



Almost Heaven?

By Terrie Dopp Aamodt

What have I gotten myself into? I tried to dislodge the cobwebs after five hours of fitful red-eye dozing. What would incite a middle-aged woman to sign onto a Boston Red Sox fantasy camp as its only female player? Being fully awake only made me more fretful as we landed in Atlanta before the sun on a chilly January morning. I trudged over to the connecting flight to Fort Myers, eying my fellow passengers. Were any of them headed for Red Sox camp?

A few men looked buff and athletic, just the right type to be annoyed at having a woman underfoot on the diamond. I looked hopefully at a few men comfortably padded with middle age. They probably wouldn't mind. Should I smile at them? Rats! If only I had a 1967 Red Sox year-book I could tuck under my arm. Then we could recognize each other and enjoy the bond of intimacy and hopelessness understood by no one else except Cub fans and wearers of St. Jude medals.

If I had only thought about it, 7:00 on a Sunday morning was too early

to encounter Bostonians on a flight to Florida. Descending the East Coast is a simple matter, something that can occur during hours when normal people are awake. Early morning flights are populated by denizens of Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis, and Seattle, eager for a first crack at Florida sunshine, or the truly desperate, from places like Walla Walla, Washington, who take two days to go anywhere on a winter weekend.

The foliage got greener and the sky bluer as we flew south. At least if camp was miserable, the weather ought to be

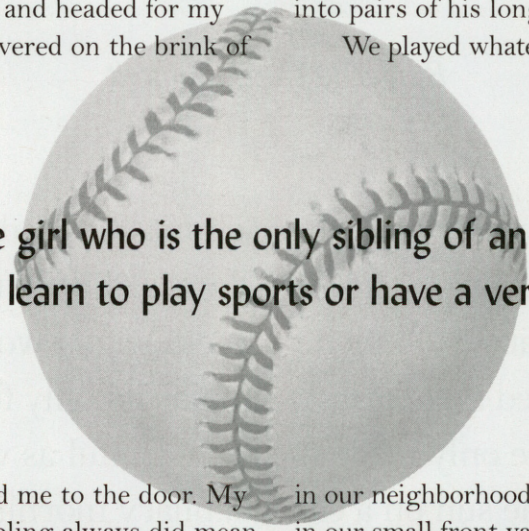
nice. I had forgotten how jarring the contrast between abstraction and reality can be. In the abstract, it had seemed like such a wonderfully logical idea. I was embarking on a major baseball research project and preparing to teach a new class, Baseball and American Popular Culture, with history colleague Terry Gottschall. I had loved baseball and had played it and its surrogates since third grade. It made sense to grab this opportunity to experience baseball from the inside. Pretty straightforward, right? Right.

I felt alone, at the ends of the earth, as I waited for the hotel shuttle. Arriving at the hotel, I was too groggy to face future teammates for a while, so I slipped through the check-in line and headed for my suite, intent on sleep. Just as I hovered on the brink of

Giants play. We sat in the right centerfield seats, and Willie Mays made a basket catch near us. It didn't matter how many future Hall of Famers were on the field that day—I had eyes only for Willie Mays, who, I maintain, is the best all-around talent ever to play the game. And he clearly loved it.

Our future was settled. Randy and I had to have baseball uniforms. We drooled over the beautiful kids' baseball outfits in the S&H green stamp catalog. If only.... But we knew we could never save that many stamps. We swallowed our disappointment and made do with the best we had: Randy's old flannel pajama bottoms, the ones with the fighter jets on them, tucked into pairs of his long white socks.

We played whatever variants of baseball would work



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consciousness, a loud knock jolted me to the door. My rollaway bed. Being a younger sibling always did mean getting the short end of the stick, didn't it? I reminded myself. Then real, grateful slumber. "RIIIIIING" sang the phone fifteen minutes later. "I'll be there in about an hour!" my brother's voice was merry. OK, whatever. Maybe I can sleep on the way home.

I also admitted to myself that if it weren't for my brother, Randy, I wouldn't have been much of a baseball or softball player. An introverted little girl who is the only sibling of an athletic older brother will either learn to play sports or have a very lonely life. I've often wondered how my brotherless friends learned to play.

