political science professor had been assigned as my advisor and I went to his office to sign my program of courses each quarter—three quarters a year, and then a a summer session. He barely acknowledged my presence and just signed my program and went on with whatever he was doing. I remember one time when I went to his office to get my program signed he was on the phone. "Hold on a second," he told the caller. "I'll get back to you after I get rid of a guy that just came in the door." Was I offended by that comment? No.

I remember my first test result. It was a paper in English and 90 and above was an A, 80 to 89 was a B, 70 to 79 a C, and so on. I

got a 13. It never dawned on me to go talk to professor about that. I missed classes left and right. I remember going to the final exam in a course at the time and place scheduled in the syllabus and the room was empty—they'd changed rooms and I hadn't been in class enough to know about the change, and I didn't know anyone I was in class with, so there was nobody to tell me. I never missed a freshman baseball team practice, though, or the sport section of the newspaper, or a sport magazine, or a game on television. My favorite magazines were the pre-season reviews of the teams. There I'd be reading about the prospects of Vanderbilt's football team in the Southeast Conference, and time would fly by. I remember watching NBA basketball on sunny afternoons in a darkened room by myself eating potato chips and candy bars--I think a case could be made that that is no sadder human activity than that—unless it is reading about Vandy's prospects in the SEC.

I got through my freshman year at the U with a 1.7 GPA—2.0 is a C—and was on scholastic probation. I never knew I was on probation until I got a letter telling me I was off probation, though, because I missed the letter telling me I was on probation. I tried out for the varsity baseball team as a sophomore. I didn't make the team, but for some reason I wasn't told to go home—which, looking back on it, would have been a gift to me. Instead, I was allowed to stand around in the infield while the team took batting practice—I wasn't allowed to hit and had no bat issued to me. When the team took fielding practice I was excused. I played in a few intra-squad games with no preparation at all. I was employed as a base runner so the real players could practice their relay throws and such. After a few times huffing and puffing around the bases—the potato chips and candy bars were taking their toll—I really slowed down and Siebert chewed me out for ruining the players' timing on their throws.

I was never issued a uniform cap, so there I'd be, standing out in the infield with a blue cap on while everybody else had a maroon and gold cap with an "M" on it. After a couple weeks, a varsity player, Barry Effress, gave me one of his old caps to wear. It was faded, but it was better than the blue one. The problem with Barry's hat was it was too small for my head. I was able to jam it on my head, but I wound up with headaches and an indentation in my forehead that took about a half hour to go away every day. But at least I wasn't wearing a blue cap while everybody else was wearing a

maroon and gold cap with an “M” on it. Except for Barry Effress, who not only gave me a cap but let me use his bat during the intra-squad games and spoke to me occasionally, no one else on the varsity team acknowledged my existence. Wherever you are today, Barry, if you are still alive, thank you.

For some reason, even though it fit the pattern, one baseball-related snub stands out after all these years. Major league players with ties to the university would practice with the university team indoors in January and February prior to going to spring training in Florida or Arizona. Jerry Kindall had been a big star on the U’s team and was at that time a good-field-no-hit second baseman for the Chicago Cubs. One day for about twenty minutes, Kindall and I fielded ground balls Siebert drilled at the two of us in turn. Kindall and I were standing right next to each other.

If I were older as Kindall was and standing next to a college-age person—I was twenty at the time—I’d feel compelled to say “Hello” or “How’s it going?” or “What’s your name” and, at least briefly, talk to them about what was going on in school or on the team. Not Kindall. It was as if I didn’t exist, and I was standing shoulder-to-shoulder, right next to him, and it was just the two of us in that area. Thinking back on it, I admire Kindall’s self-containment. I have always felt compelled to at least glance at a person standing right next to me, and especially if it is just the two of us in the area. Not Kindall. I’m not really knocking him. He didn’t owe me anything. He hadn’t asked for me to be standing next to him. He had no agenda with me. I was none of his business. I didn’t think it was my place to start up a conversation with a major leaguer like Jerry Kindall, so I just looked at him hoping he’d say something or at least acknowledge my presence, and he never did. I remember feeling a little bad about it at the time, but I assumed I was getting my due. I was nobody and he was Jerry Kindall. Over the years, I’ve found myself thinking, I wish I could be more like Jerry Kindall and be able to make people invisible—he was perfect at it, at least with me.

