

From Pinstripes to Pinstripes

By Lawrence Savell

It's 7 o'clock on a Tuesday night. I could be at my desk, contributing to the deterioration of my corneas by searching for the two typos hidden among the fifty pages of the "brief" still warm from the laser printer that produced it. I could be at a LEXIS terminal, trying to figure out why my search phrase has uncovered 96 percent of the contents of the *Federal Reporter*. I could even be home, looking forward to paying off some of the REM debt I have accumulated since shortly before the 1982 bar exam. But instead, I am standing on an uneven surface of sand, rocks, and glass fragments, waiting for a once-spherical projectile to streak in my direction. Deep within the tortfeasor's paradise that is Central Park, I am among the other Walter Mittys who strive to achieve glory and avoid injury as a participant in the Lawyers' Softball League.

Summer Schedule

The league's schedule runs from early May until early September, with each team scheduled to play approximately a dozen games during the season. [Although there are rumors that playoff games are played, this is only hearsay and outside my personal knowledge.] The actual number of games that a team plays is dependent upon a number of factors, such as the weather and whether a quorum of players remembered to bring their gloves and shoes to work that morning. Furthermore, several games each season end up being cancelled to allow those people who tolerate classical music or opera to hear such works from great distances while being bitten by bugs and lying on the ground.

During the afternoon before a game, each team's captain is transformed into a cross between a weatherman and a diplomat. First, he continuously has to assess the atmospheric conditions (i.e., the chance of rain) in order to inform his players whether or not they should disrobe on schedule. Second, the captain must be prepared to engage in sensitive telephone negotiations with his counterpart, and be able to sense when such opponent's concern with cloud formations actually reflects the opponent's having an insufficient number of available players.

Assuming no act of God or shortage of manpower, the players at the appropriate time adjourn to their offices (or the nearest lavatory, if such office contains either glass walls or an officemate of the opposite gender) to dress for the 5:30 or 7 P.M. contest. Player turnout is notoriously worse for the 5:30 games, unless a gullible time-logging receptionist can be convinced that one is headed for a research session in the Bar Library where the dress code has recently been modified to require silk-screened T-shirts and faded sweatpants.

Good for Business?

Once out of the office, the players are whisked to the arena in one of the League's many railway cars, colorfully decorated by hand for the occasion. Normally, a team is accompanied on its ride by hundreds of supporters, constantly shoving forward to get a closer look at their heroes. Obviously, the chances for developing new business are excellent in this situation, since a prospective client cannot avoid being impressed by lawyers who travel in packs, carry dusty duffel bags filled with bats, and dress as if they are attending summer camp.

Generally speaking, the fields on which League games are played do not have fences. Thus, even a home run has to be legged out at a rigorous pace; a "trot" is never attempted before reaching third base. Worse, should a neophyte mistakenly choose to emulate Reggie Jackson and pause following his swing to stare proudly at his blast, he runs the sizeable risk of ending up with a 300-foot single.

It is obvious that one reason for the absence of fences is the cross-fertilized design of the softball field areas, with many diamonds located in close proximity to or even overlapping each other. This may be a cause for concern to the second baseman on Field 2 who realizes somewhat belatedly that he is the left field foul pole for Field 8.

Although the League is called the "Central Park Law-

yers' Softball League," not all of its games are played there. Among other locales are (1) the fields off Riverside Drive in the low 100s on the Upper West Side, where the glare of the setting sun reflecting off the Hudson River is guaranteed to blind any infielder foolish enough to look in the direction of home plate; and (2) those at Grand Street on the Lower East Side off the FDR Drive, where the tension of a closely-fought game is frequently broken by the comic relief of a foul pop caroming off windshields of cars swerving along the highway.

Rules of the Game

The rules of softball as played in the League appear to have resulted from a rather curious mark-up of the rules of baseball. For example, under one of softball's "Catch-22" laws, a runner cannot steal; nevertheless, he may be picked off base. Yet it is clear that the general intent of the rules is to let participating lawyers vent their accumulated frustrations, i.e., air out the heavy artillery. The rules essentially prohibit a pitcher from delivering anything that the eldest partner emeritus could not whack for extra bases. Moreover, the ammunition itself is "loaded": the rules require that a new (and thus dry and round) ball be put into play twice during the game.

Of course, the bats are not the tree limbs our fathers employed back in the days before Gatorade and housing allowances: the standard implement used in modern, high-tech softball is an aluminum bat, which, at the time of purchase, was brightly colored and bore a serene, pastoral designation such as "Crusher," "Slammer," or "Whomper." As a result, instead of the natural "crack" of a wooden bat hitting horsehide, one discerns the metallic "ping" of a pipe striking a softball. I assume it is only a matter of time before I hear someone compliment a successful softball hitter for getting "good aluminum" on the ball.

Between innings in the field, an experienced player will never even consider attempting to use one of the public water fountains (assuming one can be found within the same zip code of the diamond), since he is well aware that such devices usually have been out of operating condition since the Lindsay Administration. Instead, he will rely on the latest embodiment of the entrepreneur: the roaming purveyors of unfamiliar-branded beer and soda packed inside their insulated shopping carts. These hardy souls are fixtures in the softball community; nevertheless, I fear the day when some aggressive marketing company invades their turf with an army of prepped-out vendors, bearing Perrier and Tofutti in squeeze bottles.

Hazards in Twilight

Ordinarily, League games are seven innings long or, in the case of 5:30 starts, less than that if 7 o'clock rolls around beforehand. Seven o'clock games have an added element of excitement, known to the cognoscenti as the "Wrigley Field Effect." Like their equally-anachronistic counterpart in Chicago, the diamonds used by the League generally lack lights. The rules provide that "[t]he umpire shall determine when and if darkness makes continuance of the game impossible" — authority generally exercised two innings after the outfielders have lost the ability to locate a ball in flight.

Once the game is over, it is customary for the victorious team to approach and comfort the vanquished in a manner reminiscent of the ritual following the Stanley Cup series in hockey. Invariably, the members of the winning team will reach out their hand, smile, and say "Nice game," regardless of the fact that you had the three grounders hit to you ricochet off your groin and you went 0-for-4 at the plate.

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As the song goes, "You always hurt [or, in this case, poke fun at] the one you love." The Lawyers' Softball League provides me and the hundreds of ersatz Darryl Strawberry's like me with the opportunity for athletic redemption, and maybe even a little glory, momentary in time but lasting (and, often, expanding) in memory. A clean hit or a diving catch can do much to make the prospect of returning to the real world beyond the trees come the next morning a little more tolerable. As one of life's few activities that are free, healthful, and involve wearing clothes, playing softball in my mind ranks up there with Maalox cocktails and regular visits to the internist as among the basic necessities for surviving life as a lawyer in New York.

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