**What Baseball Means To Me**

**By Ken Collins**

**For some people baseball is a boring game.**

**My guess is that "those" people are the ones who never played baseball other than on the playground in grade school, so they don't understand the complexities of the game and because of this - it's easier for them to criticize something they know nothing about.**

**Baseball has given me many skills I have needed to recover from my brain injury 39 years ago. On December 31, 1976, I ran head first into the side of Bob Brewer’s, Ford Pinto while riding Pat Moore’s snowmobile by Summit Lake, Oregon, at 3 a.m. My friends said I was going full speed and was catapulted from the snowmobile to the side of Bob’s parked car.**

**On impact, I broke my left jaw below my chin and rammed my right jawbone into my ear canal, separated my skull completely (cap fracture), shattered most of my teeth and fractured a rib. In the hospital the doctors couldn't set my jaw for two days because of brain swelling.**

**My hospital records show that I was in a Posey Jacket and wrist restraints all the time I was in the hospital. One day when I was in the bathroom I ranked out my catheter and a few days later was sent home with my parents because I started to get loose (3 times in 6 days). On my last day in the hospital I was found urinating in a planter in the hallway.**

**For my safety and the liability of the hospital, I was sent home with my family who were told if they couldn't handle me to put me in a nursing home. Luckily, my family spared me the fate that awaits many young people who sustain these types of injuries today: long term confinement to a nursing home, long term rehabilitation facility or state institution - unless they have good insurance, but when that runs out and they become “poor”, many will be forced to have the government pick up the tab.**

**The tab for my stay in the hospital was paid by welfare because the snowmobile I was on was uninsured, the car I ran into was uninsured and I didn’t have any insurance. When I awoke a month after the accident I came out of darkness through a fog to about six inches from the mirror in my parent’s bathroom picking the wires in my mouth that was wired shut because of my broken jaw.**

**I respect baseball and am grateful for the lessons it has given me.**

**I respect my brain injury because of the lessons I have learned and the obstacles I have overcome.**

**I played professional baseball in the 70’s before big money came into the game (and ruined it) so my rewards were being able to travel around the country in a bus, meet a variety of people, visit many towns and cities and gain many of lives experiences and the skills I would later need after my brain injury.**

**Baseball has played a major role in my rehabilitation and the way to judge my recovery.**

**After my brain injury I pitched on several semi-pro teams in Eugene/Springfield, Oregon, but things weren't the same. The first few years were very difficult because I didn't have the self-confidence and discipline it takes to be a good pitcher. I pitched on 4 teams in six years, played some softball from time to time but didn't have the ability to play at the level I could before my injury.**

**My self-confidence took about eight years to return and by now a Men's Senior Baseball League team - Eugene Giants - was being organized by some old semi-pro baseball teammates who wanted me to pitch on their team. I pitched and I got better. I got better and my self-esteem improved, and this gave me hope because I could see that I could do things I wasn't able to do the previous season.**

**Baseball also teaches you about poise.**

**When you are pitching and it’s the bottom of the ninth with no outs and the bases loaded and you have a one run lead - you have to throw strikes and get people out.**

**If you lose your poise it gives your opposition an advantage because you are becoming rattled and unable to concentrate on what you are there to do – keep the ball down – throw strikes – get ground balls - pitch to win!**

**It took persistence and perseverance to regain my poise. Baseball brought back the poise and self-determination that I have needed to continue with my recovery from the brain injury.**

**By pitching again, I got my pride back and was able to accomplish what I had done before my injury. I could see that I was getting better because I could start hitting the “spots” again and this took concentration and focus.**

**Concentration and focus are critical elements in regaining old skills and learning new ones. This improved my self-confidence and self-esteem even more. I could start seeing light at the end of the tunnel and this gave me hope.**

**Hope is something that gets eaten away during the recovery process.  It’s easy to give up hope and start blaming others when you don't see that you are getting better and the constant reminders of "how you used to be -and- who you are now" compounds our situation.**

**The loss of your old self and the isolation this can cause can be overwhelming and this makes it easy to give up hope and start blaming others for our problems.**

**In baseball when you start blaming your team mates for not making the plays behind you to win a game, things will go downhill fast from there.  There’s a good chance that because of this you will breakdown the harmony on the team that it takes to win. Because of this the team will have a harder time making the plays you will need to win the game.**

**When I played "organized ball" in the minor leagues for the Milwaukee Brewers for 5 seasons (4 regular seasons & a Winter Ball Instructional League) and a season in Santiago, Dominican Republic, I always ran more and worked harder than any of the other pitchers. I took pride in that and now that I could see that I was getting better this increased my self-determination and made me work out even harder.**

**Organized baseball also teaches you about learning "situations." Situations are what you practice during spring training and work on throughout the season. Thinking about these situations is when you have to think ahead and make the pitches it will take to "control the situation."**

**For example: with a runner on first - who is a threat to steal second and you have a left- handed hitter up - you have to know what pitches to make to the hitter to get a ground ball - make that pitch and hope your infielders make the play to get a double play so that you can get two outs - instead of having two runners on base - with no one out.**

**Learning situations is also about knowing how to relax during these stressful times. Being able to throw over ninety miles an hour and hit the spots from sixty feet - six inches (length from front of pitchers rubber to home plate) is very difficult and staying relaxed controls stress and also makes it easier to think and stay focused.**

