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## “Until the Ball Glows in the Twilight”: Fatherhood, Baseball, and the Game of Playing Catch

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Baseball is fathers and sons playing catch, lazy and murderous, wild and controlled, the profound archaic song of birth, growth, age, and death.

Donald Hall (1985)

It has been said, “Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball” (Barzun 1954). It may also be said that whoever wants to know the heart and mind of American fatherhood—the pattern of meanings associated with fatherhood—had best be familiar with the symbolism connected to a father teaching a child how to catch and throw a ball. In certain segments of the population, the game of playing catch not only is indispensable to learning the fundamentals of baseball, but also is instrumental to being defined as a caring dad (Rosenblatt 1998; McCormack 1999–2000).

How did baseball and the game of playing catch come to be associated with fatherhood? Drawing on a range of written and iconographic texts (e.g., newspaper and magazine articles, books, cartoons, films), I document the historical link between the institution of baseball (America’s “national pastime”) and a fleeting but important component of father–child interaction. Focusing on the question of who, where, when, how, and why (as in, “*who* plays the game?” and “*where* does the game take place?”), I show how ecological contexts (backyards and sunsets) and gender-specific meanings (definitions of fatherhood and athleticism) have transposed a seemingly mundane activity into a sacred and memorable moment; and how the moment itself is constructed through a combination of talk (or silence) and geometry (distance between the players). Ultimately I aim to demonstrate, via the game of playing catch, how physical and social realities are intertwined.<sup>1</sup>

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## BASEBALL AND FATHERHOOD

As one observer put it, “Chances are good that if you’re a baseball fan, your dad had something to do with it—and your thoughts of the sport evoke thoughts of him” (Anonymous 2001). Baseball, however, was not always a part of America’s social landscape; nor was it always central to fatherhood. How, then, did it become so?

Who invented baseball is open to debate, but lore has it that the sport was a variation of the English game of rounders and that it first became popular in the 1800s (Litsky 2004; Pennington 2004; Steele 1904). In its infancy, baseball was mainly the province of the upper middle class, but by the late 1800s, it had spread to the working class. Contributing to the diffusion was (1) the arrival of large urban parks or fields (rural havens in the city; Barth 1980); (2) the growing preoccupation with health and exercise (America went “sports crazy”; Dubbert 1979, 175); and (3) the increasing belief that sport was an effective response to America’s turn-of-the-century “crisis of masculinity” (sport was a “place where manhood was earned”; Adelman 1986, 286) (Kimmel 1990).<sup>2</sup>

Thirteen major league fields were built or reconstructed between 1909 and 1915 (Bluthardt 1987), and the presence of major league ballparks in populated areas helped make professional ballplayers objects of admiration and emulation. Children were afforded opportunities to see baseball skillfully played; and fathers, more often than not, were the ones who took their kids to their “first game”—a phrase that, technically, can refer to any baseball contest seen for the first time, even if played on a sandlot, but that symbolically has come to be defined almost exclusively as a child’s first visit to a major league venue.

Looking for early references to baseball and fatherhood, I examined over three hundred popular magazine articles published between 1900 and 1960, which were categorized under the heading of “fatherhood,” “fathers,” or “father-child relationships” in the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature*.<sup>3</sup> If popular magazine articles are any indication, commercial media accounts of fathers taking their kids to a ballgame or teaching them how to play baseball were rare in the early twentieth century. The first article that I discovered was published in *The Outlook* in 1914. A father reported that he had escorted his eleven-year-old son to a baseball game every afternoon the previous summer, in an effort “to take seriously the business of being a companion to the boy.” He said that he had bought a baseball glove for himself, so that he and his son could play. “I mean to be closer to him in the next ten years than any other companion—to be a bigger influence in his life than any of the influences that are outside our control. He’s going to be a better man than I am, if

I can make him so" (Barton 1914). Eight years later, a father writing in *American Magazine* declared that if he did not help his ten-year-old son "grow up right," he would consider himself a "failure," no matter how much money he made or how big a reputation he achieved. So when his son asked him to play catch ("Dad, come on and peg me a few"), he immediately interrupted what he was doing and went outside. "Is that the swiftest you can throw," the boy asked. "Do you want them faster?" the father replied. "Sure, burn 'em in," the boy answered.

Now I thought I knew that boy. I fancied I could tell anyone all about him. Yet it had been almost a year since I had tossed a baseball to him. . . . To my surprise he could handle his mitt with ease and grace. He was not afraid of the ball and he caught what little speed I have left without flinching. (Guest 1922)

And in 1923, in *Ladies Home Journal*, a father talked about how he and his two sons would drive into Boston to see the Red Sox or Braves play and that "for a time baseball would absorb [them]." He also mentioned precisely how he played with his children. "I used to lay down a glove to represent second base, station the boys on either side as shortstop and second baseman, and bat or throw . . . leaving it to them to make the instant decision who would go for the ball and who would cover . . . [the base]" (Merwin 1923).