As for Siebert, that sophomore year he spoke to me exactly three times.

I have already mentioned the first time: when he berated me for not running faster when I was base runner fodder during relay practice.

The second time was after I struck out during an intra-squad game. I was overmatched by the pitching in any case, but it certainly didn't help to have gone to the plate with a borrowed bat without having had any batting practice all season and in the freezing cold—this was Minnesota in March, remember. The mound has been lowered since, but in those years you could get nosebleed and vertigo on the top of that thing. So there I am, standing up to the plate with Barry's bat in my delicate hands and with my small wrists, having had no practice, trying to hit baseballs—why bother to hit them? what's the point?—that looked like lightning bolts being fired down on me by Zeus. On one occasion, after taking three whiffs at the ball while falling away—the truth was I was afraid I was going to get hit with the ball—as I was walking back to bench, Siebert, who was sitting in the first row of the first-base-side grandstand, barked, "Come here!"

I veered to my right and walked toward Siebert, who was about fifty at the time and had the persona of a longshoreman with crotch itch. As I approached him, I'm thinking, I bet he's looking at my legs. For some reason—and I never asked questions in those years—our practice pants were denim knickerbockers with no socks. That outfit extenuated my skinny hairless bowed legs. When I got up to Siebert, he didn't remark at my legs. Instead, he thundered, "You're swinging like Ted Kluszewski!"

That's it, that's all Siebert said to me, but that single sentence was loaded with meaning. What he was telling me was that I was swinging too hard, overswinging, as it is called. At the time, Ted Kluszewski was a slugging first baseman for the Cincinnati Reds who took big cuts at the ball. He was called "Big Klu" and cut off his uniform sleeves to show off his muscular arms. I had actually seen the Big Klu play in person. The only vacation my mother and dad and I took when I was a kid was a train trip to Milwaukee and Chicago to see some major league games. The one in Milwaukee rained out, but we got to see the Cubs play the Reds. We were sitting on the first base side, and there was the Big Klu right in front of me with his sleeves cut off and his big muscles. I don't remember how Big Klu did that day, but those arms made a big impression on a thirteen year old. (We all meet our maker, and big arms don't save us. Big Klu was traded to the ball club in the sky on March 29, 1988.)

So I knew what Siebert meant with his Ted Kluszewski exclamation. I might have replied that part of my problem might be that I was up there hitting having had no batting practice and with a borrowed bat that was the wrong weight and length for me, but that never occurred to me, and I didn't say anything at all. I turned around and walked away thinking about whether Siebert was looking at my legs from the back. Thinking about it now, I'm sure the very last thing on Dick Siebert's mind was my legs.

As for the third, and last, thing Dick Siebert ever said to me, I was standing in the infield during batting practice in Barry Effress' old hat that felt like it was going to pop off my head and Siebert is walking in my direction and then it hit me that he was coming up to me. He got up very close to me looking like he had just eaten a dill pickle and in a low, confidential, guttural snarl said, "You are ruining the ball club. Why don't you quit?"

I just smiled slightly and didn't reply, and Siebert, looking repulsed, turned on his heel and walked away. I have no idea what I was doing to ruin the ball club, and I'll never know, because Dick Siebert is with Big Klu in the sky. What he did was cruel and abusive and bullying, but I didn't see it that way then. What strikes me now is that I never thought of asking him for a meeting to explain himself, or considered reporting him to the athletic director. I never thought of going immediately to the locker room and handing in my denim pants and going home. I never moved off my spot in the infield. I stayed through that practice and was back the next day and the next through the end of the school year.

I ask myself now why I—and others, I assume there are others like me—would stay in a circumstance like that. I was having a rotten time, was completely out of place, and nobody wanted me to be there. Somehow I had it in my head that this was where I had to be and this is what I had to do. I was going nowhere in this activity and it was a waste of my time, and it disconfirmed and diminished me. In those years, I took any crap anyone dished out and never spoke up in my defense about anything. No one in my life ever asked me how I was or expressed any concern. I look back at this time with sorrow, and yes, profound regret.

