

When the game ends, all that is left are imaginary runners

Imaginary runner on third.

Remember that? Seems when we were kids we were always shy a few players for baseball, softball or kickball. If we ran out of batters, we'd have the runner who was farthest along the bases come up to hit again. That gives you an imaginary runner.

Of course, an imaginary runner can then lead to imaginary outs or imaginary runs, which result in real fights and real punches. Did the imaginary runner tag up on the fly ball? Was he forced at home? Did he run out of the basepath? With the imaginary runner, you never know.

How simply our imaginations projected youthful ambitions into goals we would never achieve as adults. At some point we all become imaginary runners, never sure whether with diligence we might have scored, or whether we lacked the physical stuff necessary to enjoy even moderate glory.

Somewhere, as most of us faded from serious competition and took our seats in the bleachers, the heroes of our generation



roger brigham in my time

emerged. Athletes blessed with rarer gifts, competitors glowing with a purer fire. Upon their chests we pinned our hopes like medals of honor, and their victories and defeats became ours.

Yet even for heroes come final victories followed by no more. The last battle is won or lost and then its warriors yield the field to a new generation of strife and achievement. In the end, even heroes are removed from the game and become imaginary runners.

The star pitcher for our high school team was Clint, a dashing young fellow whose fastball lured scouts from the majors. Clint's departure from the bases began with an injury, the result of an untutored throwing motion too stressful for his arm to bear. The scouts moved on.

Clint could have sat in the bleachers then but chose instead to continue. He learned how to throw all over again, pitching with streaks of brilliance for Ohio State, but his consistency never returned. When the fastball left, he joined the Navy.

Clint had two dreams: to pitch and to fly. Having done one, he grabbed the chance to do the other, learning to fly jets for Uncle Sam. Last time I saw him he waggled his wings in a farewell gesture while taking off over the flat Ohio countryside.

The Navy moved him about the country awhile before stationing him in the Mediterranean. He and his friends toured the blue and built lives that were perhaps not remarkable except that they were not compromised. They

were not sitting in the stands.

Occasionally his new friends died. A plane goes into the water and sometimes you never know why, the reasons swallowed up in waves, the mystery sinking to the bottom of the sea. Good pilots, young men, out of the blue, into the blue.

Thus Clint lived his life and was married — no longer a ballplayer, but for those of his generation who knew him, a hero in his own right. Thus he lived till the day his plane landed on a carrier and continued over the side, sinking into the water.

I don't think of Clint like that. I think of Clint as the fellow learning to pitch and learning to fly, always willing to reach further and work harder to achieve those youthful ambitions. The imaginary runner who, when asked to leave the base, came up to hit once more.

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