My first baseball-like memory occurred when my dad took my brother to see the King and His Court softball barnstormers, featuring Eddie Feigner. I was not included and felt terribly left out. Maybe it was a father-son bonding moment, or maybe I was too young (second grade), or maybe girls weren't expected to enjoy such things (my mom found spectator sports a boring alternative to actual play), or maybe our family could only afford two tickets.

Life improved, though, the next year when my dad included me in a trip to San Francisco to see the

in our neighborhood streets in Campbell, California, or in our small front yard in front of large windows. When I was ten we moved to Massachusetts. It was lovely, and I didn't miss anything about California except Willie Mays. I had never heard of the Red Sox, didn't know that once upon a time they had been the best team in baseball, that they had once owned Babe Ruth. All I knew was that they were perennial cellar dwellers saddled with unpronounceable names.

"Willie Mays" was such a perfect baseball name—"Willie" crisp and full of fun, plus a beautiful one-syllable last name that evoked "amaze." Who knew how to spell "Yastrzemski"? Who would want to? "Conigliaro" was a little better—at least it was phonetic, and it rhymed with "arrow" and other cool words, and "Petrocelli" sounded like pasta. Still, who cared?

Little did I know that after a ninth-place finish in 1966 the Red Sox would roar back to take the American League pennant on the last day of the season in 1967, against 100:1 odds. Yaz would win the Triple Crown, and Tony Conigliaro would excel in home run hitting before a beanball sent his tragic career into permanent decline in August.

It was an incredible story. Just as incredible was the way it knit together fractious New Englanders, including those old enough to remember some spectacular flops after the Red Sox sold Babe Ruth to the Yankees in 1920. It knit together our eighth grade class—giggling boys, preening girls, our humorless math teacher—with fierce loyalty.

It was bigger than baseball, bigger than sport, as large as life. It was shared grief and triumph, brotherhood, sisterhood, and the hope of fulfillment that returned and will return every spring, even after the ball bounced between Bill Buckner's legs in 1986 or slid wrong off Pedro Martinez' long fingers in 2003. Baseball, especially baseball in the context of a perennially lost cause, is about passion, ritual, expectation.

Would those shared bonds get me through a week of intense play with my brother and fifty-five men I had never met? I severely doubted it Sunday afternoon. We exercised our option to drive out to the Red Sox spring training facilities so we could learn our way around and practice putting on our uniforms so we wouldn't look like dorks on the first day of camp. The Red Sox spring training facility has four fields arranged in a square, a separate exhibition field named for longtime coach Eddie Popowski, a structure full of batting cages, many practice pitching mounds, and a large training building. The team plays spring training games in a stadium a few miles away.

The training building has a large weight room, a vast trainer's room with rubdown tables and several whirlpool baths, a coaches' locker room, and a cavernous room with about 150 lockers, home to all the campers except me. I was given the full run of the umpires' locker room.

My quavering spirit steadied when I stepped into my locker room. There was my name and a Red Sox emblem above my locker, and all my things were neatly arranged: the navy wool cap with an ornate red "B" sat on the high shelf; the navy blue Red Sox T-shirt hung from a wire hanger on the bar with the immaculate white home uniform, red piping outlining the shirt and pant legs, the quaint old lettering of "RED SOX" on the front of the jersey, the enormous shiny silky "25" on the back.

(I picked Tony Conigliaro's number because I could personally identify with his brief, tragic career. Although I didn't have the requisite talent to waste into tragedy, I knew my career would be brief. I could never aspire to

the sterling perfection of Carl Yastrzemski's "8" or Ted Williams's "9").

Also in my locker were the gray traveling jersey with "BOSTON" on the front and "AAMODT" and "25" on the back; the spiffy navy blue leather belt; the white sanitary socks and the genuine article, the authentic Red Sox stirrup socks (why don't big leaguers wear them anymore?) with red on the lower part and two horizontal white stripes alternating with navy blue at the top. There was a strap to hold it all together when they did the daily laundry. Cool. I had a locker with my name on it.