Finally, I did quit the university team. Just before classes began my junior year, Siebert's student assistant phoned me to tell me that fall ball, as it was called, was starting up. I told him I wasn't going to be there. Without comment, he hung up the phone.

That was the end of my college baseball career, but sadly, it wasn't the end of my baseball playing. In those years, it was as if I was self-less, without self, without volition; I would do whatever anyone said to do. The manager of a local amateur baseball team that played during the summer months phoned me when I was 22 saying his team needed a shortstop, and although I was unsuited to that position—my arm wasn't strong enough—I agreed to play for his team. I practiced virtually every late afternoon and early evening and we played games on the weekend.

The team would travel to Wisconsin to play town teams in the evenings. One of those games became an often-recited family legend. My older brother and sister-in-law and their two boys came to the game. After the public address announcer announced each batter's name, he would turn off his microphone and hurl invective at the opposing team and its players, that is to say, at my team and me. I was playing shortstop that night, and between my weak, scatter arm and nerves (I was able to do OK in practice), it was my usual experience in humiliation. The number of errors I made was basically a function of the number of balls that were hit to me—I booted every one of them. Thinking back on it, I wonder why the manager kept me in the lineup. My best guess is that he thought he had made a commitment to playing me at shortstop that year when he asked me to be on the team and was carrying out that commitment. That night, to the accompaniment of mockery by the announcer/fan, I made my usual string of errors and made an out every time at bat.

Time and again over the years, my brother has repeated the announcer/big-mouth-fan story: "Remember that time when we went to the game you played in Wisconsin, wasn't that a hoot? The announcer would announce batters' names and then he'd turn off the microphone and start yelling at the top of his lungs at the players. And then he'd go back to announcing. It was really funny." And it goes on. I've always just smiled through the exposition—that same smile I gave Siebert when he told me I was ruining the team and to quit. Earlier this year, in an e-mail, one of my nephews brought up that game, saying how much fun it was and reminding me how good a time I had playing baseball in those years. I didn't answer his e-mail.

I wish I could say that the Wisconsin-game year was the last I played baseball. There was one more year, the next year. I was 23. Another phone call; do you want to play? Again shortstop, out of position—I could run a little and hit some—but far be from me to express my thinking about how best to use what little talent I had or state a position preference. Again, I felt compelled to say yes, and I played out the summer season. As it turned out, it was a very good team and we won a state amateur championship in spite of me. So I guess it could be said that I went out on a high note. But I didn't experience it as a high note. It was just something to endure, that I felt I had to do, and the success of the team didn't alter that inner reality, or the fact that I was out of place and having no fun and spinning my wheels as my life was going by.

Back in the late 1990s I wrote a book on kids and sports and the research for the book helped me make sense of what went on in my own life as a teenager and young adult around sports. Even though the book is a decade old, I think it holds up conceptually, and not just about the consequences of organized sports involvement for young people but on the process of growing up as a whole. The book's title is *Sports in the Lives of Children and Adolescents: Success on the Field and in Life*. It's addressed to parents and might seem distant to adolescents, but I think readers of college age and above will find it useful in understanding the implications of their own sports participation in their younger years. As I indicated in the writings section of this web site, the book is only available in a very expensive hard copy version, so it is best to get it through a library. If your town or school library doesn't have a copy in its collection, it can get it for you through interlibrary loan. It's short, 146 pages, and a quick read, but I think there is a lot of useful material in the book.

The sports book is cautionary to parents, making the point that sports can be a good thing or a bad thing depending on what their child or teenager is like and the particular sport circumstance. What I didn't say in the book, and didn't fully realize at the time, and what I'm saying here for the first time, is that sports was deadly bad for me personally. This thought is a kind of update on the sports book, as it takes into account my experience and reflections since the book's publication. Now I'm saying, with greater urgency than is reflected in the book, think very hard before you promote,

or go along with, your son or daughter getting in a sport arrangement where they wear a number and put on performances for an audience.

