

The Big Game (of Life)

Coach: "Team, this game is really important! We've won 3 and lost 2 so far. Tonight we're playing the best team in the league. They're 4 and 1! If we can beat them, we'll be right back in the thick of the race. We'll start with Maren and follow-up with Jill and Michaellee. If they start hitting us too hard I might bring in Jane from first to pitch for an inning or two. The rest of the lineup is posted on the backstop. Any questions?"

Elizabeth: Coach?

Coach: Yes, Liz....

Elizabeth: Do we get to go out for ice cream after the game?

Coach: We'll see....

Tamra: Let's go to Stoddards!!

Coach: We'll see....

Alison: You promised!

Coach: We'll go somewhere, but I won't discuss it until after the game!

Team: Yea! (applause)

Frank Robinson and Bill Martin may not be able to handle crises in interpersonal relations, but I just avoided a potentially dangerous situation involving team morale before a crucial game. John Foster Dulles called it "Brinkmanship", but I call it managing a ponytail softball team: fifteen little girls ages seven to ten.

The first inning of the big game went smoothly. Maren got the ball across the plate, and most of the defensive team

played in their proper positions. Connie chased the dog from centerfield, and the fielding was smoother than normal. I could tell our opponents weren't getting around on the ball like their coach had hoped...as evidenced by so many balls being hit to the opposite field. It was really great to see all of the efforts of spring training coming to fruition. We weren't the Big Red Machine, but, we were looking good. The first half of the first inning was over and we were in good shape...of course we were behind 6-0, but now it was our turn to bat...THE SMALL BLUE MACHINE was ready to roll!!!

Coach: Let's start it off Mary Beth!! (I knew Mary Beth was the lead-off batter because Keith had read the batting order, at team request, about six times)

Kerry: Can I get a drink?

Coach: May I? (We're here to build character too, you know)

Kerry: Sure! Can I?

Coach: No, you're batting second....wait 'til after the game!

Kerry: I thought we were going for ice cream after the game!

Coach: Just get out there on deck and take a few practice swings!

The first three batters got solid hits. Right after my wife finished bandaging Missy's ear (she was hit on the side of the head walking by the on-deck circle to pick up her hat which Helen had thrown over the backstop), my cleanup

hitter fanned on a ball three feet over her head. Two walks and a homerun by a girl who hadn't got a hit all season and were back in the game 6-5 after one inning.

The next three innings went by uneventfully--good pitching, good fielding, good hitting--and after three innings we led 15-12!

Coach: Rachael, go in at right field.

Rachael: Should I play in close or deep?

Coach: Close.

Rachael: Which side's right field?

As third base coach (I'm not the kind of manager who sits on the bench), you get pretty friendly with the opponent's third base girl. In the middle of the bottom of the fifth inning, the third base girl asked me a question that I'd never been asked in all my years of managing. She shouted to the ump for "the count" and he responded "two and two". Miss Keystone Corner then turned to me. "How many two and two counts are you allowed to have in one game?"

Standing there perplexed, contemplating my answer, she took me off the hook by adding, "My dad ran over our neighbor's cat last night." Concentration is the name of the game...but how can a player concentrate with visions of abstract 2 and 2 counts and concrete dead Siamese felines floating around in her head? (What ever happened to visions of sugar plums for these little sugar and spice creatures?)

Two screaming line drives and an error. We jumped to an almost insurmountable lead--22-15 with one inning to go!!

After tying my centerfielder's shoes and listening to a brief recital on "growing pains" by a seven year old, we were ready to nail down the win with some solid defensive play in the sixth and final inning. Ed, my other assistant coach--- we're no small organization-- had already tied two other pairs of shoes "so they won't come undone" and helped replace a pierced earring.

Okay, Okay, you can't win 'em all! We had a defensive letdown in the top half of the last inning. A ground out and two strike outs made up the bottom half of the inning. We ended up being edged 28-22!

Coach: Girls, don't take this too hard--you played well tonight, got a lot of hits, ran the bases well...we just need more practice on our fielding. Ask your Moms and Dads and brothers and sisters to play with you. Practice will be Thursday night at 6:30 p.m.

Cassandra: Where?

Coach: At Walls Elementary School

Laura: Dirt field or grass field?

Coach: Grass. (It's the only field on which we've ever practiced!)

Michaelee: Does Jill get credit for a win for the first 5 innings?

Coach: No.

Jane: My Mom will bring pop for everyone at practice.

Kerry: Are we going out for ice cream?

Coach: Yeah, let's go--Ed, Keith and I'll drive.
Tamra: Can I ride with my Mom?
Coach: Yeah.
Kerry: Can we have pop and ice cream?
Coach: No, just a small cone!
Team: Yea! (applause)

We're 3-3 now...no chance for the championship, although we might have 3 or 4 players on the All-Star Team. We'll probably win our last two...in fact, I'm certain we will.

The girls, however, don't even know how many games we have left....and what's more, they aren't too worried about it. I think they have this all in much better perspective than do a lot of the adults.

On the way to get ice cream, I casually brought up the subject of practicing fielding to my shortstop who had made six errors in the game.

Coach: I hope you'll get a chance to practice a little extra this week...
Shortstop: You're always thinking about us Coach! That's why we love you!!
Coach: Have fun at the pool tomorrow.

Another night in the life of a ponytail coach ends with the renewed conviction that ice cream and friends and love are more important than winning softball games. Ed and Keith and Glenn are learning a lot. They're also helping fifteen little

girls grow up a little stronger in an atmosphere of softball and softness.

Summer, 1977