



<< Sports Break

Baseball Mirrors Life

Season Opens to Strikes and Lockouts

By Norm Kent

I have always felt the New Year begins on Opening Day of the major league baseball season. At the very least, it is my own personal national holiday, when wanderlust burns through my soul, and compels me to travel to different regions of the country to be part of the magic that is the First Pitch of the season.

I am headed to Wrigley Field for Opening Day, where I expect to dutifully freeze my ass off in 27-degree weather. It will make Monday night's opener here in Marlinville that much more rewarding. I will try to concentrate on the game between the lines, because that is where the spirit of baseball soars.

Any normal, clear-thinking, rational human being has to have a lover's quarrel with pro sports. The athletes are paid incomprehensible salaries, the owners ask for ludicrous ticket prices, and corporate greed, luxury suites, and underwear companies naming stadiums after themselves have swallowed up the games. Nothing makes sense except the game, the purity of the competitive spirit and the spontaneity of the drama.

Inside the lines, baseball is a sport of the unpredictable: the startling no-hitter, the game-ending homer, or the amazing rookie. In Texas, this year a young stud named Hank Blalock has captured the town's passions. Out in San Diego, the fans are waiting to see what Sean Burroughs, son of a major leaguer, can do. In Florida, we are holding our breath over a fire-balling right-hander, Josh Beckett, - and that is more over his pitching than his looks, so don't get any ideas.

Still, out in the bay, the Old Man, the Warhorse that is Barry Bonds, began the season by pounding out two homers in each of his first two games, at age 38. His Ruthian blasts have sailed into history, and while Mark McGuire retired this year short of Hank Aaron's record of 755, Bonds has cranked out numbers 567-571 this past week.

I don't know how he does it. You know, the golden years ain't so golden. You hurt

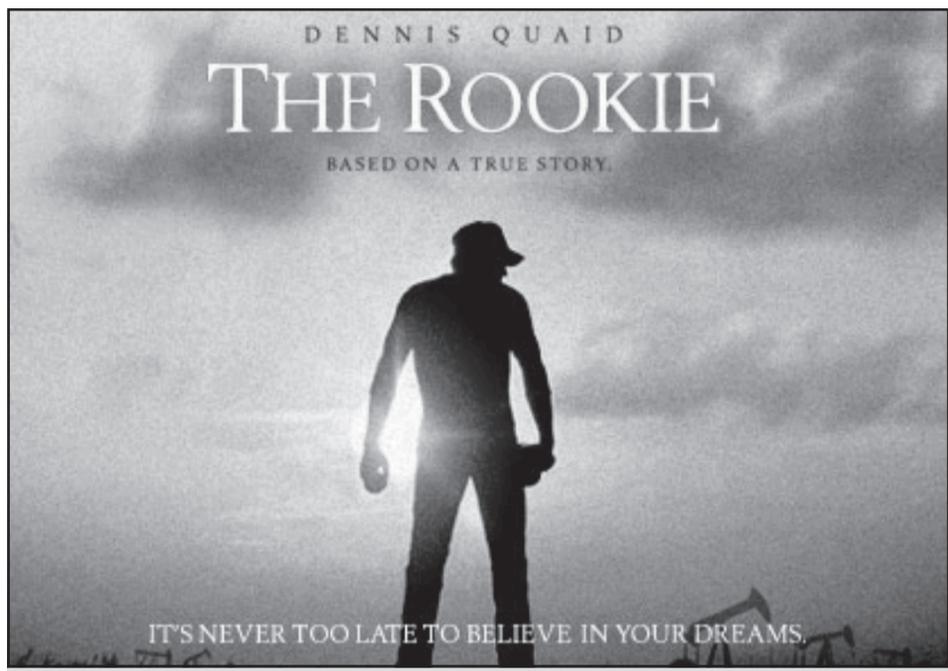
quicker and heal slower. The sprained ankle today becomes a weeklong limp. Still, there is something about sitting in the stands and watching Derek Jeter line a baseball into right field. As he rounds first base, so do you with him. Only now, at age 50, your mind tends to make an appointment your body can't keep.