The four-decade span of the 1920s to the 1950s generally is known as baseball's "golden years." Radio and later television began to broadcast the games, and arenas grew even larger. (Some 74,200 fans were in attendance when Yankee Stadium opened in 1923; Yankee Stadium History, n.d.) Prior to the 1920s, baseball was mainly a game of singles and doubles, batted balls that would advance base runners and add to a team's score. While this strategy continued to be important, the interwar years marked the glorification of the home run, wherein a ball would be hit over an outfield fence. The changing social meaning of the "long ball" not only altered how kids viewed the physical world of baseball but also reconceptualized their own performances on and off the field. "Swinging for the fences" became a prized strategy in the sport as well as an aphorism for striving for success in life.

From 1932 to 1937, *Parents* magazine ran a series of monthly articles under the banner "For fathers only." Curiously, only two articles mentioned baseball. The first, published in 1932, talked about the importance of positive reinforcement, using the game of catch to illustrate the point: "A father who has been doing a little quiet research concludes that when parents adopt the 'do' attitude, few 'don'ts' are necessary. . . . 'Don't be afraid of the baseball' can be translated into 'Do show me how well you can catch'" (Motherwell 1932). The second, published in 1933, offered the observation, "It is frequently only when a son becomes interested in baseball that a father begins

to see a chance for companionship with his boy.” The article went on to offer advice on how to teach a child who was just learning the game.

If a father tries to get his son interested in baseball, he must be prepared to maintain poise and gentleness in the face of the boy’s acting babyish, crying and complaining about a hurt finger, placing himself in a ridiculous position by making silly faces and gestures as he misses catch after catch, or slamming down his glove and sulking because of errors. (Rademacher 1933)

After Pearl Harbor and America’s entrance in World War II, the question arose as to whether baseball should be temporarily suspended. The commissioner of baseball wrote to President Roosevelt to seek his advice. The president “responded the next day with what has become known as ‘the green light letter,’ offering . . . his personal opinion that baseball should continue.” Roosevelt felt that “the benefits of the game would provide a much-needed morale boost to those on the home front and to American service personnel overseas” (Percoco 1992). As the war progressed, a number of professional baseball players were drafted into the armed forces but were replaced by others eager to play. It was during this time also that the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League was formed. The historical significance of the “Girls” league is that it gave women the opportunity to play baseball professionally. Although fans initially seemed to enjoy the women’s competitions, interest waned after the war ended. The league was disbanded in 1954 (Peterik 1995).

Little League Baseball, founded in 1939, expanded during the war, as well (Little League Online, n.d.). Although organized youth leagues existed in the 1920s and 1930s, none of them equaled Little League in popularity. (The leagues were thought to be an effective antidote to juvenile delinquency; Hurley 1935; Speaker 1939.) The growth of Little League put more pressure on children to learn the sport and more demands on fathers to instruct their kids in the intricacies of the game (Fine 1987).

Since the 1960s, baseball has become an even larger and more complex entertainment industry. Whereas before, professional teams were located mainly in the industrial North and the Midwest, major (and minor) league baseball now is played in cities and towns throughout the United States and Canada. Baseball also has taken hold in other areas of the world, especially in Japan and Latin America. Video games, sports television networks, and the further expansion and bureaucratization of youth baseball now encourage children to both learn and consume the game. (Profits on the sale of baseball paraphernalia are considerable.) Although baseball continues to be a game played by boys and men *for* boys and men, it is increasingly common for girls to play youth ball, and some women have played high school or college ball, on the same team as their male classmates.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time that baseball has grown, its share of the sports pie has shrunk. Over the past forty years, major league baseball has had to contend with the mounting popularity of other sports (Mandelbaum 2004). For example, fathers, who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s loving and playing baseball, have had children who enjoyed playing other sports more. Looking forward to the day they would play catch with their kids (as their own fathers did or did not do with them), men raised in the postwar era often have discovered that their sons and daughters would just as soon practice the deft footwork that soccer requires—a skill that the men may not have learned and thus cannot teach.<sup>5</sup>

### THE GAME OF PLAYING CATCH

A baseball enthusiast once remarked that although playing catch is called a game, “there is really no game to it” because “nobody wins or loses” (Rosenblatt 1998). The fact is, however, that while playing catch may not be a game in a conventional sense, it *is* a game, in a sociological sense, because the social institution of baseball penetrates the heart of the activity. So does the institution of fatherhood. Thus it can be said that the community of baseball and fatherhood “exercises control over the conduct of its individual members” (Mead 1934, 155). To put it another way, “America surfaces in a ball park” (Geertz 1973, 417)—and sometimes in a backyard.

What is the social nature of the game of catch? To answer this question, I initiated a series of bibliographic and Internet searches to find as many references to playing catch as I could. (I also had kept a file on the subject for several years.) Relying on these texts, I endeavored to dissect the game. I was interested in five basic questions: *Who* plays catch, and *where, when, how, and why* is the game played?

#### Who

Although nothing prevents several players from forming a circle and tossing around a ball, in the texts that I reviewed, playing catch almost always was described as a two-person game. What seems to make the game special—and memorable—is the opportunity the game affords to have private time, not just with “any other,” but with a “significant other.” Structurally and experientially, playing catch is a to-and-fro dance—a pas de deux, prized for its intimacy (“just you and me”).