**Baseball is also about controlling situations and thinking ahead.**

**Today, this is called mindfulness.**

**Mindfulness helps me stay calm and relaxed during stressful situations.**

**When pitching I had to focus and be relaxed because if I don't stay relaxed my muscles tightening up and my pitch wouldn't have any movement and "straighten out".**

**Pitches that straighten out are "flat" which makes the ball easier to hit and that’s why good pitchers stay relaxed and are harder to hit.**

**To stay relaxed I learned about "deep breathing" which keeps oxygen flowing to the brain so you can keep your muscles from tightening up in those stressful times. Deep breathing also helps with brain injury during stressful times when you can’t find the word you need to express yourself or remember someone’s name.**

**If you stay relaxed and don’t try so hard it will make it easier to recall their name or word.**

**While getting ready to pitch again in 1977, I had to set up a routine to go by.**

**Setting up a routine is a critical part of brain injury recovery too and helps to reduce stress. Setting up a routine also creates “structure” that helps us to control stress.**

**Stress is what triggers many of the problems we have after our brain injury i.e. alcohol, anger, drugs, etc. Controlling stress is very important because stress disrupts our ability to think straight, focus and stay on task.**

**We need to control stress so that the "fight or flight" response isn't triggered because once this happens it makes everything harder.**

**As part of my routine to become an effective pitcher again, I had to throw everyday but didn't always have someone to play catch with to work on my mechanics. Throwing strikes is more than just throwing the ball over home plate. The ability to throw strikes consistently comes from getting your body and arm in the right throwing position.**

**My tutor in all of this was my pitching coach, Al Widmar, who took me under his wing for four years with the Brewers. Al helped me break my delivery down so that my arm and body worked together so that every pitch would be a strike.**

**From there I fined tuned my delivery so I could hit the spots it took to throw pitches on the ‘black”. The black is the space between the dirt around the plate and the “white” of home plate and where you don’t want your pitch to end up. In professional baseball it’s called “no man’s land” because most pitches will become hits if you throw it over the middle of the plate.**

**Because I didn't have someone to throw with everyday I spent many long hours at the University of Oregon (U of O) track, throwing against the cement wall in back of the bleachers. I would start out close to the wall so the ball would come right back to me and then slowly increase the distance of my throws to where I would be “60 ft. 6 inches” throwing at spots on the wall that simulated home plate. I would then throw long (200 ft. or more) against the wall to make my arm stronger.**

**Not having someone to play catch with didn't stop me from throwing. Finding another use for the cement wall in back of the bleachers at the U of O track was just what I needed to fine tune my skills and get in shape.**

**Getting in shape that summer meant running 25 sets of stairs at a time. It meant doing 20 sets of pick-ups, and running at least ten, one hundred-yard sprints, and walking the curves on the U of O track.**

**Baseball and brain injury also teaches you about overcoming adversity and loss.**

**Because the professional baseball season is so long (140 games in the minors and over 160 in the majors – life is longer) you learn that a loss is just a loss and not the end of the season.**

**Every day is a new day and the adversity we feel because of memory loss, loss of friends, and our “old self” can become overwhelming if we let it. We must not be self defeated by these losses in our lives but self determined to get beyond them and move on. It takes hard work and perseverance to do this. You have to be motivated to get well and baseball was my motivation.**

**I could see I was getting better each year- this motivated me to work even harder. Getting in shape improved my discipline, self-esteem and self-confidence.**

**In 1995 our Men's Senior Baseball League team took the state championship. This was because we played as a team and had respect for each other. We had our differences (every team does), but we were a team.**

**Our team wasn't always the best team on the field but we won because we played as a team. We were un-selfish, we took pride in our ability to work together and look out for each other, when someone was having a bad game someone else would step up and make the play or get the hit when we needed it.**

**It's not about who you are on the team - it’s about how well you play on the team that matters. There is no “I” in TEAM. Being a team player always made me proud!**

**As you can see - life with a brain injury is a lot like baseball in many ways.**

**You have to look ahead and learn situations to succeed. Don’t set yourself up to fail. Think ahead and have insight - instead of hindsight. Impulsivity, short term memory loss and other issues are new situations we must learn how to deal with if we are going to become productive members of our communities.**

**Success is a journey and winning “life’s games” is possible if we work at it!**

**The road to recovery and journey back to life while living with a brain injury isn't always as smooth as we would like it to be and there are many pitfalls and obstacles we must overcome. We must stay relaxed to be able to think through these situations.**

**It took 13 years before I could start to smell again, 18 years before the numbness on my left finger and left little toe went away and 25 years before I could start to dream again when I slept. Baseball brought back the self-confidence I have needed to recover and I am just now getting my attitude back.**

**Life's infield and outfield are full of bad hops and miscalculations.**

**To overcome these we must be a team player to overcome this adversity and have the discipline, self-respect, self-determination, self-confidence, self-esteem, hope, motivation, poise, good work ethic and pride it will take - to put meaning and purpose into whatever we do.**

**We must always give 110%, and make every pitch "our best pitch" because it’s easy to become mediocre and when we are mediocre we will never be all that we can become.**

**Remember - the game of life isn't over until it's over.**

**Tomorrow is another day and a whole new game. Know the situations - learn from these experiences and practice what you have learned. Setting up a routine will help to reduce stress and create a structure to follow. Practicing these skills will improve your situation and make living with your brain injury easier.**

**That's what baseball means to me.**