Monday morning we all gathered at 6:30 for breakfast. If I hadn't been so focused on my own worries, I would have realized that everyone was nervous. The best part of my week happened when I got on the van to the ball field and the driver, an old Red Sox hand, asked, "Terrie, did you used to play on the Silver Bullets?" (a talented professional women's barnstorming baseball team that played a few seasons in the early 1990s).

"No—I wish!" Yikes! Maybe they expect me to be good!

Overcome with dread, I walked into my locker room, took the folding chair out of my locker, sat down, pulled on all the various layers of socks, fiddled around trying to tuck my oversize T-shirt and the long-tailed jersey smoothly into the pants so it wouldn't make my stomach stick out any further, put on the cap, grabbed my bag of gloves, and sidled into a corner of the big locker room for the obligatory kangaroo court.

As near as I could tell, the kangaroo court was designed to shrivel various fears and trepidations through a combination of bravado, self-deprecating humor, ritual male display, masked anxiety, and a nonstop stream of Viagra jokes, a fixation that vaguely puzzled me. What would a locker room full of women act like, I wondered. Though somewhat bewildered, I was quietly relieved that my presence didn't seem to inhibit their fun.

The coaches divided us into four alphabetical groups for tryouts, meaning I couldn't tag along after my big brother, the way I had when I started first grade, and dread again overwhelmed me. To make matters worse, our first assignment was



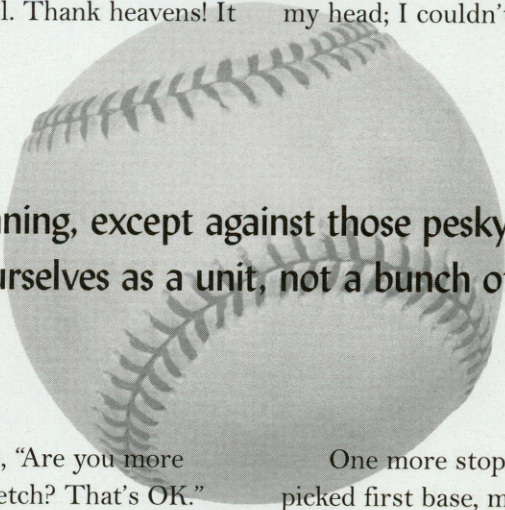
the pitcher's mound. I had never even stood on one. We played catch while we waited for everything to start, and I kept dropping the ball.

I felt so stupid in my uniform. What a dork! What if I threw my pitches in the dirt? The mound looked at least five feet high. I hung back as long as I could while Luis Tiant (perhaps the best pitcher alive who is not in the Hall of Fame) instructed eager pitchers and Rich Gedman (the steady, unflappable catcher of the tragic 1986 Red Sox) showed players how to catch without breaking their fingers.

Finally, unavoidably, it was my turn. Rich Gedman caught me himself, not wanting to pair an utterly inexperienced pitcher with an equally inept catcher. I made a sort of windup and threw the ball. Thank heavens! It

had hurt my hands like crazy. Baseball camp, thankfully, used wooden bats only. There is nothing more satisfying than the solid "chunk" of hickory against horsehide, or, in the unalliterative present, ash against cowhide. But the bats! (The camp had promised to provide bats.) They were all 36-ounce monsters! Didn't anyone remember that Stan Musial made it to the Hall of Fame using a 31-ounce bat? I feebly waved at the mechanical pitches, finally managing a weak grounder to shortstop on my tenth, and last, pitch. My day was not going well.

Then it was time for outfield drills. Reid Nichols and Dick Berardino hit us grounders and flies. My grounder was soft and easy. My fly soared way over my head; I couldn't have caught it with a stepladder.



Our team kept winning, except against those pesky Gophers, and we began to think of ourselves as a unit, not a bunch of individuals.

didn't bounce! Luis Tiant observed, "Are you more comfortable throwing from the stretch? That's OK."

I thought to myself, let him call it the stretch if he wants to—I don't know what I'm doing! Let me throw my other four pitches and escape!

