

### **about more than baseball**

*For better or worse each child has an aspiration,  
a deep longing to become something greater than he or she is at the moment.*

Donald Graves

When the first batter stepped up to the plate the silence that surrounded the field was painful. It only lasted a few seconds, since it betrayed the anxiety we were trying so hard to hide from the boys. There was scattered applause, a self-conscious, "Let's go green," and Jimmy sent the first pitch flying towards the plate. Strike one. Cheers. Laughter. People gathered against the fence.

"I guess they'll be no sitting for this one," a mother offered as she joined the others.

The extra innings began at 5:00, the game suspended by darkness the night before when the teams remained tied at the end of the tenth inning. The winner of this game tonight would advance to the finals. The green team had won the championship seven years in a row and had a 14-1 record this summer. Their opponent, the Reds, were responsible for that one stunning loss the green's suffered the week before. A fluke, they thought. No one expected this close game. The Reds could taste the promise of an underdog victory. The greens simply had to win, everyone expected them to.

My son came to watch his good friend Matt. Matt approached before the game, sweat already forming across his upper lip as he paced with his new bat and freshly washed green uniform. He is a natural talent and a dedicated player, forgoing all other sports to concentrate on baseball. The rumor has it his father was once such a promising player, but his dreams were cut short with an injury. Matt is now the promise. Tonight he is nervous.

The green pitcher threw two more strikes and knocked out the first red player quickly. The second batter made it to first base. Jimmy is the pitcher, a student I had a year ago in eighth grade. He is quiet and gentle, a large kid with fine, blonde hair. He is all kindness, always polite, never a bad word for anyone. He is a gift to a classroom and I adore him. He has a talented, athletic older brother and a family history of athletic success. I can feel the pressure on him. I want him to do well tonight; I watch him eye his coach as he surveys the next player before him.

It is Torin. I love this kid. A student of mine for the last two years, Torin has grown from an awkward adolescent into a considerate and sensitive young man this year. He shared his excitement with me in the spring when he was chosen captain of this red Babe Ruth team. I know what baseball means to him. How can I choose a side in this game? They are all my kids.

Torin wrote a memoir for my class about playing in a baseball tournament three years before. It was his best piece of writing yet, with the tension building as the story reached the last inning, the last fly ball heading towards his glove. Only he dropped it. He had felt the loss of the entire game in his hands and it had taken him three years to

write that story. Here he stood again, with the weight of their season on his slight shoulders.

He stands tall and surveys the crowd and the field. I imagine he's writing his next story, smelling the leather in the glove poised inches behind him, feeling the sun melt his polyester shirt to his tanned back. He practices a strong swing and steps into the batter box. *Come on, Torin*, I plead silently. I'm a traitor standing here with these green parents, hoping this red batter will blast the ball with all he has.

He does. It is an impressive hit, above the head of the center fielder. Matt races to catch the bounce off the back boundary and quickly sends the ball to second base, holding Torin at first. Cheers on all sides. I watch Torin give a thumbs up to his teammate on second and smile.

My son turns to see if I noticed Matt's great play. "Yes," I nod, "Impressive."

The Reds manage to score soon after and put another man on base. There are errors by the green team in the infield, balls mishandled, nerves straining these kids to the breaking point. Torin is now on third base and with a quick infield hit the bases are loaded. Matt's mom lights up a cigarette and paces just behind the fence.

"Jesus," she says.

Walking up to the plate is a slightly built kid, his face shadowed by the helmet. I know the walk, I think, but I can't see.

"Who is that?" I ask a father nearby.

"Ethan Davis."

My heart sinks. Ethan with the bases loaded. No wonder his chest is thrust out before him as if to ward off the weight of this. He has too much to lose. He appears confident, ready. I search the crowd for his grandparents. I hope they are here. Ethan was a quiet, reluctant student when I first met him. We began to connect when he worked on a piece tracing his personal history. He struggled to tell the story of separating from his parents and moving here to live with his grandparents. He had tried his dad's house, then his mom's, then his dad's again. It was complicated and he was a struggling writer. One day he came back at lunch for another conference and said, "Mrs. Kittle, I have to get this right." It wasn't about the writing.