I ask myself, why did I hang in there until I was 23 before finally stopping the team sports involvement? I used the word “stopping” rather than the word “quitting” in this last sentence, because I bet if someone had asked me to play on yet another amateur team—they didn’t—I would have again said yes. Around sports (and other things as well) I simply did what anyone asked me or told me to do. What I wish I had done is, at eleven, quit organized sports for good; given who I am, that would have been best thing to do. I should have focused on my schoolwork and taken advantage of my high level of academic capability. I should have read classic, timeless literature. I should have explored dance and yoga, which I did later on and found appropriate for me, personally enhancing, and gratifyingly self-expressive. I should have gotten into theater, which I did later on as an actor and director and writer and found to be right for me. I should have gotten away from the jock crowd and gotten around people who shared my personal style and encouraged me to do something other than set a screen in basketball. I should have connected with nature through hiking and camping and climbing.

All of that would have been better for me than spending hours alone practicing, with bad form—my jump shot was like a baseball knuckleball, no spin at all—and reading about Robin Freeman, who at the time was a All-American guard for the Ohio State Buckeyes. I was going to be like Robin Freeman. He wore number 24 and I tried to get that number on my high school team but it was unavailable. What should have been obvious to me is that Robin Freeman had talent for basketball and I had virtually none. Incidentally, Freeman in his last year of college chopped off part of his hand with an ax. He said it was an accident, but the rumor was that he had felt trapped and wanted out and lost it mentally and hacked off his own fingers. I remember hearing that and, to the extent I could be affected by anything in those years, being disconcerted by it. Robin Freeman had everything, I had thought; if I could only be like him. You mean Robin Freeman wasn’t happy? He wanted out? He did that to himself?

The reason all of this is so important for me--and for other young people as well, I believe--is organized sports had a lasting impact on me. It would be one thing if sports was simply a waste of my time and a painful experience and that was then and this is now and I've moved on. But it is not as simple as that. Our lives are all of a piece and what happens at one time of our lives affects what happens at every other time. At each stage, or period, of our lives there are issues and challenges particular to that stage, salient at that time, and the way we resolve those issues and challenges, our success with them, affects how we deal with the ones coming up, and this process continues until our deaths. These issues and concerns are developmental in that they determine the way we develop as human beings, and this shapes the directions we take in life and the levels of accomplishment and happiness we attain while we are on this earth. All to say, sports are not just fun and games for those who get deeply caught up with them.

In the sports book I called the development concerns and tasks of childhood and adolescence the *agenda of childhood*. These are the jobs, if you will, that, whether we realize it or not, and for better or worse, we work through during those years. I devote chapter two in the book to a discussion of this topic and I refer the reader to that material, but I believe this quote from the chapter provides a summary of the agenda of childhood sufficient to serve our purposes here:

Youngsters are dealing with issues of autonomy and initiative, and mastery. They are confronting questions regarding gender. They are learning to use their mind, to think. They are establishing a relationship with themselves as physical, corporeal entities. They are defining who they are as individuals, which includes assuming a work identity. They are developing a social identity and social skills and a place in the world. They are becoming moral beings. They are shaping their personalities and character. They are achieving self-esteem and self-respect (or not). They are finding people to be with and creating some fun and excitement in their lives. They are attending school and developing an academic style and academic skills and compiling an academic record. They are identifying scholastic and career ambitions and laying the groundwork for further education and training. And they are

establishing a particular kind of relationship with their parent or parents.

While children work through this agenda of childhood in many venues, including the classroom and the street corner, organized sports is a particularly good vehicle for it. Sports is a public endeavor: people are watching. The fact that people are looking on increases youngsters' self-awareness and self-attention, and this they find rewarding because with all their identity concerns this is a particularly self-referenced time of life. It feels right to children for the light to be shining on them, to be pushed to attend to their developing selves, receive immediate public validation. Also, in sports there are clear criteria for success and failure. You know how you are doing and when you are making progress. Add to that fact that sports is arousing and enjoyable when so much of what is in children's worlds isn't.