Incredibly, none of them went in the dirt and my hardest assignment of the week was done. The catching task was better—I could do that part. Tiant and Gedman were so kind. They treated all of our efforts with grace, and the men in my group were nice.

Then we moved on to the batting tryouts, aided by a pitching machine. I had tried to prepare for this moment, I really had. My colleague, business professor Andy Dressler, a women's fast-pitch softball coach, had run through some batting drills with me, the first time I had ever batted anything other than a slow-pitch marshmallow. I batted pretty well against Andy's machine, once I figured out how to swing fast enough after the ball whizzed out of the contraption about thirty-five feet away.

My aluminum bat had connected with most of the pitches with a firm, if annoying, "clink," but it

One more stop—infield drills. I strategically picked first base, my favorite playing position. Not many grounders, not much running or throwing. Several of us waited in line to take throws at first base. I caught a couple, chased a couple of wild throws, then inexplicably missed a throw entirely. It hit me in the shoulder. What a dork! I couldn't believe I had done that in front of all those people.

Thankfully it was time for lunch. We sat at picnic tables in a shady area outside and listened to the pros' stories. After some post-lunch stretching, it was time for a practice game with us still divided into our alphabetical teams. The coaches would finish their evaluations of us and carry out their player draft that evening. Rich Gedman and Rick Wise (pitcher of two no-hitters and one of the best-hitting pitchers ever) were my coaches. I got to play first for part of the game.



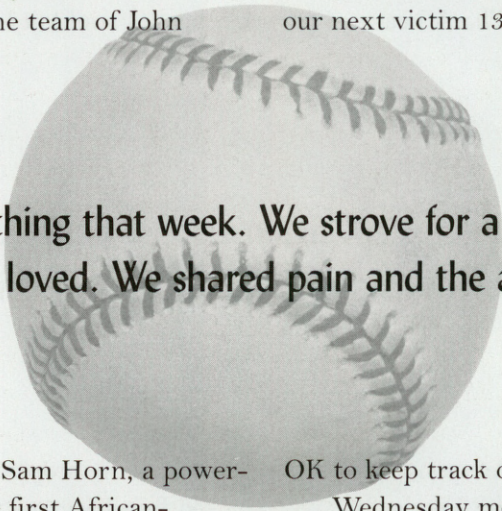
The afternoon was as marvelous as the morning was miserable. At last we could play. At last we could do what we came to do. A teammate had a nice lightweight bat he let me use. I got a hit my first time up and went 2 for 4. I managed to scoop a throw out of the dirt at first, even though I think my eyes were closed. We had so much fun. The score didn't mean anything—we just played for the pure joy of playing. If we were auditioning, I didn't even think about it. Coach Gedman was cool. I wanted to be on his team, and so did my brother (family members were always a package deal at the camp).

Although Gedman picked many of his alphabetic team, Randy and I ended up on the team of John

er were thirtyish and were excellent athletes. Our team also had the camp's only woman—me—and its only disabled player, a guy I'll call Ron.

Ron had multiple physical challenges. He swung the bat, fielded, and ran in slow motion. He wore thick glasses and saw only in spots. His body was even less suited to the dimensions of a standard baseball uniform than my female form was. But he played a special tenth position in the outfield and took his regular at-bat (all of our fourteen players batted in order throughout each game).

Tuesday morning we began a four-day series of eight games. Our trepidation dissipated quickly as we vanquished our first opponent 23 to 0. We rolled over our next victim 13 to 3. Wow, this was fun! Maybe it's



All of us shared something that week. We strove for a common goal involving an activity we loved. We shared pain and the agony of defeat.

Curtis, a left-handed pitcher, and Sam Horn, a powerful designated hitter who was the first African-American ever taken by the Red Sox in the first round of the draft. Randy and I wondered what our team would be like. Gedman's team, the Gophers, was young—young, that is, considering campers had to be at least thirty.

Our team, Curtis's Comets, was—well—diverse. One gentleman, who had done a Boston radio show with Red Sox standout Johnny Pesky in the 1940s, was our first base coach. Our oldest player was seventy-two. He had been selected to the Senior Softball Hall of Fame and played two hundred baseball and softball games every year. Another player, sixty-seven, was one of our most consistent hitters. Our regular catcher was fifty-nine and unbelievably agile—one day he caught two seven-inning games. When he got tired on other days, the sixty-seven year old took over.