When he arrived in the valley he had joined every sports team he could, often riding his bicycle several miles to practice. He was a strong competitor; he never gave up. He had earned the respect of his teammates and cherished it. His final portfolio contained several short pieces about important games, but the piece we had first worked on together remained his favorite. Probably because he got it right; the story made sense. The reader understood why he had to move. I believe Ethan finally did as well.

He swung at the first pitch and missed. Yikes. I couldn't watch. I had to.

The pitcher eyed his father who gave him a thumbs up, "Another one just like that, Jimmy," he said.

Two balls, one strike. Ethan swung hard at the next and popped it up near the foul line, right in front of the plate. He waited to run, then started forward, as the catcher and pitcher moved in to catch it.

"Call it!" the coach yells. There was just a hint of desperation in his croaky voice.

The boys answer, "Got it!" as the ball nicks the edge of the catcher's mitt and hits the dirt between them. The catcher scrambles to snag it and tag the plate as he sends the ball towards second. Double play. From ruins to riches in a few seconds, Ethan hangs his head as walks towards the dug out. Damn.

In silence the teams change positions. The first green batter is Eddy, a small 12-year-old, half the size of some of his teammates. He is the last batter in their line-up, but the team has to start where they left off the night before. His mother was diagnosed with breast cancer this fall. She is our school secretary, her two children attend our school and her husband is a coach and study hall monitor. We have all agonized over the uncertainty. She told me she asked Eddy to cut the grass one afternoon soon after she heard, but to leave the Indian paintbrush still growing in the back field. When she looked out later he had cut a large heart around it. It was the only sign of what he was carrying.

He doesn't swing. He watches four pitches go by silently and takes his base as the crowd cheers.

I notice the pitcher and am relieved to not recognize him. They get the next batter out on a pop up in the infield, but this pitcher is struggling. He is kicking the dirt, trying to gain ground as William approaches the plate. William has struggled to fit in at school. He is young and nice looking, but exiled from almost everyone. I have never really understood why. He loves baseball and being a part of this team. They are winners. The count goes to 3-1, this pitcher still throwing far off the mark. William takes his base, as Jimmy heads to the plate, then curses in disgust. He throws the bat aside and jogs towards first. An intentional walk. I understand it is a smart strategy, but it feels unfair. Jimmy would have loved the chance to bring the runners in.

The bases are loaded. Matt steps forward. Cam cheers with the rest of the green crowd. Matt not only pitches near 70 mph, he has a batting average that all the boys envy. He has struck out once in the last two seasons. Last week he hit a game ending grand slam. The pitcher sends three balls across the plate. The count 3-0. Walking one in will tie this game, but a power hit would end it.

Strike one. Matt is surprised and steps away, then back quickly. He swings at the next, popping it up behind the backstop. The count now 3-2. The pitcher winds back and sends a beauty across the plate. I can't look. Unbelievably, it's a third strike and Matt must face the crowd as he heads to the dugout. The red crowd is jubilant, the green silent. Matt's mom walks away from the fence, his father and sister cling helplessly to its wire frame, not moving. My son stares, unbelieving.

Two outs and the bases are loaded. This will be it. Kenny steps up. I'm grateful I barely know him, although I feel like I do, since one of my girls spent the entire year hopelessly in love with his every move. She wrote about him nightly in her journal, poetry and letters and dreams. His mother is seated near the fence, fraying the woven edges of her lawn chair. Kenny swings at the first, watches two balls go by, then swings and misses again. He steps away for a moment and looks at the dirt, the count 2-2. The next pitch is high, easy to read, and the count moves to 3-2. We all breathe silently. I just can't stand it. One pitch.

I want them all to win.

The pitch comes in and Kenny swings, catching the ball low and sending it over the pitcher's head as the runner races for home. Torin fields the ball to the second baseman who tags the runner out. Over, in an instant. I watch Torin approach the mound to keep from looking at the green runners as they come in from the field. I'm happy to see the joy on Torin's face briefly before he is pulled into a subdued celebration. Green helmets rain from the dugout. My son is silent.

"Shit," says a mother near me.

It is a silent walk back to our truck past the flushed, tear-stained faces of kids I have known for years. I realize how lucky I am. If I had any other job I might speed by this field on a summer's night with a quick glance at the players. Instead I know these boys; they have drawn me near with their stories and journals. This is my answer to the question I see in the papers regarding teaching: *Why would anyone want this thankless job?*

It is a privilege.

Weaving my life into the fabric of these adolescents is a gift indeed.