

The Greenest Grass I Ever Saw

As a young boy, I grew up in a large city. Concrete and steel were all I knew when it came to the “great outdoors.” There wasn’t much grass growing along the sidewalks of 182nd Street in Queens. Looking back at those times, it was a fascinating experience. New York City in the 1950s was everything those old black and white movies depicted. From the unremitting cacophony of busy sounds emanating from the streets to the vintage cars, buses and trucks that were in constant motion, nothing seemed to stand still. Those times were truly unique in a number of ways. In the world of music, the clarinet of the “Big Band Era” was slowly giving way to rock and roll music and the electric guitar. The President of the United States was Dwight D. Eisenhower. Our radios were tuned to music stations on the AM dial, and telephone numbers did not have area codes; they had exchanges as prefixes. (Olympia 8-6714 was our home number.) The photo albums containing events of those days are all in black and white, but when I lived those memories growing up, everything was in color.

Back then, things seemed close, and that was because everything was close! Your school, your friends, the local deli and candy store were all within walking distance from your front door. When your mother told you to “run down to the store” you literally could run down to the store and hardly be out of breath. Two-family houses and apartment complexes lined narrow streets. As kids, we played sports and games in those streets, pausing frequently each time a car approached.

My paternal grandparents lived exactly three miles away, but it seemed much farther than that when we climbed into the family car and made that drive to “Nana and Pop’s” each Saturday for dinner. That fact was explained to me on one of those Saturday drives when my father described the difference between the car’s speedometer and its odometer. While the term speedometer made sense to me (a speedometer shows your speed), why did the thing that measured distance have such an odd name? I never claimed to be all that smart as a six year-old.



We were a “one car” family. Economics dictated that, but it was also noteworthy that my mother never found it necessary to get a driver’s license. Subway stations and bus stops were everywhere. There were very few places you couldn’t get to via public transportation. Manhattan was less than ten miles to

the west, and it was only a thirty-minute subway ride. Nobody drove into “the City.”

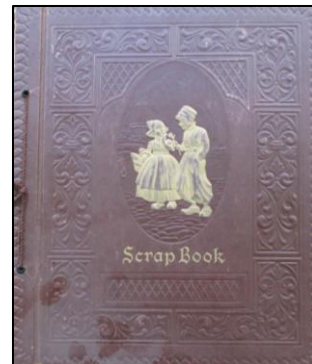
My father, Robert W. Guise, Jr., was a New York City native and World War II veteran who married Rosie, his high school sweetheart. In his black and white world, he was the oldest of Robert (everyone called him “Whitey”) and Mary Guise’s four children. Born before the Great Depression, he grew up on the streets of Astoria, Queens, just across the river from Manhattan in the virtual afternoon shadow of the Empire State Building. My father’s childhood was not much different from mine. Where we grew up was less than six miles apart, even though my formative years took place twenty-five years after his. Both of us played stickball in the streets and learned the game of football in pickup games played on vacant lots in our neighborhoods. Cuts and bruises were part of the process because concrete isn’t soft and you never knew what was scattered in the sand and dirt of those “vacant” lots. Most of our games ended at dinnertime with a chorus of mothers calling their sons’ names.