Even though I didn't realize it at the time, organized sports was my venue for working through this agenda of childhood, and it was not a good venue. I'll use the "agenda" items listed in the quote above to outline sports' impact on me:

- Sports did not contribute to personal autonomy and initiative in my case. It is a top-down, authoritarian world. Someone else decided when practice was scheduled, what position I played and whether I started, and how much time I played. Someone else set out the schedule of games and the strategy that was to be employed during them. My job was to carry out orders, and that doesn't build autonomy and mindful, purpose-directed initiative.

- In our early years we draw a conclusion about ourselves that is held deep in our beings, in a total, organic, felt way, and used to direct our actions: that we are basically masterful, or alternatively, basically inept and ineffectual. Sports did not support the development of a general sense of mastery for me. Simply, I wasn't good enough and not successful enough in sports to arrive at this conclusion. Too many errors, too many turnovers, too many missed free throws.

- Sports promoted a no-nonsense, hunt-and-fish, men-are-men-and-women-are-women concept of masculinity. While I have an affinity for that gender identity, I just don't fit in that category.

I'm more of a wordy, sit-and-talk-over-a-glass-of-wine-and-then-watch-a-Fellini-film sort of man. Playing ball, I wasn't learning to be a good version of what I really am. And in the all-male context I was in, I wasn't learning to understand women or relate to them well.

- I most certainly wasn't developing my mind and learning how to think. I read nothing in those years that was of substance and attended not at all to the arts and literature and social concerns. The sports culture didn't encourage any of that. And it didn't encourage personal expression beyond showing the world my "game" on the court and deciding on a batting stance. As for learning how to think, carrying out the plays someone else draws on a blackboard is not really thinking. It is more akin to doing the work of a sled dog.

- It has only been in later years that through dance and yoga I have developed a connection with my body and integrated the physical dimension of my being into the totality of who I am. In organized sport, my body was more of an "it"—a tool I honed and used in service of the sport and the team. So often, ex-jocks are obese and unhealthy and die before their time. (The Big Klu was 64 when he passed, and Siebert was 66.) Sport taught them to use their bodies but not to honor and nurture them.

- For me, sports encouraged the self-concept of athlete, and there was a "and later success in business" dimension to this identity. But that isn't who I really am.

- As for a work identity, it was a "do as the coach says" and "someday play college ball" and "star for the Yankees" work identity. Organized sports did not encourage me to work all-out in school and develop my intellect and define a work identity that suited me and that was good for the world. There are better things to do than putting on sport shows for work, I finally realized, like growing food and healing the sick and educating the young and serving the cause of social justice.

- The only social identity, skills, and place in the world that sports developed in me was hanging out with guys after practice and playing pickup games during the off season and maybe catching an action flick, whatever happened to be showing at the time. Anybody else, anything else, was "over there," alien. It was a terse, clipped, keep-it-brief personal style, and any measure of expansiveness and exploration of nuance was discouraged, and those are the very things that I want to do and should do.

- As for morality, I think sports encouraged being a good, reliable person, an OK guy. At the same time, however, I wouldn't say it promoted social commitment or a passion for making the world a better place. It was more of a "contribute to the United Fund" kind of morality, which isn't all bad, but it is a dutiful, circumscribed, perfunctory morality. And there is a touch of "game morality" in sports—doing whatever you can get away with if the referee isn't looking.

- As for sports' effect in shaping my personality, frankly, I think it pushed me in the direction of the cliché-reciting automatons you see being interviewed on television, and it encouraged a laugh-it-up-at-the-bar-after-the-game persona. But that isn't who I am or want to be or should be.

- Sports impact on my character: Sports promoted "good-teammate-we-can-trust-the-guy" qualities, which again, isn't all bad, but I want to push myself to be more than that. I want to be truly decent and giving.

- Sports can be a venue for developing self-esteem and self-respect, but it clearly wasn't that for me. Much of our self-respect grows out of the respect others have for us. The stars were respected, not mediocre-at-best ballplayers like me.

- Fun and excitement? Some. I liked practices and pickup games. In regular games, I was so tense and nervous and had such a sense of impending doom—which was not an unrealistic expectation—I was just trying to get through them. They were no fun, and apprehension is not excitement.