The fact that playing catch often involves two people who are at different skill levels is important, too. The game can be dangerous and does demand

concentration. The adult must be careful not to throw too fast, so as not to hurt and/or embarrass the child. The child, especially if new to the game, must remember how to hold the glove to avoid getting hit in the face. As players get older, however, skill levels may reverse. One of my children, for example, is now a better fielder than I ever was, and the velocity of my “fast ball” diminishes with each passing year.

Playing catch also is generally talked about as a game between fathers and sons. However, recent texts have included references to fathers and daughters, as well as to mothers and sons.<sup>6</sup> A daughter exclaimed, “My dad is way, way cool. . . . He taught me to believe in myself and be fair. He taught me how to throw a baseball” (“My dad is way, way cool,” 2003).<sup>7</sup> A son reported, “I played catch with my father, of course, but also with my mother. She would borrow my father’s big glove late on a summer’s weekend afternoon” (Lichtenberg 1993). (Note the “of course,” when the son talked about playing with his father.) A man spoke of the special relationship he had with his two girls, both of whom played softball: “I’ve been doing it [playing catch] for over twenty-five years with my daughters. It binds us together, connects generations, widens our appreciation of some of the old-fashioned virtues of America just as much as boys with their fathers.” He also reminisced, “Almost every day, when I would come home from work, one or the other, or both, would say ‘come on, Dad, let’s play catch.’ It was our special time together. ‘We can do it,’ they seemed to be saying, ‘we can do it just like boys; we’re no wimps’” (Cummins 2001).

### Where

Not every recent reference to playing catch happened to mention where the activity took place. But of the cases in which location was identified, it was a yard or, more specifically, a *backyard* that was mentioned most of the time.

Notably, the yard as a location to toss a ball (or bat it) was not talked about much in the pre–World War II articles that I reviewed. I did find several post-war articles that included pictures of fathers and children playing ball, but the texts rarely specified where they were playing. One that did was a 1952 article in *Woman’s Home Companion*. It had a photo of a father pitching a ball to his son in a yard in what appears to be the back of a house (“Today’s Father,” 1952). A 1950 *Snookums* comic strip, published in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, depicted a father taking his toddler son “out in the yard” (far enough away not to “break any windows”), hoping to “get him interested in baseball.” And a *Sparks* strip, published in 1956 in the *Chicago Defender* (an African American newspaper) portrayed a father and son playing catch in an open, but indeterminate area. (“I wanna see how ya like this new fast ball I’ve developed . . . Daddy!” “Okay! Let ’er fly!”)

Recently published texts included more references to playing in a backyard. As some saw it, the game was something that *naturally* took place there: "It's an American ritual for a father and son to grab a ball and glove and go out in the backyard to play catch" (Ward 2003). In one case, when both a yard and playground were mentioned, it was the backyard game that was the better remembered of the two: "Many professional ballplayers . . . have come and gone since the days in the mid-1950s when my father and I played ball in our backyard or at Mohawk school across the street from our house. . . . Dad is 82 and I just turned 56, so obviously it has been many, many years since we played pitch-and-catch *in our backyard*" (Hart 2002, emphasis added).

Where a game of catch happens to occur is significant. The availability of a backyard increases the likelihood that fathers will be engaged in the activity, since it does not take much effort to walk out the door to play. Playing catch in the backyard is, as one author put it, "an easy thing to do—you don't need to have access to something like a basketball hoop and you don't have to strap on a ton of gear" (Coddling 2002). A backyard also can make it more difficult for a father to deny a child's request. In the popular song about generational alienation, "Cat's in the Cradle," a son's appeal to his father ("Thanks for the ball, Dad, come on let's play"), is heart-rending because we assume that the boy simply is asking his father to step outside. The father's reply ("Not today, I got a lot to do") comes across as insensitive, because playing catch does not seem to be too much to ask. (After all, a few days earlier the son had been given a ball on his tenth birthday.) The father's refusal to make room for his son ultimately comes full circle when, later in life, his son refuses to make room for him ("I'd love to see you [son] if you don't mind." He said, "I'd love to, Dad, if I could find the time") (Chapin and Chapin 1974).

An ecological variable that may have contributed to the popularity of the game of catch was post-World War II suburbanization. The backyards of suburban homes were marketed as family-friendly areas, perfect for weekend barbecues and evenings of tossing a ball around. Suburban spaces also were designed to be safe places to play. In *Fathers Playing Catch with Sons*, the poet Donald Hall recalled playing catch with his father in the 1930s and 1940s, but he spoke about doing so near a busy street.

[At first] I threw straight. Then I tried to put something on it; it flew twenty feet over his head. Or it banged into the sidewalk in front of him, breaking stitches [on the ball] and ricocheting off a pebble into the gutter of Greenway Street. Or it went wide to his right and lost itself in Mrs. Davis's bushes. Or it went wide to his left and rolled across the street while drivers swerved their cars. (Hall 1985, 28) <sup>8</sup>

Hall and his father were playing in traffic (literally), where a misplayed ball could put a child or father in serious danger. Suburban yards eliminated, or at least minimized, these risks.