Bob and Rose in 1938

Scrap Books

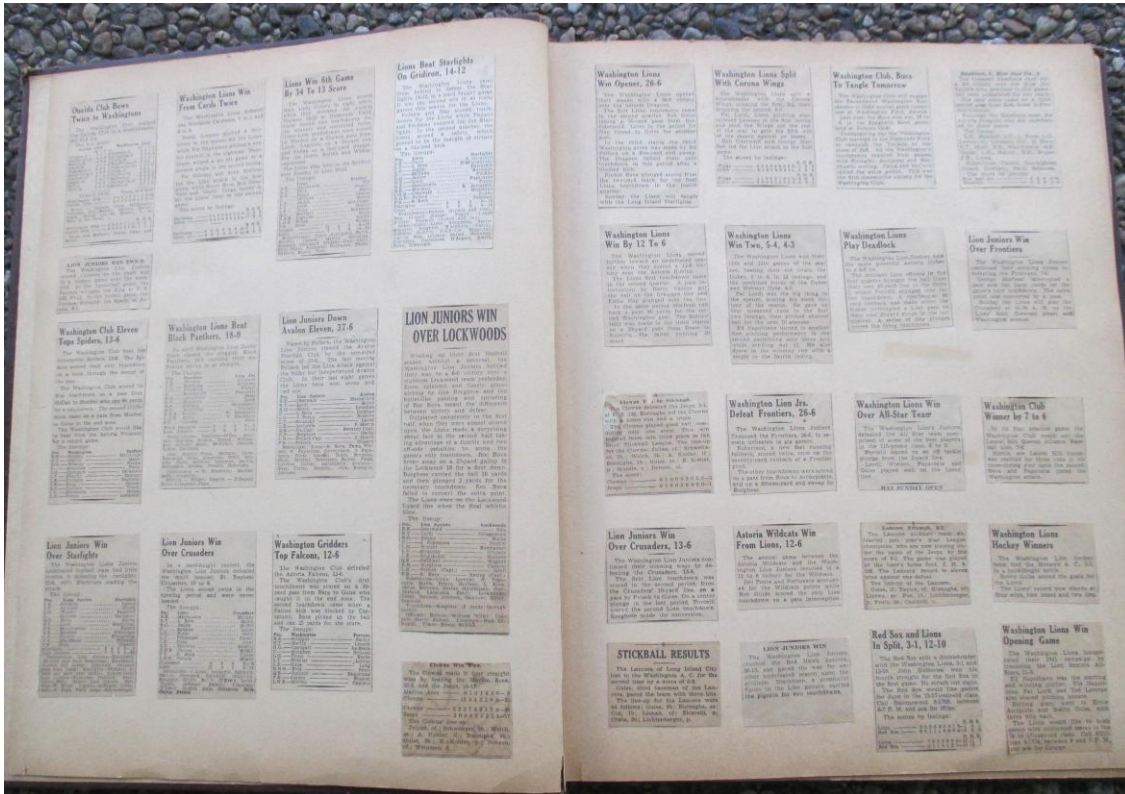
I recall my mother opening up one of her scrapbooks filled with yellowed newspaper clippings from the now defunct *New York Journal American* and the *Long Island Press*. A common theme that ran throughout those articles was my father’s sports accomplishments. There were numerous articles along with box scores showing that he went “four for five with two triples” in a Washington Lions victory over a cross-city rival, or that he scored two touchdowns from his “left end” position in a come-from-behind fourth quarter win. There were dozens of individual as well as team pictures in her collection. I had no trouble picking out my then nineteen-year old father in his muddy football uniform complete with his leather “Red Grange” helmet sans facemask. There were also pictures of him in his baggy cotton Washington Lions baseball uniform, reminiscent of the St. Louis Cardinals “gashouse gang” teams of the late 1930s. Those photographs captured split seconds of his life, froze them in time, and preserved those moments for more than seventy-plus years.



He was an exceptional athlete in both baseball and football, and those who actually saw him play said that if it were not for the interruption of World War II, he could have played professionally. Each time I thumbed through those

delicate pages with my mother I could not help but marvel at just how good he was. A tinge of regret always entered my mind. I never saw my father play.

Most of the New York inter-city club teams disbanded during World War II because their ranks were depleted and never re-formed. When my father came home from his service obligation after four years in the Pacific, he did not play competitive sports again. According to my mother, his primary obligation was to support his new wife and plan for their future family. The classified want ads during that period weren't listing baseball teams looking for a third baseman.



Mom's scrap book

The Bond

Baseball has been known to create a remarkably strong bond between fathers and sons. It is a unique relationship that has spanned generations and withstood the test of time. There are very few fathers who haven't dusted off old baseball gloves and had a game of "catch" with their son. There is no clock in

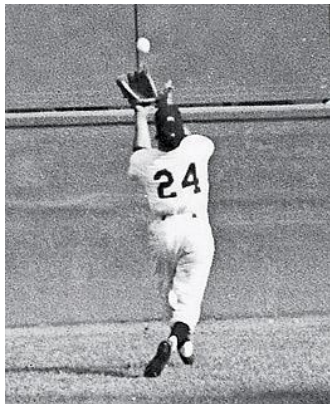
baseball. Perhaps it is the leisurely pace of the game that allows for real conversation. These verbal exchanges can happen while watching baseball on TV, or by bringing up a random fact about a past or present player at dinner. All that is necessary is the subject of baseball.

