

A Beautiful Day for Baseball

The excitement was in the air. It was unmistakable...palpable, in fact.

And I am not just talking about the buzz of anticipation that usually accompanies Opening Day at any ballpark, not just Kiwanis Miracle League field.

It was also Free Maid-Rite Day.

Free Maid-Rite Day alone would send chills down the spine any normal sports fan, but COMBINE the two and you now have an event of "Woodstock" proportions.

I took my usual spot behind the concession counter and prepared for the first post-game rush. Players would now have tickets for both food AND drink and it was my job to deliver them smoothly.

Before the Marlins and the Athletics took the field for the National Anthem, our good friend and fellow Kiwanian Jan mentioned that they were short "buddies" for the first game.

In the grand scheme of things, my job as food and drink distribution specialist is miniscule compared to the responsibilities of the "buddies" that accompany the Miracle League players and help them navigate the base paths and gobble up ground balls.

I have to admit that I was apprehensive to say the least about being a "buddy". In the safe confines of the concession stand I was at ease interacting with both players and parents but I had no experience being around special needs kids of any kind. When Jan asked for volunteers I quickly averted my eyes and pretended to be working hard on my concession duties. Luckily, another Kiwanian volunteered and I was safe.

For now...

The second game had enough buddies but sure enough, the third game, the Phillies and the Orioles were short as well.

Facing my fears head on, I decided to volunteer to be a buddy. Not knowing what to expect I threw myself into it with gusto. The player I was assigned to was named Terrance, and looking around he was by far the most profoundly disabled on the team.

“You can do this,” I told myself with all the false bravado I could muster.

We took the field first and I positioned Terrance at shortstop. We were sure to get lots of excitement at that position and I figured Terrance would have lots of fun.

After the second batter, Terrance or “T” as he was called, informed me that he wanted to go sit down. I helped him back to the dugout and he plopped himself on the bench.

I was devastated. My guy didn’t want to play. I had failed.

I was heartbroken.

I managed to talk him into batting and he was second to last in the lineup. I didn’t know what to expect but he CLOBBERED the ball and he needed little encouragement from me to take an extra base and stretch that hit into a double.

Things were looking up.

He refused to take the field during the top of the second and I sat next to my “designated hitter” not really knowing what to do. He asked me for some water and I was able to call upon my many years of food and drink distribution skills to deftly comply with his wishes. We watched in silence as the Orioles scored a bunch of runs as ground ball after ground ball went to the empty hole that would have been ripe pickings for a shortstop.

I was perhaps the biggest loser in the history of buddies anywhere...

He wanted to bat again and his second hit was even better than the first one. He stretched it into a triple and I tried valiantly to keep up as he rounded second and screeched into third.

I made a fist and held it towards him as real ballplayers do. In my giddy enthusiasm I said "Pound it, T!" and he made a fist himself, pounding his knuckles into mine in the universal gesture that has replaced the handshake for his generation.

The game complete, we all converged on the pitcher's mound for the final cheer. We were almost there when I felt "T" throw his arms around me. In what was maybe only the third time he spoke all morning he said, "I love you..."

For only the second time in my life, words failed me.

Unsure of what to say, I hugged back.

"Love you too, man..." was all I could get out. I sounded like I was in a Bud Lite commercial.

We said our cheer and walked back to the dugout still hugging.

Not really knowing how to say goodbye, I just left with another, "Pound it, T!" which he enthusiastically did. He was embraced in a huge bear hug by his dad and the rest of T's entourage that were cheering loudly for him.

As I turned quickly to leave, I must have picked up something in my eye or maybe they watered because of all the excitement in the air.

It being Free Maid-Rite day and all...