- Academic style? Sluff off in class. Do the minimum to stay eligible. Academic record? I had the ability to soar as a student, and eventually, in my doctoral work, did soar. It makes my stomach churn to think now about how I wasted my true talent as a student in high school and as an undergraduate in the university. I believe I would have qualified for a scholarship to a prestige university. Instead I was paying my own way to a huge and impersonal state university. Ouch!

- As for scholastic and career aspirations, sports didn't encourage more than playing ball in college or working my way through the Phillies' farm system. Double ouch!! Life has worked out well for me with the university professorship and the writing, but it took me until middle age to get moving in that direction and

whatever I have accomplished academically and professionally has been in spite of organized sports and not because of it.

•As for sports' affect on my relationship with my parents and much-older brother and sister, it kept it where it was: minimal.

So why did I play ball all these years if it didn't make me happy and didn't get me anywhere?

A big part of the answer to that question is that for those who get deeply invested in sports, as I did, sports is more than an activity, it is a *culture*. Sports is a separate, self-contained world with its own beliefs and values and meanings and ways, and a youngster who gets caught up with playing sports becomes a part of that world, that culture. Without thinking about it—sports does not encourage reflection—I bought into the values of the sport culture. In the sport culture quitting the team or sports altogether has a highly negative connotation. You don't quit. You hang in there. You see it through. Winners never quit. If you quit you are a failure and you are letting people down.

Of course, quitting is exactly what I should have done. I should have gotten out of organized sports when I was eleven years old and never looked back. I didn't need to have looked at it as quitting but rather as simply choosing to do something else with my time. But I didn't see things that way, and I suspect there are a lot of young people playing third team offensive guard on the high school football team that think they'd be a quitter if they turned in their uniform and tried out for a part in the school play or went to the library and studied math. Perhaps if my parents or older brother or sister or a teacher or counselor had discussed things with me or advised or encouraged me to go in some other direction than sports it would have helped me get out of the trap I was in, but they didn't.

What is sobering to think about is that sports participation may be connected to that number one regret I live with every day, the wife and two boys I let down. In our twenties and thirties, we face issues and challenges around love and family and children and establishing a home. I have been markedly unsuccessful with those issues and challenges. I believe that the success—lack thereof—I had in adolescence taking on the challenges I faced, with sports being the worst possible context for taking them on, created a very weak base for establishing a family and a home in my 20s and 30s.

My marriage broke up and I am estranged, irreparably, from my children to this day. I have never established a family, and as I look back on my life I can see that I have had some excellent opportunities to do that before age caught up with me. Sports participation in my youth isn't the only cause of that, but it is one of the top two along with my experience in my family growing up.

Why did I get into organized sports in the first place? Why sports and not something else? I'll list some reasons for my immersion in organized sports. What strikes me is that I never thought about any of what I will list while it was happening to me. For all practical purposes, I never thought at all about why I was playing ball the way I did and to the extent I did; I just did it. I operated out of a global, pervasive, felt but inarticulate sense of who I am and what I do. I never pondered my personal qualities or characteristics or abilities or needs, or the opportunities I had or could create, or thought about consequences or weighed options. I simply went out for the team; that's who I am, that's what I do, period. I experienced that identity, felt it, I didn't put words to it, as an obligation: this is what I have to do. I never explained that inner reality to myself or to anyone else, and no one ever asked me about why I did what I did. I was a product of my circumstance and what it left inside me. I went in the direction my world nudged me. Self-creation, self-direction, self-generated, considered action, didn't apply in my case. I was undoubtedly more mindless than most kids, and that my mindlessness continued well into my twenties puts me on the robotic end of the spectrum, but I was different in degree and not kind from a lot of young people I see today. A lot of kids go out for soccer because, well, that's what you do at thirteen.

