

features

Little League ball a never-changing tradition

By John Drescher

The home plate umpire wears a surfing T-shirt. The first baseman is number 88. There are more high-top basketball shoes on the field than there are cleats, and the pitcher has no hat. Straight from the Bad News Bears? No, but close: just your average Carrboro Little League game.

Arriving late, I ask the scorer if I missed anything in the top of the first.

"Five runs on one hit," she informs me.

Five runs on one hit? She is kidding, isn't she?

Soon I find out she is not. The Mets grabbed a five-run lead, and now in the bottom half of the first are trying to give it all back. I feel like I am at Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7; baseballs fly all over the field. My safety is at stake sitting behind the questionably sturdy backstop.

Thank God for backstops, because they stop the ball more than Little League catchers do. And, you know, they always have. While sitting there dodging baseballs, it all comes back to me. It may be 10 years since my first Little League game, but much is still the same.

Parents still dominate the crowd, both in numbers and in loudness. They still say the same things they used to say.

"That's the way to watch it."

"Give it a ride."

"Wait for your pitch."

"C'mon, be a stick."

The players, and their capabilities, are still the same. Little League pitchers still cannot throw to a lefthanded batter, and rightfielders still cannot catch a beachball, not to mention a baseball.

In the top of the third, the Mets advance a runner to third. The next batter hits a weak grounder to the second baseman, who fields it cleanly. He is roughly 10 feet from first base, so close that he could have run over and still have gotten the runner out. Instead, he throws it to some



unsuspecting man behind the first base fence. Ah, the joys of Little League.

Every team still has its chubby player, just like back in my day. You know him: shirt out, chocolate smeared on his face, bat squeezed like it just may fly away. Somewhere in the rules I think it says you cannot play a Little League game without a fat kid on each team.

After four innings the Mets are leading 11 to 4. But the

Lions fight back; i.e. the Mets play soccer with the baseball. The Mets call a meeting on the pitcher's mound. These team huddles have not changed either. Every player rushes to the mound to comfort their stricken star. Little League pitchers are always stars, and are usually the coach's son. It's no different tonight.

The Mets replace their pitcher with—who else?—the biggest guy on the team. Whoever said baseball is not a game of size has never seen a Little League game.

To the timeless chorus of "Hey, ey, ey, ey swing!" big boy strikes out his first batter.

The talk on the benches, just like it used to be, is often on the current Major League stars. They mimic Pete Rose, Jim Rice and Reggie Jackson. Always Reggie. When I played, we talked about Mickey Mantle and his 536 home runs. Now they talk about Reggie Jackson and his "\$2 million a year."

In the top of the sixth, with a runner on third and one out, a Met hits a fly ball to right. Rightfielders in Little League are small, blonde and blue-eyed, but are not prone to catching baseballs. This one wavers underneath, then gloves it. He waves his fist triumphantly, clutching the baseball ever so tightly in his glove... while the runner on third walks home uncontested.

Down 14-12 in the bottom of the last inning, a Lion homers over the centerfield fence. He is ecstatic. In fact, he is so happy he misses third base. Quickly the third-base coach grabs him and escorts him back to third.

The next batter also homers. Amazing. Two home runs on two pitches. The Lions end up winning when a runner advances to third on a series of passed balls, and then scampers home with the winning run on a wild pitch. It is a fitting way to end this-and-most-Little League games.

As he crosses the plate, he is mobbed by his teammates. Sweet victory. The kids are jumping up and down. There is joy in Mudville.

Some things never change.

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