Needless to say, not everyone can live in suburbia—or wants to. Fathers who reside in the city either by choice or circumstance, and who desire to play catch, may have to dodge cars, much like Hall's father was forced to do. Or they may invest more energy and time trying to find a safe place to play (e.g., walking or driving to a nearby park). Separated or divorced suburban dads, living in an apartment that does not have a yard, may discover that extemporaneous games of catch are not as easy to arrange as they once were.

Where family members engage in sports activities also is connected to spatial and temporal privacy. A backyard large enough to throw a baseball back and forth affords the players a space where they can interact without necessarily being observed. A child learning the intricacies of baseball thus may take solace in the fact that his or her mistakes are not open to scrutiny. Equally if not more important, the quality of a Little Leaguer's performance under the watchful eyes of his or her teammates may hinge on the opportunity he or she has to practice in what may be called a backstage region (Goffman 1959). A backyard also provides a measure of temporal privacy, because it reduces the likelihood that others will interrupt the game (Zerubavel 1981). Locked in a temporal bubble, a parent and child can more easily manufacture "quality time," in which the sport itself becomes subordinate to the emotions engendered between the players.

### When

Assuming a place to play can be found, throwing and catching a baseball can occur whenever people can get together. Two other factors, however, impinge on whether or not a game is played. The first is visibility. Without artificial illumination, playing catch is an activity that can happen only in daylight or lowlight (e.g., twilight). The second factor is the set of commitments that a parent and child might have. For a father, there is work; for a child, there may be school. These commitments often relegate playing catch to weeknights and weekends, but even this schedule assumes that the father is working from 9:00 in the morning to 5:00 in the late afternoon and has Saturday and Sunday off. (A father who works evenings and/or nights, and/or weekends, or is a stay-at-home dad, operates within different temporal constraints.)

Despite the number of possible permutations, playing catch typically was described in the texts that I reviewed as an activity that occurred not so much on the weekend as toward the end of the day, after the father had come home from work.



It is almost evening, and I have just settled into my spot on the couch. I want nothing more than to slip off my shoes and be totally, blissfully idle.

Suddenly my baseball mitt comes flying from behind and lands in my lap. "Wanna play catch?" It's Dash, my ten-year-old son, the boy never seen without his baseball cap, the boy who sleeps with his mitt.

"It's almost dark," I tell him. "And I'm worn out."

He doesn't say anything, just gives me the look that says: SOMEDAY WHEN YOU ARE OLD AND I AM GROWN, YOU'RE GOING TO REGRET EACH DAY YOU DIDN'T PLAY CATCH WHEN I ASKED YOU.

I put on my shoes. "Grab a ball."

"Already got one." He grins and flips it to me.

And the arc is renewed. The ball. The toss. Fathers playing catch with their sons. (Morris n.d.)

What is intriguing is the length of time referred to in the above excerpt. The father indicated that it was almost dark when his son asked him to play, which meant that they did not play for all that long. Later on in the article, the father talked about playing catch with his own father. He and his dad would go "out back beyond the orange trees" and "spend hours and hours just tossing the ball back and forth" (Morris n.d.). The fifty-six-year-old author (cited earlier), who reminisced about playing "pitch-and-catch" with his father, also spoke of "the hours" that they spent together "after a long hard day at work" (Hart 2002). And another writer spoke affectionately of fathers and sons playing catch "until the ball glows in the twilight"—a phrase that implied playing after the sun went down and suggested, too, a sacred quality to the act (Cozine 2003).

The chronological dynamics in playing-catch discourse is revealing of how the game is contemplated. The symbolism conveyed is that when fathers and children play catch, time becomes irrelevant. The moment is all there is.

How long fathers and children *actually* play catch is harder to decipher. If playing catch requires a certain degree of natural light, and if indeed the game can be played in twilight, how much time is there at the end of the day to play? The answer is a matter of both history and geography.

The father who recalled playing catch with his dad in the mid-1950s said that he grew up in Scotia, New York, which is just north of Schenectady. According to the U.S. Naval Observatory, sunset was at 7:38 and twilight ended at 8:13 on July 1, 1955, in Scotia. If we assume that the father worked from 9:00 to 5:00 and would get home by 5:45, that would leave approximately two hours of direct sunlight and about a half hour of twilight to engage in an outside game. The author spoke of "the hours" that he and his father spent together playing ball at the end of the day. If indeed that were the case, the two would have had to begin playing as soon as the father got home and continue

playing until just about dark. Dinner would have had to wait. This very well may have been the family's pattern. Then again, it may not. It could be that most games of catch in the 1950s lasted no more than forty-five minutes, maybe an hour, but that because the time devoted to playing was limited, the activity itself became more precious in the child's mind and also more memorable. It is possible, as well, that the wistfully recollected "hours" of postwar fathers and sons playing catch is more emblematic of what baby boomers wanted, but rarely received.