We have had major league baseball for a decade now in Florida, and this is a season where we should legitimately be competing for a pennant. Unfortunately, we started the year by trading our best closer away in order to save a million dollars in salaries. That used to pay for a whole team. Now it does not cover a middle reliever. Maybe Jerry Seinfeld was right when he said we should stop rooting for players, and just root for a favorite number: "Okay! Number Four got a base hit! He's my man!" Why not? By next year, number 4 will be wearing a different uniform anyway?

Owners and employers need to learn that paying huge salaries does not provide automatic winners. Certainly this is so in baseball, where the six-month, 162 game season is a marathon, not a sprint. It is never the size of dog in the fight. Consider that in the last three years the Seattle Mariners have lost arguably three of the best players in the game, Alex Rodriguez, Randy Johnson, and Ken Griffey, Jr. How did they respond last year? Only by winning 116 games and playing exciting baseball all season.

In Cleveland, where they have sold out their majestic new stadium a zillion times in a row, where they have corporate suites, incredible fan support and the team is competitive season after season, the new General Manager says the team has to cut its payroll because it is paying beyond its means. I don't care. For me, I just want a good hot dog, a well-pitched game, a couple of homers, and a diving catch. That is what makes me happy at a ballgame.

As for the money, none of it makes sense to anyone anymore. Forbes Magazine does



Promotion still from Disney's *The Rookie*

a feature saying Baseball is making billions. Bud "Lite" Selig, the Commissioner of the Sport claims they are out of their mind. He even went before Congress last winter to complain how baseball is going broke, and had to contract its size.

Then you open the newspaper the next morning and see some team is paying a guy \$55 million for five years, and it just eats at you. That kind of money could probably sponsor Team Fort Lauderdale at the Gay Olympics in Australia this year. At the very least, it may cover the flights.

You are in the stands, you're trying to root for a player, and he is in the dugout looking at stock returns, making more in a mediocre month than an average fan earns in a lifetime. How is he doing this? By playing a baseball game, by competing under sunny skies, on green fields, in a sport we learned as kids with our dads. Amazing.

So it's Opening Day, and this year a real life story hit the Big Screen. Marvelously played by Dennis Quaid, he is this year's

Rookie, a real-life middle-aged high school baseball coach who tries out for the Tampa Bay Devil Rays, and makes the team, in 1999. "It's okay to build castles in the air, that is where they belong" wrote Henry David Thoreau, "just build foundations under them."

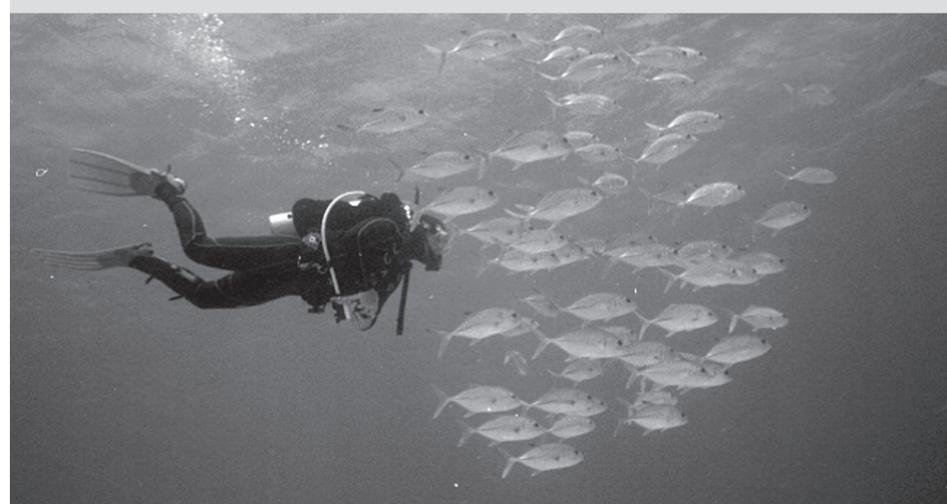
The foundation of major league baseball is being built on quicksand, and the year begins with the offensive clouds of lockouts and strikes, and not the ones the pitchers throw. It is frustrating, because I am here trying to focus on the game. Concentrate on the sport. It's a weird sport. You get a round ball, a round bat, and you got to hit it square. Go figure.

