

Pig Tails & Pony Tails

There's a clearing in the tree-covered hills east of Lake Placid, New York just large enough to hold a softball field. A hundred years ago it might have been a make-shift rodeo, a stock yard, or a feeding place for wild critters of all shapes and sizes. But every Saturday morning, Cedar Hills Park gets chalked and ready for softball gladiators of all ages.

Like any good hideaway, Cedar Hills Park isn't all that easy to find. Only local folks know how to get here - and most of them aren't talking. From the nearby road, you wouldn't even know the park is near. All you'd see are trees. Majestic Evergreen Pines and Douglas Firs, towering high above the players, coaches and parents who make it such a fine place to spend a weekend afternoon. Baseball legends aren't born here. No Mo Vaughns, Roger Clemens, Cal Ripkens or Mike Piazza's ever graced this place.

But it is home to Pig Tails and Pony Tails, a softball league for energetic, girls right around 12 years old. They're sometimes graceful and sometimes slow as they chase their way through bright-hot summer days. Win or lose, strike or single, they always, always try. No major league contracts await them, no

adoring fans, or big league endorsements. They play simply and full of spirit, for the pure, enjoyable fun of it all.

I remember one particular Saturday at Cedar Mills Park more than any other. The Sunset Valley Leopards and Green Garden Rangers were meeting in their second game of the season. A small group of parents and friends gathered to watch on a small hill behind home plate. With a very wide, very encouraging strike zone, I umpired my way through the game and kept things moving along. I only had to remind one Sunset Valley Leopard and one Green Garden Ranger that pierced earrings DID constitute jewelry - and could NOT be worn in the batter's box.

Meg, the Leopards' catcher, was a dainty little fifty-pounder, with a petite throw to match. Inning after inning, I watched from over her youthful little shoulder as she chased tipped balls, foul balls, and wild pitches with major-league intensity. Johnny Bench himself would have been proud.

With oversized mask and clumsy padding, little Meg did her best to chase each pitch. That seemed to satisfy all the coaches, players, and me. We

offered a steady stream of encouragement to pitcher and catcher both, but one spectator wasn't pleased at all.

"WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH YOU?" I heard over my right shoulder as one ball passed by. Even with her catcher's mask on, I was sure Meg heard every word. Still, she refused to acknowledge the heckler behind her.

The same inning, one of the Green Garden Rangers bunted. Meg leaped up from behind the plate but her throw to first was way off mark.

"NOT EVEN CLOSE! What are you - BLIND?" the same woman shrieked.

An inning later, Meg made a great catch at home and tagged a runner out. The small crowd cheered her on. But next inning, after letting a wild pitch no one could have handled roll to the backstop, the same angry voice rose above the crowd.

"Who taught you to PLAY, ANYWAY?"

Meg collected her mask from the dirt and settled in for the next pitch.

Peering over her shoulder, I could see tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Timeout," I barked, and called both coaches over. "Carl... Tim... we have a fine game going here and a catcher playing her heart out, but she can't see a thing with tears running down her face. Do either of you know the jerk in the crowd who's giving this kid such a bad time of it?"

"Sure don't," said Carl.

"I don't either," said Tim, with eyes turned downwards.

"Well listen guys, I have to keep my eye on the game, but the next time this lady opens her mouth, whoever she is, I want you to point her out to me so I can get her off the hill and away from these players."

"You got it, ump."

It didn't take long. In the very next inning, as she chased a foul ball outside the third base line, Meg stumbled on a loose patch of dirt and dropped the ball.

"GLASSES...said the voice. You need GLASSES!"

This time, I whipped around and spotted her - the person behind the voice. She was sitting on a lawn chair behind the Leopard's dugout. She was in her mid thirties, wearing a neatly pressed pair of jeans and loose summer blouse.

"TIMEOUT," I called and walked off the field, right over to her. "Mam, I need to ask you to leave the game."

"LEAVE THE GAME. You can't do that!" she exclaimed.

"The rule book says I can... and Sunset's catcher, who's had tears running down her face for the better part of the game thanks to your comments, deserves better than what she's been hearing from you. I'd appreciate it very much if you'd leave."

"This is ridiculous, umpire... whatever your name is. I can say anything to that player I want."

"Not today, Mam, not during this game," I interrupted. Now please leave. I turned and left her standing there, walked back behind the plate and checked over my shoulder. She was gathering her things.

"You okay?" I said to Meg, who had new tears clinging to the streaking paths of smudged red dirt that clung to her face from an inning before.

"I'm okay," she replied as she watched the woman walk away.

"Do you know that lady?" I asked, following Meg's glance to the woman I had just spoken to.

"I do." Said Meg, wiping her face as the woman disappeared over the hill to the wooded paths beyond the edge of the clearing. "That's my Mom."

Mixing sports, children, and parents can create a roller coaster ride of emotion. In winning, some can lose. In losing, some can win.