



The Voice of Reason

Mike Gastineau

Growing Up in a Minor League Town

ONE of my many detractors once said of my knowledge of baseball: "What could he possibly know about baseball? He grew up in Indianapolis."

It's true. I mean the part about growing up in Indianapolis (suggested motto: The Largest City in America without Major League Baseball).

Does growing up in a city without a big league team somehow impart a lack of knowledge for the game? I don't know. The vast majority of America (at least geographically) was in the same boat as me. But I don't feel as if I missed anything.

My first Major League Baseball experience came when I was 8 or 9, I think. The Cubs and White Sox were playing an exhibition game on their way home from spring training. The game was slated for historic Bush Stadium in Indianapolis. Bush Stadium was the home of the Indianapolis Indians who played in the American Association. It was originally known as Victory Field but for some reason was changed to Bush Stadium in the 60's. But Dad wouldn't call the park anything but Victory Field. I figured he was just some old codger who couldn't remember the name of the park. Truth was, he was a traditionalist. The park he had gone to as a kid, the park he had played in as a high school athlete, that park was Victory Field. Dammit. Not Bush Stadium.

It snowed the night before the game. Morning dawned cold, gray, and decidedly unbaseball like. Now, the romantic, Tom Boswellian take on this would be to talk of how my Dad stoically decided that despite the weather we were going to the game.

The truth? He tried to talk me out of it. But he was no match. I was in prime pouting years. I didn't even have to try.

Soon, we were bundled up and headed for the game.

I don't remember much about the experience except that it was unbelievably cold. I remember I was somewhat of a Cubs fan. I remember getting a big kick out of Cubs skipper Leo Durocher arguing a call with an umpire. Dad said he was doing it to play to the crowd and he was probably right. Fans had come out to the park to see Leo the Lip and Leo the Lip they would get.

My dad had a somewhat schizophrenic opinion of Durocher. He loved his combativeness. He often loudly questioned his strategic decisions. And he sometimes just thought he was an ass. I would grow to understand Dad's conflicting opinions as I got older and had to deal with Bob Knight, Lefty Driesell, and George Karl all in the same lifetime.

From that point, Dad and I made several journeys together to Major League games in other cities. We drove to Cincinnati to see the Reds play the Giants two nights before Crosley Field closed in 1970. We made trips to Wrigley Field to see the Cubs and we'd get out to Bush Stadium (excuse me... Victory Field) on occasion to see the hometown Tribe.

I'm sure I saw Ken Griffey Senior play in Indianapolis. Truth is, I don't remember. But I do remember another Reds farmhand named Bernie Carbo. Dad and I saw him hit three home runs one night. Carbo would later play an integral part in one of the most famous games in baseball history. It was his pinch-hit home run in the 8th inning that tied up Game Six of the 1975 World Series between the Reds and the Red Sox. That set the stage for Carlton Fisk's dramatic game-winning home run in the 12th inning.

But growing up 2 hours from the nearest big league team (and in the dark ages, the 60s and 70s, before ESPN) meant we followed baseball via the radio. Dad would have the radio on almost every night of the summer. Listening to a young Al Michaels doing the Reds games. Or Harry Caray doing the Cardinals. Or a Cubs game with Vince Lloyd and Lou Boudreau.

It's not like the signal was always clear. Summertime in the Midwest means thunderstorms. So he'd listen to games through cracked static-y noise. He was actually a White Sox fan, but the Sox never had their games on a station that could be heard in Indianapolis. So he'd listen to other games hoping to catch a score on the Sox game.

The first (and only) big league game I ever took my Dad to was in April of 1996 at the Kingdome between the M's and the White Sox. I'd regaled him with the now legendary stories of the 1995 M's run to the pennant. As if providing an encore to that memorable September and October, the M's spotted the Sox a 10-2 lead before roaring back to win in the bottom of the 9th.

Dad and I were pretty close despite the fact that I left Indianapolis in 1982. We talked weekly on the phone and almost always talked a little baseball. He died last summer and typical of a son I've spent lots of time thinking about him since then. All those nights listening to games on the radio. The occasional trip to a ball park. And numerous conversations about the game. I don't feel like I missed anything by not growing up in a "major league town."

On a shelf in my office sits the flag from Dad's funeral. Next to it sits a baseball. It's a commemorative baseball from the opening night of Indianapolis' new ball park a couple summers back.

The logo on the ball reads "Victory Field." That's what they named the "new" park. He loved baseball. And so do I. 🍌

Catch Mike Gastineau on Groz with Gas, weekdays from 2 to 7 PM on Sportsradio 950 KJR-AM.