The situation, however, is not the same today. In 1966, the Uniform Time Act was passed and signed into law. This act was an attempt to establish one pattern of Daylight Saving Time from April to October across the country. Up until then, daylight saving time was based on local laws and customs. (There are communities that, by state law, are exempt from DST, but they are few.) ("Daylight Saving Time" n.d.). On July 1, 1966, in Scotia, sunset and the "end of civil twilight" were at 7:38 and 8:13, respectively, precisely when they were in 1955. But on July 1, 1967, both occurred *one hour later*, at 8:38 and 9:13. Thus after the Uniform Time Act was enacted, there was more daylight at the end of the day in the spring and summer and early fall (the baseball season) for families to play outdoors. Because of the implementation of daylight saving time, a father and child playing catch may have become more common in the *immediate* wake of the change.<sup>9</sup> As for comparisons between now and twenty or thirty years ago, the longer commutes between work and home and the overall "frenzied temporal climate" (Daly 1996) may mean that contemporary fathers are playing catch less often with their children than their fathers played with them. In other words, the historical pattern, with regard to the frequency of the game, may be curvilinear (i.e., first a rise, then a decline).

Sunlight patterns also vary by latitude and longitude, creating different opportunities for playing outside in the evening. In midsummer, the sun sets in Boston at 8:25, in Atlanta at 8:52, in San Francisco at 8:36, and in Los Angeles, at 8:09 (USNO times for July 1, 2004). Thus, in general, fathers in Boston may play catch less often, and for shorter periods of time, than fathers in Atlanta; and fathers in Los Angeles may play less often, and for shorter periods of time, than fathers in San Francisco.

### How

How to play catch is influenced, to some extent, by the amount of space available to the players and by the rules of baseball. A small yard or the presence of trees may limit "pop-ups," balls thrown high in the air by one player and caught on the way down by the other player, while a yard with shrubbery in

the middle may limit "grounders," balls skipped across the grass or dirt. Needless to say, trees and shrubs, as well as other obstacles, may be cut down or eliminated to "make room" for the game, which raises the question of how often fathers build or craft physical sanctuaries to facilitate play. In the tongue-in-cheek book, *How to Dad*, the point is made, "Playing Catch with the Old Man involves more than merely tossing a ball back and forth. . . . It is a ritual that connects one generation to the next and should make you feel compelled to build a lighted domed stadium in your backyard (Boswell and Barrett 1990, 16). While building a baseball park is well beyond the reach of the average father, we certainly can envision the space around a home being modified to accommodate one sport or another. I recall cutting the grass in our backyard more frequently when our sons were young to make the terrain more suitable for our ball games.

It is not unusual, when playing catch, for fathers and children to pretend they are pitching to a batter, in which case they may mark off the official distance between the "pitching rubber" (with which a pitcher's foot must always be in contact) and "home plate" (behind which the catcher crouches). In Little League, the distance between the pitching rubber and home plate is 46 feet. In high school, college, and major league baseball, it is 60.5 feet. While a backyard may be available, it may not be large enough to accommodate throwing across these distances. If it is not, players may still "pitch" to each other, but they will do so under artificial spatial conditions. (Imagine having a basketball hoop in one's driveway, but at lower than regulation height.)

The geometry of the game of playing catch is less contingent on institutional rules. The game can involve nothing more than repeatedly throwing and catching a baseball, with the players standing 20–30 feet apart. As the game ebbs and flows, the distance between the players will expand or contract, depending on how they feel at the moment (how much they are *in* the moment). In this scenario, it is the relationship between the players that determines the game's spatial parameters, rather than vice versa. For some who have played catch, this is the game they remember most and the game that captures best the game's aesthetics: "We fell into the timeless pace of throw and catch and throw and catch: we found the timeless place of playing catch" (Littlefield 2002).

Clearly how people play is linked to the *meanings* they attach to the activity. Take, for example, whether players should talk to each other. According one view, playing catch is optimal when quiet prevails.

The best part of the game is the silence. . . . Once I happened to be on the field of Yankee Stadium before game time when the players were warming up. . . . Every easy toss was delivered at a speed greater than a good high school fastball pitcher could generate. *Thwack, thwack, thwack* in the leather.

And the silence between the men on the field. It was interesting to note that even at their level, this was still a game of catch. We do what we can as parents, one child at a time. . . . The trick, I think, is to recognize the moments when nothing needs to be said. (Rosenblatt 1998)

To others, however, talk is essential to the game. A writer who grew up playing catch with his father and his mother argued that conversation between a parent and child is crucial—*but not just any conversation*.