Four things that accounted for my sports involvement:

My dad loved major spectator sports and, without his telling me, I picked up that he would be happy and proud if I became a good ballplayer. Dad was a barber in a hotel shop, and both our local minor league baseball and visiting team players were among his customers. I would sit in the shop, and I noticed how Dad especially deferred to these players, who were well-kept, pleasant men. Dad was in his fifties and sixties when I was growing up and wasn't active in any sport or physical activity, but he was an avid sports gambler;

so how “Cincy” (the Cincinnati Reds) did against the “Cubbies” (the Chicago Cubs) and how the various college and pro football teams fared relative to the “spot”—the amount they were favored or an underdog--was a big part of my life. The only thing I ever saw my father read, after a fashion anyway, was the “sport sheet,” as he called it, the sports section of the newspaper, which he would skim to catch up on the scores of the games. Dad would take me with him to betting establishments—I guess officially they were pool halls. I was six, seven, eight, nine, in there, and I’d stand next to him as he talked to his buddies about the outcomes of the games and their bets. Then we would meet my mother at the Forum Café and I’d slide my tray along the rail and Mother would help me get a scoop of mashed potatoes with an good-sized indentation filled with gravy, a slab of meat loaf and some catsup, chopped green beans, and a glass of milk. We’d eat our meal and take the streetcar home. Dad’s ballplayer customers would give us passes and Dad and Mother and I would go to watch the games between the Saint Paul Saints and the visiting team. One time I went down next to the field and talked to a player for the Columbus Red Birds, and another time Dad and I went into the locker room.

That I was from a working class background was a factor in my sports involvement, I believe. The idea of hitting it big as a major spectator sports star is not the exclusive prerogative of working and low income people, but at the same time, working people are less likely to set their sights on participating in crew or lacrosse at Yale, if you know what I mean. I put it this way in the sports book:

How do the upper classes approach sports? They play sports avidly, intensely. They use sports to build competitiveness in their children. They see sports as recreation and a way to build skills and make social contacts. They focus on lifetime sports such as golf, tennis, and sailing. They see sports as part of what a well-rounded person does. But they don’t use sports to build and identity. They don’t let sports consume them, and they are careful not to let athletics get in the way of doing what it takes to live well in later life. They don’t kid themselves into thinking that sports is the way they are going to make it in America.

This does not describe how my family or the people in my neighborhood approached sports.

Sports was *marketed* to me by the sport establishment: the commercial sport companies—the Red Sox and the Chicago Bears, etc.; the media—television, radio, newspapers, magazines; and those who make a living off sports—coaches, equipment manufacturers, and the rest.

I had the experience of watching a big league baseball game on television with someone from another country who had never seen a baseball game and hadn't heard anything about it. After three innings or so, I asked her, "What do you think?"

"It's a lot of foul balls. They are just standing there. Nothing's happening. Do people actually care about this? What you call soccer I can understand, but *this*? Really?"

Yes, really. My friend's problem was she was limited to seeing only what was happening right in front of her. She saw foul balls. The people in the stands and I, however, knew what those foul balls *meant*. She saw people standing around. We knew the *significance* of that standing around. Her experience with baseball was *direct*, immediate, what her senses transmitted to her in that moment in time and nothing else. Our experience with baseball was *mediated*. People had shown us and told us what those people and those events were about, and that made all the difference.

My friend didn't see the *context*. That batter and pitcher have a statistical record that changes with every at-bat and game—batting averages and earned run averages and the rest. Those averages are compared to the averages of players now playing and from the past. What was going on in front of her would forever affect those individual records. The outcome of this game meant the two teams would rise or fall in the standings, and there would be a division champion and then playoffs and the World Series. These teams had a history: perhaps one of them hadn't won a World Series in thirty years and this might be the year. This wasn't just a show, like a circus act, a one-time entertainment. What she was looking at was part of a historical record that was a central part of this commercial event and its promotion to paying customers.

That batter she was watching has a salary of \$10 million this year. Commercial sport teams always make sure that everyone knows the players' salaries. That gives weight to the enterprise. If

someone is making \$10 million to hit a ball with a stick, it must be important and worth paying money to see. And that pitcher is a star, and a hero. And the centerfielder has super models fawning over him. Those men aren't stiffs playing with a ball for a living—they are somebody special.

