

Hills and Valleys

In the hills of Dubuque, enough cheap, flat land for ball diamonds is hard to come by, so the city's Little Leagues share a three field complex on the outskirts of town. The complex is cramped. There isn't much room for dugouts and the opposing fans share two benches behind the plate, under a tree providing blissful shade. The locals are friendly but grumbling, as locals do, about this and that.

Are they kidding me? Are they nearsighted? Hard scrabble though it may be, the Dubuque fields sit on a plateau overlooking miles of rolling farmland in all directions. Iowa, the most fertile of states, is on full display, with every shade of green pulsing skyward from the warm July soil. They could charge admission just to take in the view. Just down the road at the Field of Dreams site in Dyersville, donations are happily offered to do just that.

The sun starts to set as assuredly as Little League careers across the nation. The game tonight is the last of a week of nerve wracking contests, played through drenching heat, and cloudbursts so persistent Marcia and the other moms have found it almost impossible to keep their boys in dry cleats. Davenport Southeast has traveled upriver to face Dubuque South. If Davenport wins, they'll play in the district semi-finals. If they lose, Little League is over forever, except for the hour and a half they'll spend in their uniforms on the forlorn drive home.

The baseball day begins on a beatific note. Turning into the Davenport fields from which the team will caravan up to the game, a ball nearly hits the Ford. Will's dad is throwing some batting practice, and Will has ripped a ball out of the park onto the road. This bodes well. Colin is second to arrive and gets a few cuts in before we depart.

On the drive up, we wonder if baseball talent is evenly distributed in Dubuque. We more than wonder, we hope. At home in Davenport, Southeast dismantled Dubuque North 16 - 1. All the boys played well, and T.J. ricocheted a grand slam off the scoreboard. On the seventh / eighth grade cool meter, they'd need a new word for that. The Dubuque South game begins and two innings in, the hope has been dashed. We're behind 7 - 2. This will be a win we need to earn.

The lead changes nearly every inning, and every parent is on edge. The setting might still be beautiful, but it is hard to look beyond the field. Dubuque ties the game in the top of the final inning at ten runs apiece. We are down two injured players (Calvin and Will) and have to win at a field where the umps would have to explain a close call against a hometown kid for the rest of their tragic lives.

Alex has replaced Will, our number three hitter in the lineup, and Colin and Max follow after Alex. Alex has done a fine job on the mound in the late innings, and he coaxes a full count walk from his counterpart to start us off. Colin dons a helmet and steps in. In his first three at bats today, he has drilled two home runs. The opposing manager has to decide to put the winning run on second with no outs if he gives Colin an intentional walk, or pitch to him. He talks with his crafty left hander, and rolls the dice.

The first pitch is wide by a foot and Colin lets it pass. You want to stop the game and tell him they are going to throw balls to induce aggressive but futile swings. You'd like to stop the world and go over the importance of discipline and being a team player and imparting, again, every lesson you've tried to teach over his half decade of youth baseball. But there you sit, on the bench behind home, with Marcia. And there he stands, at the plate, alone.

The pitcher throws a curve, tailing six inches outside. He has miscalculated Colin's height and reach. More decisively, he has underestimated the thousand hours of practice that determines the next half second. Colin waits on it and then tears into the ball, launching it toward right center. Marcia jumps to her feet and says, softly, "go...go...". I stay seated. That ball ain't coming back. Torn from the shackles of gravity, it streaks a hundred feet past the fence as great commotion ensues. Jubilation for some, chagrin for others.

I may have gone temporarily deaf, for I can't recall hearing anything as Colin circles the bases at a respectful pace. As he passes third base coach Kevin in a craftsmanlike trot, he is told to smile. He does as instructed before being mobbed by his teammates at the plate. He has given his team another game to play and given the Davenport parents a few more days to be parents, watching our boys do what they love.

In the hills and valleys of our existence, there is abundant commotion. Always up or down, always in motion, always spinning toward our fate. You can't stop it. You can't call a time out. But every now and then, you can find a quiet place, with a nice view, and tuck the moment away. One of my quiet places will forever be a plateau in Dubuque, with grumbling locals, and a group of ballplayers that will always be young, and pure, and twelve.