My mother had nothing to teach me about the techniques of baseball. I threw the ball to her, she threw it back to me. Her chat was observation, not praise or prescription. My father called: “Nice grab!” or “Two hands!” or “Keep your eye on it!” She’d say, “That was a high one.” I had to ask her to throw me grounders and explain to her what they were. “You know, grounders. On the ground. Like a ground ball. *Grounders*.” My mother smiled at me, half apologetic, half amused. I could hear as I talked baseball to her that, like her, I was new at this, not eloquent and authoritative like my father. I couldn’t make every detail of skill and strategy seem like an absolute truth. As I explained to her a bit of what I’d recently learned from him, I could hear something a boy might otherwise miss: *baseball was strange*. Why would an intelligent person engaged in throwing a ball back and forth want the ball aimed at the ground? . . . What she threw me wasn’t the official Dad stuff, but it was fine on its own terms. . . . For boys and their fathers, baseball follows an established progression, from instructional games to catch to stickball or Little League, then school teams with fatherlike coaches, and finally employment, with “team players” and “hardball,” whether literal or figurative. But my mother and I had only a pickup game she offered to invent with me as we went along. . . . Catch for me was preparation. My father was keeping in practice for the pickup softball games he loved. But my mother never played softball. When my father threw with me it was as if to say, *This is how we do what we do*. Not with my mother. Our “we” was not yet defined. She was not saying, *This is what we do*. She was saying: *Don’t leave. We’ll figure something out.*” (Lichtenberg 1993, 28–29)

Another man, recalling his relationship with his dad, said, “As I grew older and more distant (the way sons too often become with their fathers), playing catch was sometimes the only way we could talk. Or try. The turf between us seemed wider than ever, our only connection the path of a ball” (Morris n.d.).

If every act of verbal and nonverbal interaction ultimately says, “This is how I see myself . . . this is how I see you . . . this is how I see you seeing me,” and so forth (Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson 1967, 52), then the game of playing catch has as much to do with interpersonal relations as any other form of communication might have. The silence and the talk are ingredients in the mix, defining who we are, and would like to be.

## Why

It is interesting that the game of catch is called "catch," when the game entails not only catching but also throwing. For many, in fact, learning how to throw the ball is the most difficult part of the game.

With arrival of youth baseball leagues, teaching children how to throw the "right way" became a key reason to play catch. A boy who threw without the proper arm motion or, worse, "threw like a girl" could be the object of ridicule, both on the field and off.<sup>10</sup> A father could be taken to task, as well. ("What kind of father would not teach his son how to throw?") A man who knew how to "correct" his son's throwing, on the other hand, could be a hero. Said one author, recalling his youth:

I'm 8 years old and I'm playing Little League Baseball for the first time and my dad's the coach! It's my first tryout/practice and it's an exciting, confusing, scary affair, with what seems like hundreds of boys. . . . Later at home, my father informs me that there are two boys on the team who throw like girls, and that I, unfortunately, am one of them! By the next practice, he tells me, we will have corrected that problem. That evening, with glove and cap securely in place, I anxiously face my father on the front lawn. And we play catch. For quite a while, I am concentrating, working hard to throw correctly ("like a *man*"), pulling my arm back as far as I can and snapping the ball overhand, just past my ear. When I do this, it feels very strange—I really have very little control over the flight of the ball, and it hurts my shoulder a bit—but I am rewarded with the knowledge that *this is how men throw the ball*. If I learn this, I won't embarrass either myself or my father. (Messner 1995, 46–47)

The professional baseball player Harmon Killebrew once talked about how he and his brother would play ball with their father and how his mother would admonish them for tearing up the lawn. Killebrew's dad reportedly would reply, "We're not raising grass. We're raising boys" (cited in Kennedy 2003, 3D). In some people's minds, the whys and wherefores of playing catch have less to do with baseball than with gender and masculinity. Through the game, boys are shown "how men throw" (i.e., how "real" men *behave*).

Rationales for playing catch have not been constant, however. If we take a historical look at the texts, we can discern a shift. In the early twentieth century, a common justification for playing catch was that playing with a child would help a father to get to know that child. Playing catch thus was placed in the same category as playing marbles or playing hide-and-seek. ("To know a boy you must play with him"; Guest 1922.) Then, in the mid-twentieth century, as more children got involved in organized youth sports, playing catch became an instructional activity. Learning how to throw and catch "correctly" grew in importance. (Recalling what it was like to grow up in the 1950s, a

former Little Leaguer said, "I was lucky to have a dad who cared enough to teach me the basics"; Hart 2002.) In the late twentieth century, the meaning of playing catch appears to have taken yet a different turn. The game is still about play and instruction, but also it has been transformed, at least for some, into a celebration of fatherhood (e.g., "There's something about a father playing catch with his son that is just so pure, so iconic, so American"; Kennedy 2003). Playing catch, in addition, may now be perceived to be about *multiple* generations of fathers and sons, and through a process of temporal extension, the game has been reified; for example, "I played catch in the backyard with my dad, as kids have done and dads have done *since baseball first arrived*" (Littlefield 2002, emphasis added); "*for 100 years and more now*, fathers have been playing catch with sons" (Coddling 2002, emphasis added).