I really don't remember the details of how my first baseball glove came into my possession. It was not new, and the leather ties that held the fingers together were always breaking. There were times my mother would find a pair of old shoelaces and weave them through the openings to keep the glove's fingers from spreading too far apart. (Catching a baseball in the mouth wasn't fun, and fixing broken teeth was expensive.) This "fix" worked until I could gather enough empty soda bottles to return to Sonny and Lena's Candy Store for their two-cent deposits. With that "earned" money, I could take the glove to the local shoemaker and he would re-string real leather ties through the fingers and the webbing.

During the summer, the sun sets much later in the evening. That meant that we could go outside and do things after dinner before it got dark. While I would play ball and other games with my friends during the day or after school, it was always a special treat when my father would say to me after dinner, "Rob, why don't you get your glove and we'll go outside and have a catch." He never had to ask me twice!



The highlight of those sessions was baseball talk. He was a Giants fan, and I loved the Yankees. We would always watch baseball on television whenever a Giants or Yankee game was broadcasted on Channel 11. It was because of that visual medium that I was able to study individual hitting and pitching styles of the players and imitate them. There were times after watching a game that we would go out to the street and have a catch. My dad would throw me a pop-up and I would imitate Mickey Mantle's style of camping under the ball and catching it with two hands. If I threw him the same style pop-up, he would demonstrate the famous Willie Mays basket catch. We would also play baseball trivia. A typical contest would begin by me asking, "So, who has the highest batting average of all time?" He would say, "For a season or for a career?" Being only nine at the time, my resources were limited, and I wasn't knowledgeable enough then to know if his answers were correct or not. After a while, I would scour the sports section of the newspaper and search for baseball facts I was pretty sure he wouldn't know. Rarely would I ask him something he didn't answer correctly.



In 1957, I lived and breathed New York Yankee baseball. It was just a year earlier that my favorite ballplayer, Mickey Mantle, won the American League triple-crown and led the Yankees to the 1956 World Series Championship over

the hated Brooklyn Dodgers. As a then nine-year old, I knew all of his stats and marveled at the fact that he could hit equally well from both sides of the plate. When I got home from school, I would grab my baseball bat, position myself in front of the living room mirror and imitate Mantle's stance while taking practice swings. Echoes of my mother saying, "Don't swing that bat in the house!" sent small pangs of guilt through my subconscious that I continued to ignore until my sister would say, "I'm telling mom when she gets home." I tried not to swing really hard for fear that the bat would slip out of my hands and break a lamp or two or slam into our parakeet's cage and claim Petey as an innocent victim.

Yankee Stadium

Up to that point, my familiarity with major league baseball was the product of radio, newspapers, magazines, and black and white television. I had never seen a real baseball game in an actual baseball stadium. I knew tickets were expensive and purchasing one would translate into taking over three hundred empty soda bottles to Sonny and Lena's Candy Store to get enough money to pay for a single ticket. Besides, Yankee Stadium was in the Bronx, and as far as I was concerned, it was at the other end of the world!

It was the Friday evening of the last week of June, and school had been out for approximately two weeks. The weather in New York was ideal for everything outdoors . . . especially baseball. At dinner that evening my father said to me, "Rob, how would you like to go to the Stadium on Sunday to see the Yankees play the Kansas City Athletics?"

I remember practically jumping out of my seat at the table when I finally comprehended what he said. I also looked at my mother whose smiling face indicated that she was also in on my surprise. He then said, "You know, Don Larsen is scheduled to pitch. Remember, he pitched that perfect game against the Dodgers in the Series last October."



The next day, I could barely contain my excitement. The only thing I could think about was the game. What would it be like getting that close to real major league baseball players and seeing them play at Yankee Stadium? Would Mickey Mantle hit a home run? Would I be lucky enough to catch a foul ball? Should I bring my glove just in case? Sunday couldn't come fast enough.



