Our dads didn’t teach us to use steroids

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CENTER VALLEY – At a recent symposium on baseball and American culture, the president of the Hall of Fame, Dale Petroskey, spoke of the problems facing our national pastime: from threats of another strike (involving billionaires fighting with millionaires) to reports of widespread use of illegal drugs (steroids) to enhance playing performance. To counteract this negative publicity, he pointed to Cooperstown’s enduring charm as the vehicle for transmitting American culture from generation to generation.

As I visited the hallowed hall, it became clear to me that the key to baseball’s legacy is its fans, particularly dads. You could see on the face of the 70-year old dads a peaceful nostalgia, as their own lives flashed before them in the names of old ballplayers they once cheered. Their sons, now middle-aged dads themselves, strolled among the monuments with reverence for the legendary heroes to whom they had been introduced at an earlier age. Even the younger dads, with their own toddlers in tow, gazed in respect for names once heard of and all-stars they had actually seen.

What passed between these generations of fans was a shared experience of the father-son relationship, each visitor marveling at athletic accomplishments while re-living the bond that baseball had created for them. I surmise that none of these dads taught their sons to use steroids. But they did give us lessons for life, which we first encountered in Little League.

Our dads taught us the value of learning. They served as instructors, teaching us the fundamentals of the game. They weren’t just sideline cheerleaders who shout baseball slogans. They got on the field with us and demonstrated how to throw and catch and hit and run. Today we know the importance of that interaction in terms of social life. Dads spending time with their sons is a precious commodity, for education takes place first and foremost in our families.
Our dads taught us the value of fairness. They made sure that everyone, no matter the skill level, got a chance to play. They cheered when we were victorious and consoled us in our losses. And whatever the outcome, they treated us all to water ice after the game. Today we know the importance of this respect for all in terms of political and economic life. In our American dream, we believe that everyone has the right to pursue happiness, and in our shared existence we come together to support those in need.

Our dads taught us the value of perseverance. They did not chide us for missing a catch or scold us when we struck out. In a sport where errors abound and failure is the norm (the best hitters succeeding only 30% of the time), dads were the source of endless encouragement. Today we recognize the importance of never giving up. As former commissioner Fay Vincent once remarked, baseball teaches how “life rewards those who having failed, and having failed over and over, still manage to move on. It is the decision to try again that will eventually lead to a reward.”

And our dads taught us the value of sacrifice. They would drive long distances so we could watch or play a game; they even gave up vacation if we managed to make the post-season tournaments. Today we celebrate the willingness to subject personal interests to the good of others. Unique to baseball as a “badge of Americanism” (Harold Seymour), sacrifice is now recognized as the mode of heroism, displayed most poignantly in the life-giving feats of police and fire personnel during the terrorist tragedies that occurred during the last season.

Through these lessons from Little League, dads have introduced us to that “profound aspiration” that Pope John Paul II identifies as foundational to all human culture. We seek “to affirm (ourselves) in liberty” by choosing to sacrifice self-interest for the sake of the common good. We are able “to move forward with responsibility” when we treat every person as a valuable player in life. We yearn “to act on behalf of solidarity” because we recognize that promoting right relations with the team of society is what brings us ultimate success.

As former commissioner A. Bartlett Giamatti reminds us, baseball mirrors life, in as much as both involve “the story of going home after having left home, the story of how difficult it is to find the origins one so deeply needs to find. ... It is about restoration of the right relations among things – and going home is where that restoration occurs because that is where it matters most.”

Rightly, then, do we celebrate Father’s Day, for our dads have been the ones to tell us – and show us – this story.

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