Hollywood also has embraced this theme. Perhaps the best example is the 1989 film, *Field of Dreams*. The film's story is about a man who lives with his family on an Iowa farm about to go bankrupt and who repeatedly hears a voice telling him, "If you build it, he will come." He interprets the message to mean that he should build a ballpark in his cornfield, which he does. (Anything is possible in fiction. By the way, few fatherhood and baseball films merge the physical and the social as well as *Field of Dreams* does.) Eventually the 1919 Chicago White Sox show up to play. This is an infamous team that included several members who were charged with deliberately losing that year's World Championship. Many baseball fans, however, feel that at least one of the players, "Shoeless" Joe Jackson, was wrongly accused. The "he" who "will come," however, turns out to be neither Jackson nor any other public figure, but the main character's dad. (An underlying premise is that the farmer and his dad were estranged.) When the father shows up on the "field of dreams," the son meekly asks, "Hey, Dad, you wanna have a catch?" The film closes with the father and son lazily throwing a baseball back and forth to each other. The game is meant to symbolize paternal bonding. ("It is through baseball, America's game, that father and son are reconciled, that the pain of both father and son is finally healed"; Aronson and Kimmel 2001.) Men have confessed that they cried while watching this scene. I will admit that I have.

*Field of Dreams* was based on the novel *Shoeless Joe*, by W. P. Kinsella (1982). The film basically repeated the plotline of the book, but with one important exception. The final scene of the father and son playing catch was added. Apparently, the film's producers and writers felt that the new scene would resonate with fathers. Looking at films that have come out since 1950 and that have baseball and fatherhood as a theme, we see that films increasingly have used the connection between baseball and fatherhood, and between fatherhood and playing catch, to tell a heartwarming story. *The Natural*

(1984), *City Slickers* (1991), *Hook* (1991), *Free Willy* (1993), *The Sandlot* (1993), *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), *Three Wishes* (1995), *Liar Liar* (1997), and *My Dog Skip* (2000)—among others—all rely on these connections.

Why did playing catch become more strongly associated with fatherhood in the late twentieth century? One can only speculate, but a combination of both the physical and social would seem to be involved. It could be that the growing popularity of Little League baseball, and other youth baseball leagues, in the postwar suburban (more available space) era created a generation of kids who enjoyed playing ball. These kids then grew up to be fathers (and writers, artists, producers, etc.) in the late twentieth century, just when another wave of "New Fatherhood" was encouraging men to "be there" for their children. (An earlier wave of "New Fatherhood" was evident in the early twentieth century; LaRossa 1997.) The spread of major and minor league baseball venues (imposing physical edifices) and the ubiquity of baseball on television also may have increased children's desire to be baseball proficient and to emulate their sports heroes. Along with these factors, the passage of the Uniform Time Act in 1966, which created more daylight (temporal space) at the end of the day, afforded greater opportunities for fathers to play the game in the 1970s and 1980s. It appears that playing catch may occur less frequently today than twenty or thirty years ago, in part because of the growing physical distance between home and work in automobile-oriented America. But this turnabout actually may have elevated the game's nostalgic (remembrance of things past) value and further solidified its sacralization in contemporary popular culture.

#### FUTURE RESEARCH

The game of playing catch clearly is central to the social meaning of fatherhood in America. It is not an activity, however, that researchers have chosen to explore to any great degree. Relying on a variety of written and iconographic texts, I have pieced together a picture of how the symbolism attached to the game changed over the course of the twentieth century, but there is much that still remains unknown. Consider, for example, what we could learn from an interview study of men born in different decades. Such a study would be valuable in that it would allow us to uncover the subtleties of the game in the 1980s and 1990s (and beyond), relative to its subtleties in the 1940s and 1950s, and 1960s and 1970s. An important question would be whether the ecology and geometry of the game have changed over the years. What effect did suburbanization have? How exactly has the game been played under different physical and social contexts? Being retrospective accounts, the narratives also would

shed light on how the game is remembered from one generation to the next. What do the stories—or, more specifically, the plotlines—suggest about children's feelings toward their fathers?

Comparisons between playing catch and other activities deserve scrutiny, as well. For some families, "the game" they revere is centered not on throwing a baseball but on passing a football, or kicking a soccer ball. For others, it is playing one-on-one basketball ("shooting hoops"). Still others enjoy bowling or tennis, ice or street hockey. Studies that systematically examine the "who, where, when, how, and why" of these games could be very revealing of family dynamics, particularly if they focus on the definitions that parents and children attach to the play and the physical realities that demarcate the interaction.

It is worth noting, for instance, that the game of playing catch is enacted outside and is flexible enough to allow the players to move closer and farther apart, as they wish. Rarely, however, do they touch one another. Basketball can be played either outside or inside, with players staying in close proximity, moving vigorously, and often pushing off each other (if it is a competitive game). Physical contact also can be part of a one-on-one football game. I remember the times my sons and I would wrestle with each other on our living room floor while in the midst of watching a televised football game. Pretending to carry a ball toward an imaginary goal line, one or the other of us would be "thrown for a loss" or "break a tackle" to score. Times like these provided an opportunity for us to be close.

The game of playing catch also is generally a noncompetitive activity. If a parent and child pretend that they are playing in an actual event, they often will imagine themselves on the same team. ("It's a grounder to the shortstop [child], he flips to the second baseman [father] who then rifles it to the first baseman [child] for a double play.") One-on-one basketball, bowling, and tennis, however, generally develop into a competition. ("I finally beat you!") What difference does this make to families? What difference does it make to the flow of conversation during and after the game?