The subway ride to Yankee Stadium would take almost an hour, so we left our house just before eleven AM for the one o'clock start. My father said that we had to change trains in Manhattan and get off at the 161st Street-River Avenue exit. When we exited

that train, the Stadium would be right there. So I traveled with my baseball glove cradled in my lap, my eyes wide, and my thoughts full of the anticipation of my first major league baseball game.

As we approached the stadium's ticket booths, my senses were on full alert. My eyes and ears were taking in sights and sounds I had never experienced. When my dad announced that we had box seats just a few rows behind the third base dugout, my first thought was, "I'm glad I brought my glove." We then walked to the gate and the usher looked at our tickets, tore them in half, and directed us to a long, inclined walkway that would lead to our field level seats. The trip up the walkway seemed to take forever. Cries of "Peanuts, popcorn, ice-cold beeeeeer" emanated from the stadium vendors; smells of cigar smoke and hot dogs filled the air. When we arrived at the top of the ramp, something caught my eye. It wasn't anything that moved. It was something that was there all along, but it was a sight my eyes had never seen before.

Looking to my right, just beyond the rows of spectator seats was a field of the greenest grass I ever saw! Perhaps it was the contrast of the city's concrete and steel to the emerald-green grass of Yankee Stadium that made that view so spectacular and memorable, and to this day, it is a sight I will never forget.



The next two and a half hours flew by in a blur. I do remember that the Yankees won the game, I did not catch a foul ball, and that Mickey Mantle did not hit a home run. After the game, we were allowed to leave the stands and walk

across the field to the exit gates that had just opened up like giant garage doors in the outfield walls. As we slowly walked onto the field towards those exits, I kept thinking that players like Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Joe DiMaggio, Mickey Mantle and Yogi Berra played here. When we approached center field, I stopped. I recall that I looked back in the direction of home plate and marveled at just how far baseballs had to travel to become home runs.



I might have fallen asleep during the subway ride back to Queens. Those details are far too sketchy and probably overwhelmed by the anticipation and the actual baseball game I had just attended. I remember walking up the small hill that led to our two-family house and seeing my mother waiting at the door. She said, “How did it go? Did the Yankees win?”

“Yep, they won!” I replied. And as my father walked up behind me, I turned to him and said, “Dad, can we have a catch?”

Kansas City Athletics vs. New York Yankees

June 30, 1957 Box Score

Kansas City Athletics 1, New York Yankees 5

Game played on Sunday, June 30, 1957 at Yankee Stadium

Kansas City Athletics	ab	r	h	rbi	New York Yankees	ab	r	h	rbi
Power 1b	4	0	0	0	Kubek 3b	3	1	1	0
Martin 2b	4	0	1	0	Collins 1b	4	0	0	0
Zernial lf	4	0	0	0	Mantle cf	3	1	1	1
Skizas rf	4	0	0	0	Berra c	2	1	1	1
Smith c	3	0	0	0	McDougald ss	4	0	1	1
Lopez 3b	3	1	1	1	Bauer rf	4	1	2	0
Held cf	3	0	1	0	Howard lf	4	0	1	1
DeMaestri ss	2	0	0	0	Richardson 2b	4	0	0	0
Noren ph	1	0	1	0	Larsen p	3	1	3	0
Hunter ss	0	0	0	0	Totals	31	5	10	4
Urban p	2	0	0	0					
McDermott p	0	0	0	0					
Cox p	1	0	0	0					
Totals	31	1	4	1					

Kansas City	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	-	1	4	0
New York	1	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	x	-	5	10	1

Kansas City Athletics	IP	H	R	ER	BB	SO
Urban L (1-2)	6.2	8	5	4	3	3
McDermott	0.0	0	0	0	1	0
Cox	1.1	2	0	0	0	1
Totals	8.0	10	5	4	4	4

About the author:

Robert Guise is a former English teacher and sales management professional who enjoys creating humor pieces and satirical short stories based on common, every-day subjects.

“I have two goals I try to accomplish with each story I write:

- 1) *To make my readers smile.*
- 2) *Hopefully, somewhere in my stories, you will read something and comment, ‘I never knew that.’”*

