

## Sacramento Solons: My Imaginary Game

Sitting on a foot stool in a corner of the darkened living room, hunched over to the point that my ear almost touched the cloth of the radio face, I listened intently, hoping, praying that my beloved Solons would make a ninth inning comeback – they don't, a two-out long fly ball caught over the shoulder in deep center field and the winning run is left on second base, the game is over. I'm crushed! With tears welling up, I try to contain my emotions but mother notices. "If you are going to cry every time the Solons lose, I am not going to let you stay up anymore and listen to the games." This time, I think she means it.

This is 1946, I am twelve years old. How could this triple-A minor league baseball game have been such an emotional and heart-breaking experience for me?

Writing about this now, 60 baseball seasons removed, this not-so-isolated emotional occurrence is even more pathetic: these baseball games were sheer fantasies, only the final score was real. The crack of the bat, the roar of the crowd, the hitter digging in at the plate, the pitcher staring in and shaking off the catcher's sign, and the manager charging onto the field to argue the tag with the umpire – all made up, all a fantasy created by the radio announcer. The embarrassing reality is I shed childhood tears about a baseball game that was conjured up by a media company to sell among other things, sausages and tamales.

True, the Solons played the league game, but the pitch-by-pitch recreation was based upon a telegraphic wire shorthand report that chronicled each play or pitch as the game progressed: "fled out to left", "called third strike", "stolen base, safe at second", "close play at first, called out," and so forth. The KFBK radio announcer, ensconced in a small studio in Sacramento hundreds of miles from the game itself, created the sound of the bat, provided typical baseball color commentary and played canned crowd noise, including typical baseball field chatter. I knew nothing of this. Using the announcer's descriptive words and the urgency in his voice, I could visualize every pitch, every nuance of the batter's stance, and I could follow the flight of the ball, especially the long doubles in the gap to right and left centerfields that might be stretched into triples. I hung on his every word.

Was my mother aware of the make-believe nature of these radio games? What about my father? If so, they never punctured the rapt seriousness with which I

listened to the game. Surely, they would have said something. Or were they simply waiting for me to outgrow a childhood phase, like Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy? Years later, reading a newspaper article, I discovered the truth about these fantasy games, but by that time the Solons were defunct, the franchise relocated to another city, and the stadium property developed into a big box discount store. I don't remember my reaction, most likely I had none. I have never devoted much time to retrospection. I was still young, there was no need to live in the past.

My childhood life centered around sports, especially baseball, and the entertainment it provided me. I taught myself to play by watching and imitating older kids, attending Sunday semi-pro games in our town, and reading the sports sections of newspapers and magazines or watching the sport newsreels at the Saturday matinee and one time, I found a how-to book at the library. I studied every baseball photograph: how the player wore his mitt, how he gripped and positioned the bat, how he wore his uniform and fashioned the bill of his cap, how the pitcher gripped the ball across or along the seams, and how the catcher cocked the ball by his ear to make a perfect throw to second. I played incessantly – playing catch with neighborhood friends, fielding ground balls thrown at me by my father, catching pop flies, and swinging a bat. A hometown semi-pro player once told me he swung a bat at imaginary pitches a hundred times a day to develop his eye and coordination – and so did I.

Growing up in a California rural town in the 1940's – one urban square mile in size with less than three thousands residents – there were limited entertainment possibilities for pre-teen children. TV was years away, there was only one radio in the house to be shared by all, and just one movie theatre in town but only the Saturday matinees held out any hope of getting permission to go and the extra money for popcorn. Kids, boys especially, played outside and made up their own entertainment using their imagination. My first choice was baseball, I never tired of it.

Times have changed. I see my grandchildren enrolled at early ages into sports leagues – snappy uniforms, coaches, referees, league rules, professional-grade equipment, refreshments, clapping parents shouting out encouragement and instructions onto the field. If the child shows unusual or promising aptitude, and the parents are game, the organized sport can be played year-round.

TV, almost synonymous with professional and college sports, is available around the clock. How-to sports videos at every library, sports camps and day

clinics everywhere available for a price and deemed advisable for children of parents who harbor sports ambitions.

I do not pine for a return of a 1940's childhood, nor do I challenge the modern day highly organized sports programs for children, in which my own children now participate and promote. Times change, there is nothing to be done about it. But I cannot help but wonder if there is much room left for imagination, or whether a pre-teen can anymore truly savor the heartfelt joy of victory or even shed a painful tear of disappointment for their favorite team playing an imaginary game?