Our team had its own resident dentist, a guy who donated his time to check out tobacco-chewing baseball players for mouth cancer (and try to get them to stop using smokeless tobacco), and was one of our most effective pitchers. Our shortstop and center field-

OK to keep track of the score!

Wednesday morning was a day of reckoning. We met the other undefeated team, Gedman's Gophers, in a contest to determine camp bragging rights and, perhaps, the eventual champion. I started the game at first base (I believe I started all but one game there), and an intense, highly competitive contest followed.

It was exciting and fun and a little scary. I felt a bit over my head, playing baseball at such an intensely competitive level. I clung to my first base position, hoping I wouldn't do something too stupid, secretly wishing they would substitute another player in the fifth inning, as they often did, but not wanting to quit. The coaches left me in the entire game. I'll never know why. Maybe the game was so exciting they just forgot.

We had superb pitching and managed to stay ahead until late in the game, when one of our pitchers faltered, allowing four runs and putting the Gophers one run ahead. Our coaches told us not to worry, that we had another inning and could catch up. We couldn't figure out why the other team started yelling and jumped on top of each other, forming a pile of bodies

on the infield. What was the matter? Turned out the game was over, our coaches were an inning off (the rest of us had been too excited to keep track), and that one-run margin ended up being the difference in the camp championship.

As the week wore on, our aging bodies protested. Hamstrings zinged all around me. The worst victims were the fortysomething men, who tried to play like thirty year olds and paid dearly for it. Our older players took care of themselves and ran at speeds they knew wouldn't hurt them. The amount of time spent conditioning (or not conditioning) before camp became obvious.

It's so hard to get ready to play baseball in Florida when you live in a cold climate. My aerobic preparation was running in the early morning pitch dark and climbing on the Stair Master. I really tried hard to do the wind sprints regularly, but I wish I had done more. The weight training routines were more feasible—after all, they were indoors—but available time was always a problem. I tried to do the stretching routines every day—I had been warned it was the most important part of preparation—but I wish I had done them five times a day.

Throwing was also hard to do in the winter. My children, Alex and Erica, helped with that until the season got too cold and dark; after that my colleagues Dan Lambertson and Sheila Meharry played catch with me in the gym.

I was fortunate not to have any major muscle pulls, but by Wednesday night I was really sore. Sore legs, sore ribs (which caught an errant fastball that took my breath away, brought tears to my eyes, and left a purple/yellow/green baseball-size bruise; "I'll never ask again about a hit batsman, 'Why doesn't he just get out of the way?'" I confided to Sam Horn, who roared with laughter at my naive comment), and a sprained thumb that left both sides of my right hand black and blue, urging my pain-avoidance mechanism to strike out as often as possible.

I sat too long Wednesday evening and could hardly walk. I hurt so badly! Maybe my ribs are cracked—how can I stagger through two more days? It seemed so ludicrous I started giggling, then doubled over laughing. It hurt so badly to laugh. Fortunately, I learned that a brisk two-mile walk Thursday and Friday mornings made me feel a lot better, and I found myself pinch running for some of my more maimed teammates.

Our team kept winning, except against those pesky

Gophers, and we began to think of ourselves as a unit, not a bunch of individuals. Our shortstop was magnificent. He made us all look good. His bullet throws made my job easy. Our sixty-seven year old banged out line drive hits almost every time he came to bat. In spite of pitched blows to his helmet and forearm (pitches we were sure he never saw), Ron, or "Ronnie," as everyone started to call him, hit a couple of excellent line drive singles. My brother robbed the Gophers' best player of a home run.

Our pitchers seemed to get better and better. The seventy-two year old pitched. The stocky blackjack dealer used a hilarious delivery that unconsciously parodied Luis Tiant in 1975. They were terrific. Our fifty-nine year old catcher would bellow in his New England accent in the seventh inning, "Three outs 'til beeah!" (or root beer, as the case may be), and we would stroll back to the clubhouse in our sweaty, red clay-streaked uniforms, wondering why anyone would ever want to do anything else.

