

## My Life as a Baseball

Bruce Springsteen didn't have me in mind when he recorded "Born in the USA" in 1984. Back in those days, baseballs were "born" in Haiti, a tropical island in the eastern Caribbean. It's been that way for as long as most of us can remember. That's where my parents and grandparents came from. But I'm not that old. I came into this world via a small Central American country named Costa Rica, a country rich in tradition and Major League baseball talent.

Technically, baseballs like me aren't born; we are manufactured. It's a process I didn't fully understand until my grandfather explained it to me during a visit to his home one summer. "You see, not everything round can be a baseball because we're special, and you come from a unique and exceptional heritage that is rich in tradition." As grandpa said, "Once we leave the factory, there's no telling where we will end up." He told me that I have a number of famous relatives and that someday, he would surely count me among them. That made me feel good, but it wasn't always that way. While grandpa might be seen as a man set in his ways to others, his mind held a wealth of knowledge and experience, and I envisioned learning as much as I could from him. With his help, I would gain the confidence and direction I would need to become successful later in life.



*A picture of Grandpa sitting in his favorite "sofa"*

Grandpa gave me a great piece of advice. "Choose your friends carefully," and with that advice, came a story that proved his point. He proceeded to tell me about his first real friend. He was a pitcher named Jake, and he knew right away that this was a friendship that would withstand the test of time.

"Jake had really great hands," grandpa would say. "I knew it from the first time he picked me up. You know, son, it always makes sense for a baseball to have a pitcher as a friend, especially if he is a really good pitcher. Guys like that have a knack of taking care of baseballs like us." He went on to recite one of Jake's favorite lines:



*Grandpa and Jake*

"Do you know how difficult it is for a pitcher to hit a moving bat?" I guess that made sense. It's probably why my grandfather has lived such a long and relatively bruise-free life.

## Batmares

When I was young, I suffered the same fears and uncertainties that other baseballs felt. Experience taught me that they were a part of growing up and maturing. I didn't know why I had those fears back then, but explanations would soon come.

I know that many humans fear spiders, snakes or bats. People have been known to wake up in a cold sweat with the recent memory of a nightmare involving these creatures. There are horror stories written with that recurring



theme . . . a human not being able to escape the wrath of a giant spider or a swarm of bats. No matter what they do, the spiders or bats keep coming! None of those nightmares ever end well. Often times, these terrible dreams return and generate a genuine element of fear.

Perception can become reality, and there were times I feared turning off the light and curling up in my glove to go to sleep. I can identify with those horrors, because if you are a baseball, you naturally fear bats!

Nature provides everything with a natural enemy. Mice have owls, snakes have the mongoose, gazelles have cheetahs, and antelopes have lions. I am a round, white object weighing slightly over five ounces with one hundred eight red stitches. Somewhere in the genetic code of natural enemies, they saw fit to make a club-like piece of wood my natural enemy.

While I didn't understand why it had to be that way, I lived with the constant fear of being struck by a Louisville Slugger. In fact, anything with the word "bat" in it caused me to shake and shudder. I couldn't read Batman comics or listen to singer Meatloaf's "Like a Bat Out of Hell" without some degree of apprehension. Likewise, the holiday I feared the most was Halloween. Why?

Because there were just too many bat references! It took a while to realize not everything that contained the word bat was bad. Watching a baseball game on television was like watching the movie "Friday the Thirteenth" as a teenager. There should be ratings or warnings before these broadcasts, "The following program contains scenes of a violent nature. Parental discretion is advised."



*I lived in constant fear of this.*



That would make sense to me. In the movie “Rambo IV” there were 236 documented kills by Sylvester Stallone. How many baseballs has Giancarlo Stanton destroyed in batting practice alone? Believe me, it’s hard to watch that stuff if you’re a baseball.

### **Growing older but not up!**

The maturation process is extremely complex. Part of that development involves selecting role models to emulate later in life. Thanks to my grandfather, I knew where to look. Yes, I have friends in “high places.”

The Baseball Hall of Fame is located in Cooperstown, New York. When it opened in 1939, its purpose was to have a place where all of the greats of baseball could be honored by current and future generations. The “Hall” would be a living shrine to the best of the best. It’s there I located my role models.

