



The View from Right Field

by Rick Ohler

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“Diamond in the Rough”

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I went to Hamlin Park this past Monday morning to see if the diamond might be ready for a Blue Devils game later in the afternoon.

What a mistake. Well, two mistakes. First, I had forgotten that the Blue Devils now play home games at the high school. And, secondly, I wish I had not seen the diamond where my son and I and generations of ballplayers going back to the early 1900s had learned the game and where for a century the Blue Devils played in a homey atmosphere that said this was America’s favorite pastime.

These days the Hamlin diamond looks like an abandoned pet left out in the cold rain. The pitcher’s mound, no longer elevated, has become a mud puddle. The grass from the outfield and inner infield is slowly strangling the neglected base paths from both sides as a case of green measles pops up in the russet brown dirt. Without the white base lines, foul territory is everywhere. Against the backdrop of the hole where the tennis courts were, it’s an embarrassment that nettles my aesthetic, the way the dilapidated buildings at Knox Farm or the forlorn buildings adjacent to the Roycroft Campus or crumbling gravestones nettle others.

It was a momentous occasion in 1962 when my dad took me to Hamlin Park with bat, ball and baseball gloves in tow. His glove, as I recall, was a three-fingered Ballhawk, an ancient chunk of leather, darkened with age, made supple with use, the kind you might find behind glass in an exhibit at Cooperstown’s Hall of Fame.

It was the same one he used as a kid in Jaffrey Center, New Hampshire, where his family spent summers. That glove went with him to college and then waited from 1942-1945 while he took care of business in the Philippines with the U.S. Army. The Ballhawk made its way to Buffalo after the war and then to East Aurora where it saw action in church softball and when he coached us kids in the Sam Koch League. Google informs me that his glove might have cost four or five dollars, but that today it would fetch \$1,495. I’ve long since lost track of it, but if it turned up today, I wouldn’t sell it for any amount.

My glove was a Lou Boudreau model, after the shortstop for the Cleveland Indians, in the ‘40s. Dad never gave me an answer when I asked how Lou Boudreau, a right-hander,

could have endorsed my glove, since I was then, and remain, a member of the left-handed fraternity. I made the case, plausibly I thought, that if I had a shortstop's glove, I should be able to play shortstop, even though the hegemonic (RIP, Snake) forces that ruled the sport had decreed that we southpaws be limited to the outfield, the pitcher's mound and first base. Even relegated to limited positions, I played enthusiastically if not artistically. In high school, my intramural softball team, Ohler's Aardvarks (I wasn't quite good enough for varsity hardball), won a few games, not surprisingly, with a left-handed shortstop, hegemonic forces be damned.

But, I digress, which those of you who have been with me for any or all of the previous 369 "Views from Right Field" will recognize as one of my specialties.

So one day in 1962, my dad and I walked from the homestead at 472 Oakwood Avenue, the geographical center of the world, to the ball diamond at Hamlin Park. I had just turned 12-years-old, finishing my career at the comfortable confines of the junior diamonds at South Street and Olean Road (known now as the Community Pool) and ready to move on to the regulation diamond at Hamlin Park. I had spent five years in the Sam Koch League on diamonds set up with the pitcher's mound 40 feet home plate, the bases 60 feet apart and an outfield cozy enough that I could chat comfortably with the teammates.

Of course, I had seen games on regulation diamonds—Hamlin Park, home of the Blue Devils; Offermann Stadium, home of the Buffalo Bisons; even Fenway Park, the Holy Grail of the sport.

But I had never played a game on a regulation field.

It was like moving from Rhode Island to Texas. Dad positioned himself behind home plate and had me stand on the pitchers' mound. Sixty-feet, six-inches might as well have been a mile. I bounced pitches and threw them all over the place without a single strike. Then Dad stood on first base and hit to me at third. I scooped the grounder into my Lou Boudreau and looked across the ocean that lay between me and first base. My throw bounced several times and rolled pathetically to the first baseman, stopping a few inches short of the bag. An indolent turtle would have beaten my throw. We walked out to centerfield, an expanse of green that rivaled an Iowa hayfield in early spring. Three outfielders were supposed to cover all that real estate? Impossible.

My dad, an annoyingly wise man, had seen me become cocky as I reached the pinnacle of my small diamond days. At 12, I had forgotten about life at age eight, how deathly afraid of the ball I had been, batting with one foot already in retreat from the batter's box; how the 12-year-olds had intimidated me; how I been banished to right field, or Right Field in my case, where I might do only minimal defensive damage to my team. By 12, I thought I was pretty hot stuff; I struck out young batters who merely waved at the ball, hoping not to get hit by my blazing (30 mph.?) fastball; I gloated when I hit a home run that traveled only about as far as the distance between first and third on the real diamond. A sinking feeling crept into my stomach that night as I massaged my glove with neatsfoot oil from

Mike Carini's shoe repair, stuck a ball into the pocket and wrapped it with twine in preparation for the long days ahead.

Eventually, I got used to the bigger diamond, playing adequately without ever distinguishing myself. My life as ballplayer, and as an athlete in any sport, has been thoroughly unremarkable. Somewhere around the year 2002, I returned to Hamlin Park with my 12-year-old son to explain the difference between the comfortable confines of the Community Pool diamonds and the real thing. He didn't miss a beat; he could handle the big diamond from day one. So much for me playing the annoyingly wise dad.

I shifted from hoping to teach him a lesson in humility to imagining his inevitable high school success would lead to a college scholarship, followed glorious years pitching for the Boston Red Sox. The high school thing worked out pretty well; the college scholarship and Red Sox, well, their loss.

On this past Monday afternoon, I watched the varsity Blue Devils play the Depew Wildcats at the reconstituted, but still not Hamlin Park, ball diamond at the high school. It was chilly on top of the hill, cloudy and soggy enough that anyone who wore sneakers (like me) got wet feet. The home team went down 4-0 in the bottom of the first. It looked like a long afternoon, I grumbled. Then, in quick succession, Dominic Zittel, Alex Baase, Lucas Juliano smacked long doubles. Nate Mucci and Danny Farrell followed with singles and it was 5-4 after three. In the fourth, the hit parade continued with runs scoring on long blasts, crafty bunts, walks, hit batsmen and even the rare catcher interference. When the dust settled—well, when the mud stopped oozing—the Blue Devils had fashioned a 12-4 rout of the vaunted visitors. If these high schoolers were upset about Hamlin Park, they didn't show it. They were smackin' the ball, scorin' runs, joshin' with each other, spittin' sunflower seeds—kids enjoying the best game ever invented. For now, I'll just be quiet and stay out of Hamlin park.

Columnist Rick Ohler invites readers to visit him at the Advertiser office on Wednesday mornings from 10 to 11 a.m. Find past columns and articles on his website, www.rickohler.com.