The game is on television, and ESPN might show a highlight on SportCenter. Anything on television, whatever it is, becomes important and worthwhile; that is the nature of the medium. The commentators on radio and television are teachers—they teach us that winning this game matters for something, that an even bigger game is coming up, and that watching strangers swinging at baseballs is a good thing to do. Newspapers treat this event as news, which builds circulation and adds to the import of what is in fact of no consequence.

Those at the game aren't just consumers of a product. They are participants in a civic enterprise. The teams name themselves after cities and states to capture the loyalty people have to their area. This is not the Jones Baseball Exhibition Company; it is the Los Angeles Dodgers. The people in the stands—if they come onto the field, they will be arrested—are *fans*, supporters of *their* team (even though it is privately-owned, profit-making corporation and they had to pay to watch). They have a vital role to play. They help their team win, and winning is crucially important (for some reason, which is never clearly specified).

And this whole operation is wrapped in the flag—the National Anthem, the tributes to the military, America's pastime, and so on.

My foreign friend didn't see any of this, but in the back porch that served as my bedroom in our second floor rental unit next to the city hospital with all the ambulance sirens and with Bob and Mary Jean Jensen, the landlord's son and daughter, playing Lady of Spain on their accordions downstairs, I saw it, and I wanted to get in on the action.

Recently, I read a biography of Josh Gibson, a great Negro League baseball player of the 1930s and '40s. Gibson has always been presented to me as a tragic hero who wasn't allowed to play in the Major Leagues because of the color line. What stood out to me this last time was not the race issue but the way Gibson was defined, and saw himself, as a laborer—playing baseball for a living as a labor job. Modern baseball has taken cues from Hollywood and

sold its employees as stars, special people, heroes. Gibson was a working man, pure and simple.

Last week, I watched a documentary on major league baseball players in the 1940s and '50s called "When It Was a Game." This time I looked into the faces of the players. These were *working men*, doing physical labor under the watchful eye of their foreman (their manager) and the boss (the owner of team). This time I saw the vulnerability in their faces. This time I heard the player when he said, "Every year, we had to make the team all over again. At any time, we could lose our jobs."

Last night I watched a game on television, and this time I saw the players as laborers—albeit very well paid ones—earning a living with their bodies, not unlike the men in my neighborhood growing up. This time I saw the grim looks on their faces rather than the glamour the mediators of our contact with baseball teach us to see.

Schools are in the sports business in a big way. The first thing you see when you walk in the door of a secondary school is the trophy case. Until I did research for the sport book I hadn't realized that schools in other parts of the world do not get involved with sports as extensively as schools in the United States. In most countries, organized sports for adolescents and young adults is tied to community-based athletic clubs. Schools in this country have set up an operation that draws students' time and attention away from the educational mission of the school, to the point that being a good athlete is at least on a par with being a good student. A quote from the sports book:

The message our schools send to students goes something like this: "We take sports seriously and we think you ought to, and we have a lot of teams, and if you don't get on one or more of them, well, that's all right with us, *but . . .*" The result is most students feel pressure to decide what they are going to do about the school's sports programs. They must decide which ones they are going to try out for, and if they don't participate in sports, they feel compelled to justify it to themselves and the school and other students. Parents need to realize that what they do around sports is no small matter for students in our schools, and increasingly this is true for girls as well as boys. I am hard pressed to think of any other part of American life in which sports is such a big deal that it

can essentially define who someone is—student-athlete, or just athlete.

Schools, and I'm including colleges, have their reasons for being so heavily involved in the sport business and I'm not going to go into them here—see chapter five of the sports book. It is enough here to affirm that it would have been better for me if my high school had just been about getting an education, and the school assemblies had been just about honoring academic accomplishment, and sports had been limited to after-school recreation. Instead, sport in high school was something you practiced every afternoon under the direction of a professional coach and games were deadly serious affairs against other schools in front of an audience who had been prodded to “support our team.” It would have so much been better for me if I had gone to the University of Chicago, which doesn't feel the need to put on sport shows whose results are printed in the newspaper, and where students are not put in the hands of the likes of Dick Siebert. But that's not the way it was.

What does all this mean? I think it means a lot. One thing it means is a hurt and lost kid tried out for the team a half century ago, and I live with the consequences of that to this day.