Autographed baseballs by Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and Ty Cobb can be found, along with Roger Maris’s home run number 61. Balls representing no-hitters by Bob Feller and Nolan Ryan are prominently displayed along with a detailed account of each historic accomplishment. The ball that became Derek Jeter’s 3,000<sup>th</sup> hit is there along with Barry Bonds’ 73<sup>rd</sup> home run. Once I saw that, I said, “That’s what I want to be!” But how can I get there? I don’t think this something I can accomplish without some degree of pain and sacrifice.



The road to fame is never well defined. It has many distractions and roadblocks along the way. For me, much of that was out of my control. As a baseball, I can’t control my own destiny . . . that is done by someone else. You just have to hope you are in the right hands.



There are times I would fantasize about what my life would be if I could reverse some of the roles. Imagine ME doing the hitting instead of being the proverbial “bug on the windshield?” I’m sure that with proper instruction and training I could get pretty good at hitting . . . what . . . other baseballs? That might not be such a good idea. That’s a sure-fire way to lose friends. While it’s something I would like to try, it would not be at the expense of bashing friends and relatives. In the world of humans, I would be arrested and charged with domestic violence. So, I’ll just have to concentrate on taking practice cuts and imagine that those swings are turning into 400-foot home runs!

Once I made my way into the real world, I discovered something else . . . the opposite sex. To anyone other than a baseball, it's hard to tell the male of the species, from the female but believe me, there is a difference. One afternoon during batting practice, I found myself applying one of the most often recited rules of the game. I was "keeping my eye on the ball." Well, not just any ball, but one particular "cutie" that seemed much better at curves than change-ups. I thought I saw her looking my way a few times, but I couldn't be sure. I had to do something, but what? I needed to come up with a plan that encompassed a way to "catch" that girl.



Whatever I tried didn't work. I watched others fielding grounders and fly balls and it looked a whole lot easier than it was. I don't know how outfielders react to a batted ball and move to a space somewhere in the field, camp under that ball and make the catch. I established a new level of respect for those guys. It seemed that I was never in the "ready position" when she approached. Someone else always beat me to the catch and I was beginning to get depressed. Were their instincts that much better than mine? I never caught a girl before, and the more I tried, the more frustrating it would become. I decided that I should put down the glove and move on with my life.

### **Luck or Destiny?**

Sooner or later, everyone thinks about retirement and I was no different. I remember saying that if I were ever to amount to anything worthwhile, I didn't think I could accomplish it without some degree of pain and sacrifice. Well, I was right on both counts.

I wasn't sure where I was going, but the box I shared with other baseballs seemed to give me a degree of comfort. We were all in this together and wherever we were heading would be fine as long as red clay and green grass was involved. I wasn't lucky enough to make it to the Major Leagues. Sometimes childhood dreams never materialize, but we play the hand we are dealt. Being summoned to a college baseball game isn't that bad. There are some really good players at that level, and it was our job to see that they are all able to perform at their best.

When I came into the game, the pitcher rubbed me up until he felt comfortable. That reminded me of the stories my grandfather told me about Jake. If this pitcher was any good, he would masterfully maneuver his pitch selection around the bats and damage to my exterior would be held to a minimum. If I were to be hit, I'd prefer a bunt or a bloop single to a towering home run. A four-pitch walk wouldn't be out of the question, but what would it do for my legacy? Nothing. I needed to be apart of something important and if and when that happened, my purpose in life would be fulfilled.

Crack!

Yes, it was just a single, but instead of being thrown from the outfield back to the pitcher, I was removed from the game. As I waited on the bench, I overheard one of the coaches say, "Hold this one in a safe place, it's the record breaker. We'll give it to him after the game."



Now that I'm retired, I can say that I truly accomplished something worthwhile. My fear of bats is a distant memory and in retrospect, the pain and sacrifice were all worth it. I'm not in Cooperstown, but this trophy case is comfortable. I know that when people see me and read the description on my display, they will smile and know that this is where I want to spend the rest of my time.

Grandpa would be proud!