The role of talk in family sports indeed can be crucial. Bowling, for example, is played generally in a public setting with onlookers nearby (sometimes only a foot away). Marked lanes dictate where the players stand and deliver the ball. The same parameters are operative when fathers play tennis with their children at a public park. The chance to have a private chat is minimal. One could hypothesize that there are fewer heart-to-heart talks when parents and children bowl or play tennis than when they play catch. No one, to my knowledge, has done a study that examines whether there is a connection between the kinds of one-on-one sports activities that fathers and children have engaged in (and how often) and the perception of the quality of their relationships. This would be a worthwhile project.



Finally, it is imperative to explore how sport activities and the social construction of space are connected to socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and nationality. Whereas some groups perceive backyard baseball as a thing of beauty, others view cityscape basketball or open field soccer that way (Mandelbaum 2004). Our propensity to see an object "glow in the twilight" depends on the "thought community" to which we belong (Zerubavel 1997).<sup>11</sup>

## NOTES

I would like to thank Elizabeth Cavalier, Regina Davis-Sowers, Maureen Mulligan LaRossa, William Marsiglio, Kevin Roy, Cynthia Sinha, and Frank Whittington for their assistance with this chapter.

1. The texts tell us more about the culture of fatherhood than about conduct of fatherhood. By that I mean the texts reveal more about how fatherhood, baseball, and catch are *portrayed* rather than about how they are *performed*. Still, while the connection between culture and conduct should never be presumed, neither should it be denied. Thus there are times when, on the basis of cultural evidence, bits and pieces of conduct are inferred. (For a discussion of the distinction between the culture and conduct of fatherhood, and how the two may or may not be related, see LaRossa 1988, 1997, 2004.)

2. Commenting on the perceived crisis of masculinity, Kimmel (1996, 157) notes, "By the beginning of the twentieth century, testing manhood had become increasingly difficult. The public arena was crowded and competitive, and heading west to start over was more the stuff of fiction than possibility. What was worse, many believed, a new generation of young boys was being raised entirely by women, who would turn America's future men into whiny little mama's boys. Men sought to rescue their sons from the feminizing clutches of mothers and teachers and create new ways to 'manufacture manhood.'"

3. A more thorough survey would have included articles published in the nineteenth century, as well. My search was limited to articles indexed in *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, which begins in 1900.

4. Although men historically have dominated baseball, a number of women, over the years, have loved baseball, too. The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League of the 1940s and early 1950s is but one illustration. The historian Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote a memoir about her infatuation with the Brooklyn Dodgers in the 1940s and 1950s. She began, "When I was six, my father gave me a bright red scorebook that opened my heart to the game of baseball. After dinner on long summer nights, he would sit beside me in our small enclosed porch to hear my account of that day's Brooklyn Dodger game. Night after night he taught me the odd collection of symbols, numbers, and letters that enable a baseball lover to record every action of the game" (Goodwin 1997, 13).

5. Youth soccer has become very popular in the United States ("Youth Soccer" n.d.). A disjunction between fathers' and children's preferred sports also may have occurred in the 1940s and 1950s. Fathers who grew up in the 1920s and 1930s but did not play organized youth sports may not have been as adept as they would have liked at teaching their Little League sons how to throw, catch, and bat.

6. Mothers and daughters playing catch are rare but could become more common, given the number of single women raising girls who are interested in competitive sports.

7. A father whose six-year-old daughter is playing Little League baseball reported, "She practices with me in the backyard too, but she can hit a lot better than her daddy. I hope she has the time of her life playing the great game of baseball and has lots of 'Kid-type' memories, too!" (Piszek 2003).

8. Hall's 1985 book, *Fathers Playing Catch with Sons*, probably has done more to promote the *culture* of the game of catch than any other text. Other authors who have written about the game often reference (and revere) the book. The lead chapter, "Fathers Playing Catch with Sons," originally was a 1974 article (in *Playboy* magazine), but it is the 1985 book that has become synonymous with the game's sacralization.

9. The passage of the Uniform Time Act raises another interesting possibility. Fathers who had children in the 1970s and 1980s indeed may have played catch with their children more than their own fathers played with them. But they also may have forgotten that, prior to the act's passage in 1966, sunset came "sooner" at the end of the day, leaving less time to play outdoors in the evening. That is, their fathers were operating under different ecological circumstances.

10. A skilled player's arm operates like a catapult to hurl the ball. A whip of the wrist can provide additional spin and speed. The connotation of "throwing like a girl" is almost always negative. The denotation is harder to pin down. (What does "throwing like a girl" look like?) The negative label often appears to be associated with an arm motion that *stops* just as the ball is released, as opposed to allowing the arm to *continue downward*, while finely timing the ball's release.

11. In a study of Korean and Vietnamese immigrant children, one son said, "I love my dad but we never got to play catch. He didn't teach me how to play football. All the stuff a *normal* dad does for kids" (Pyke 2000). Baseball and football are integral to American culture. Some see understanding these games, and learning how to play them, as a benchmark of assimilation.

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