There is no time limit in baseball. You play nine innings, and you go from start to finish giving it everything you got. You don't know how it is going to begin or when it will end. You just try your best, and if your uniform winds up a little bit dirty, you will have played the game. It is not unlike life. There may even be a gay athlete or two playing the game. What do you think?

Sports Feature

Diving In

SAA Scuba Club Brings Gays and Lesbians Together Under Water



By Ian Drew

Scuba diving has always been popular among both South Florida residents and visitors to its famous tropical waters.

For gays and lesbians, the Sunshine Athletic Association (SAA) Scuba Club offers an exclusive group for gays and lesbians who want to explore our surrounding ocean and appreciate its natural resources together.

Chris Beamer, the SAA Scuba Club vice president of public relations and editor of the group's monthly newsletter, says that enjoying

the natural beauty underneath the water while socializing is the tie that binds.

"People join our group because it allows them to enjoy diving with people they are familiar with," he says. "Because diving requires that you do it with a buddy, it is more comfortable for gays and lesbians in our group because we pair people up according to their abilities. The camaraderie that results is very special."

The club has been around since the SAA, an organization that consists of several gay

athletic groups in the area, formed in 1981.

Of the club's average membership of 80, several original members are still in the group and continue to participate in its regular dives and social events.

The regular monthly dives start up in March or April and take place until the water temperature gets colder in December. The first dive of this year will kick off Earth Week on April 21.

The dives include night dives, reef dives and wreck dives everywhere from off the coast of West Palm Beach to the Florida Keys. Boats are usually chartered for 20 to 22 of the members in each dive.

Each year, the group travels to dive in an exotic locale, usually in another country. They traveled to Curacao last month and previous years have found them diving into the waters of the Bahamas, the Bay Islands of Honduras and Barbados.

The club's members and interested friends also meet for non-diving social events throughout the year where they share dinner and listen to guest speakers discuss dive-oriented subjects.

The group strives to support the public education about, and provide for the protection of, the natural resources of oceans and the life systems they support.

On many of their dives, they perform fish identifications and fish counts of the varieties and species of fish. The results of this information are then used by such organizations as the National Oceanographic

and Atmospheric Administration and the National Marine and Fishery Service to better develop marine protected areas and research environmental and ecological diseases.

They also give back to the community by contributing to both the SAA Holiday Project and such organizations as Save The Manatees, Audubon, Sea Turtle Conservation, the Save Our Reefs Foundation and Ocean Watch.

Membership in the club is \$25/year for singles and \$45/year for couples, with most members supplying their own equipment. Each member pays separate fees for each dive.

Membership in DAN, the Divers Alert Network, is also recommended as the club itself is an active supporter.

The club's ranks include certified instructors, dive masters, safety and advanced open water divers and newly certified open water divers. Certification ranges from PADI through the gamut to NAUI, all highly respected organizations with the professional diving community.

DAN Insurance is required for all club sponsored out-of-country dive trips.

Beamer says that the club is perfect for both divers and non-divers alike.

"The club is for someone that cares about the marine environment, is interested in ecology and just likes adventure," he says. "There is so much just under the water."

For more information, visit www.saascuba.org.

To join the SAA Scuba Club, call Harry at 305.892.1692, or e-mail cehar@aol.com.