The spirit in the entire camp was wonderfully supportive. Luis Tiant, bless his heart, told me I had a nice swing. A dermatologist on one of the other teams made sure we all wore sunscreen and played catch with Ronnie every morning. Sam Horn talked quietly one day about how painful it was to be a black player in Boston in the early 1980s. Besides his bravado, hilarious bluster, and trash talk (he went after umpires and opponents as the occasion demanded), Sam had a soft spot in his heart for underdogs. He bragged about Ronnie regularly in Kangaroo Court and made a moving speech about him at the closing banquet, bringing the entire crowd to their feet.

I will always remember Friday, my last day in camp. The sun was still low in the morning sky when we went out on the damp grass to stretch our creaky bodies. Our flock of fifty-seven players looked resplendent in their white uniforms. I don't think I ever wore a uniform before, except for my forest green Pathfinder skirt and blouse. I had been averse to military uniforms in the Vietnam era and hadn't thought about them one way or another since. But it was cool to wear a uniform with my fellow players, carrying out an activity we enjoyed.

When our two games of the day were over and we had finally defeated the Gophers (our records were

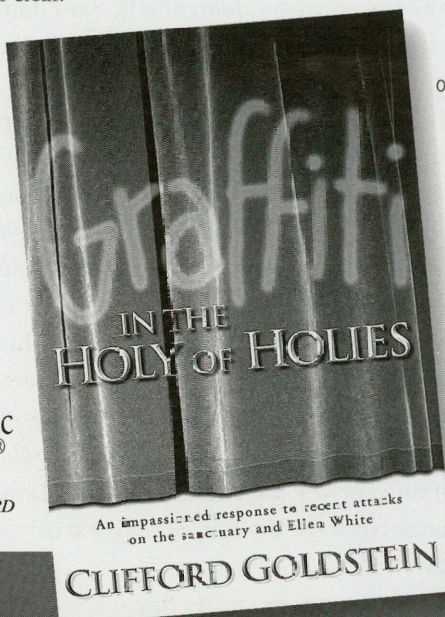


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identically 6-2 but they beat us twice), John Curtis called us all together and made a little speech about how much he appreciated having me on the team. I have no idea why he wanted to do that, but it was very sweet. All of my teammates were gracious and kind.

I wandered around outside the clubhouse, sat on Nomar Garciaparra's bench, and chatted with the elderly man who adjusted and repaired baseball gloves, talked with the wife of the orthopedist camper who examined my black and blue hand, and generally avoided going into the locker room and taking off my uniform for the last time. I wouldn't wear it again unless I was with my teammates. A person running around in a uniform by himself or herself is a dork. A whole team in uniform, despite what Sandlot would lead you to believe, is totally, unbelievably, eternally cool.

All of us shared something that week. We strove for a common goal involving an activity we loved. We shared pain and the agony of defeat. We learned about each other's families and lives. We talked about our kids incessantly. We pinched ourselves now and then to make sure we were really awake, really in warm, sunny Florida, really wearing our heroes' uniforms and occupying their space. We talked about our upcoming reunion games in Fenway Park in June. We cared for each other.

"You know," Randy said after it was all over, "I can't believe how nice everyone was to Ronnie. I bet they were nicer to him than people would have been in church."

I thought about that on the long ride home. Part of the reason it takes two days to get to Walla Walla on the weekend is that it involves many hours spent in a gulag called the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. I escaped to the nicest spot there—the meditation chapel—and tried to explain to myself why the experience had meant so much to me.

Was Randy right? Were they nicer to Ronnie than they would have been in church? Perhaps. Maybe in church there is too much at stake. Eternal life and salvation and the burdens of transmitting the right orthodoxy to the world can make people uptight, self-righteous, and cranky. What would it take to get a church full of people to be as loving, as supportive, as tenderly united toward a common goal as our motley bunch of baseball players? Heaven?

Terrie Dopp Aamodt is a professor of history and English at Walla Walla College.