

# It's the most wonderful time of the year

**H**ad "the talk" with my dad last weekend.

Not that talk — that happened in high school.

This talk: "Hey chief, guess what? Pitchers and catchers this week."

This week, as in the week when pitchers and catchers report to Spring Training.

Wake up and smell the pine tar, folks: Baseball approaches.

Five seasons constitute my year — fall, winter, spring, summer and baseball. About this time every



**SAM ROSENTHAL**  
GARDEN STATE OF MIND

year, like leaves turning color, signs of baseball begin to appear.

"Baseball Tonight" returns to the ESPN lineup, for example.

For the first time in months,

something other than steroids and contract arbitration becomes relevant.

"Will the Cubs win it this year?" for instance (never said it stayed relevant for long).

And if you visit The Bagel Bin in suburban New Jersey, you will undoubtedly find a few Philadelphia Phillies taking bets on how far manager Charlie Manuel makes it into the season before getting fired.

Have you prepared appropriately? Let's run through the checklist ...

- Pick up the old ball and mitt and play catch with your father, sister, roommate or garage door. Catch a few pop-ups and gun down ghost runners at home — then realize you threw your arm out, ice it and wait a week to try again.

- Buy a large package of David sunflower seeds (imitations not acceptable) and work on your spitting technique.

- Rent and watch "Field of Dreams" and "Bull Durham" in the same evening, successfully quoting at least three out of every ten lines spoken on screen. (See, in baseball, three out of ten earns you a spot in the Hall of Fame).

- Play Wiffle Ball until you take at least one swing that

knocks you off your feet into a pretzel-like heap.

- If you slacked during the offseason, visit your favorite team's Web site and research the players they acquired or lost. Curse the ownership for not spending enough. Or, if your team resides in New York or Boston, pessimistically assert that it won't make a damned ounce of difference, anyway.

- Stuff an entire pack of Big League Chew in your mouth at one time.

- Nostalgically try on your old uniform (complete with jockstrap and cup); then remember why you hung up your spikes in the first place.

- Swing an imaginary bat in front of a mirror until Mom asks what the heck you're doing. Tell her it's a 2-0 count and you're zone-hitting ... duh.

After that bullpen warm up, remember that baseball season in Chapel Hill works a little bit differently. No Major League franchises rep the nine-one-nine, but baseball still makes its presence felt within these friendly confines.

Many fans root for the not-so-nearby Atlanta Braves, who appear on TBS often enough to make this Phillies fan lose his Lunchables.

For fans such as myself who pull for out-of-town teams, nothing beats sitting on the big leather couches at Four Corners and sipping even bigger Blue Moon draughts while watching games from around The Show.

And, for the sweet "ping" of aluminum on rawhide, Chapel Hillians delight in the recent success of the Tar Heel baseball team.

In case you missed it — a tragedy if you did — North Carolina made successive trips to the Men's College World Series Finals in 2006 and 2007, ultimately finishing runner-up to Oregon State both times.


So, just like Cubs fans, UNC athletic supporters will wonder: "Is this the year?"

With baseball, more so maybe than other sports, you never truly know until they play the games — and they play so many. It is a mile-long season, composed of countless games of inches.

And right now, one phrase encompasses all of the hope in the world for baseball lovers across America:

Pitchers and catchers this week.

Contact Sam Rosenthal  
at [samrose@email.unc.edu](mailto:samrose@email.unc.edu).



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