

The baseball life

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 30, 2012](#) issue



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I discovered the allure of baseball at the age of ten, when the sport became the organizing principle of my life. In the summer, I'd head to the ball field in the morning, wait until five or six other players showed up, then begin a game of first bounce or fly, in which a batter continues to hit until one of his batted balls is caught on the first bounce or in the air. As the morning wore on and more players arrived, we'd start a full pickup game.

We'd begin with an elaborate ritual for choosing players. Two self-appointed captains would meet. One threw a bat to the other, who caught it in one hand. Then the two would grasp the bat hand-over-hand until one of them was holding the knob on the end. That allowed him to make the first choice of players—unless his rival could squeeze fingers around the tip of the handle and hold it tightly enough to hurl it backward, over his head, for a prescribed distance, in which case he got to make the first choice. Players were chosen until the last player was assigned to a team by default. It was humiliating to be exposed as the least desirable player, but it was preparation for life, I suppose, in which one has to proceed in the face of adversity and low expectations.

The games continued until lunchtime, when the players dispersed, only to return for more baseball in the afternoon. Afternoon play was occasionally supervised by a playground director who supplied a real ball and bat and actual bases. (Morning equipment consisted of a ball whose cover had long since disappeared; it and a

cracked bat were wrapped tightly with black electrician's tape.) After supper—in industrial Pittsburgh, lunch was the main meal and supper was served at 4:30—we would be back at the ball field to watch a city league game, and if one of us was truly fortunate, he might serve as a batboy with the opportunity to be around genuine adult players. The day often ended on our front porch as we listened to the radio broadcast of a Pittsburgh Pirates game. The voices of the announcers, Rosie Rosewell and Bob Prince, were as familiar to us as the voices of our parents.

Playing the game every day or watching one and reading the daily box scores taught me the lesson that success is rare and precious when it happens. Baseball players mostly stand around waiting for something to happen. When a ball is finally hit, a flurry of activity ensues, but it is soon over and the waiting resumes. The other valuable lesson baseball teaches is that the very best hitters fail at least two-thirds of the time. All the while, the Pirates, who struggled to attain mediocrity, taught me to love in spite of empirical data—which is not unlike the act of faith. They prepared me for the past 25 years of being a Cubs fan.