

A Few Things I Know about Softball

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I learned to play softball when I was in sixth grade, from a man named Mr. Robbins. I have had far too much education in my lifetime, and far too many teachers, principals, music teachers, conductors, professors, bosses, senior colleagues—but of all those potential positive influences and mentors, only Mr. Robbins stands out in my mind as someone who gave me advice I still remember, believe, and occasionally find useful. Tall, skinny Mr. Robbins, with his thin hair hanging over his eyes and his little mustache. I didn't know much about the rest of his life, the part that took place away from the softball field. I don't think I ever knew, for example, what he did for a living. I looked to him for one thing only—how to play softball. For all I know, that was his only talent—I can't really say. But why should I care what else he knew, what else he did, to what he aspired, of what he dreamed? He taught a group of girls how to play softball. And I'm so grateful to Mr. Robbins for the knowledge he imparted that I feel some obligation to spread his teachings around.

So here, briefly, is what I know.

Lesson 1: Put your body in front of the ball.

My town—a small one with lots of trees, situated about a 45-minute drive west of Boston—had the usual Little League and Bantam Hockey League for the boys, but we also had something unusual for that time and place: the Sudbury Girls' Softball League. This was the mid-1970s, an era in which girls were required to take Home Ec while boys were required to take Shop. But nearly every girl in town played SGS.

The first year I played, I was placed on an expansion team in the Junior Division. All the teams in the Junior Division (fifth to eighth grades) had

bird names, and we were the Flickers. We were issued dark green short-sleeved T-shirts that said "Sudbury Girls Softball," with no apostrophe. We were small, and so were the shirts. I joined the league primarily because my best friend, Debbie Kutenplon, played in the Junior Division and said I should. Up until that point I had not shown much interest in sports, and my parents were somewhat taken aback to find me suddenly demanding to be driven to games and practices. My two older brothers played both Little League baseball and Bantam League hockey, as well as regular pick-up games of all sorts in the neighborhood. My father would frequently take them across the street and through the woods to the elementary school to play basketball, and if I expressed an interest in joining them, he would tell me I could stand on the side and cheer. He meant no harm, no negative judgment—it just was how he saw the world. I thought this unfair but I didn't push it, since I knew that on the bright side of my father's attitude lay the compensatory fact that he would never make me mow the lawn or shovel the driveway. My mother, meanwhile, boasted frequently about her own athletic abilities and took a lot of genetic credit for my brothers' accomplishments—told me because she was born left-handed she batted lefty, although she had been taught to catch righty—but not once do I recall ever seeing her hit, throw, or catch a ball.

So I was on my own. Usually, I needed only to stay between the high walls of parental expectation and keep up the brisk pace set by my brothers—I didn't really need to pay much attention to where I was going. But softball was a whole new open field upon which neither brother had ever set a cleated foot.

The first year I played, it was actually *Mrs. Robbins* who signed up to take the team. *Mrs. Robbins* was blonde and pretty—in the way that, say, professional female skiers are. We all liked her at first, because she was so pretty. I don't know why she was interested in girls' softball, since she had two little boys. She brought them with her to our games and practices, where they predictably enough misbehaved in ways designed to get her full and immediate attention. Between trying to coach us and trying to instill some discipline in them, she had her hands full, resulting in an overall ineffectiveness. *Mr. Robbins* started coming along to practices to help her out.

Neither *Mrs.* nor *Mr. Robbins* knew my brothers, and so didn't have any idea of what to expect from me. It may have been the first time in my life I made my own first impression on someone. In this case, however, the first impression I made all by myself probably weighed against me—a scrawny Asian American ten-year-old, wearing thick, blue-rimmed glasses.

Most of us, the Flickers being an expansion team, were not very good at catching the ball. I had one advantage—my brother Dick's old glove. Dick had taken obsessively good care of this glove. He had rubbed it all over with a rag dipped in cooking oil every night for years, and it was soft and supple as Wonder Bread. When he got a new glove, he bequeathed the old one to me. The first time Mr. Robbins saw it—it actually caught his eye—he put it on his own hand, punched the pocket a few times, opened and closed it, and gave it back to me. "That's a great glove," he said. "That's the best glove I've ever seen." And I could tell the glove had given him something to weigh against scrawny, slanty-eyed, and bespectacled.

But even with this consecrated equipment, catching the ball was a challenge. A softball, after all, really is not "soft," although admittedly it lacks the intimidating skull-like hardness of a baseball, and doesn't make quite the same purposeful whistling sound that a baseball makes when it's tunneling through the air. But even so, it can leave you with a painful fluorescent purple-green bruise if it hits you, and if you were to see one hurtling in your direction, your fundamental instinct really might not be to place yourself in front of it. The instinct, particularly among fifth- and sixth-grade girls who were new to the sport, was to avert the face and cower.

I had even more reason than most to be wary. Too vividly in my mind's eye, I saw the ball's straight path ending abruptly in the middle of Dick's face during the father-son game at the church picnic. Too clearly I heard and heard again the *crunch!* All too well I remembered my father (it was he who had hit the ball) running over to where Dick lay on the ground with gore pouring from his nose. Also I recalled the ensuing weeks during which Dick had to wear a maroon plastic cast over the broken feature, and every time he called Mom, it came out *Bob*.

Mrs. Robbins seemed to think that repetition was the road to enlightenment, and so she had us practice throwing and catching in two parallel lines that, in her dreams, moved further and further apart in direct proportion to the growth of our abilities. We practiced a lot, but what seemed like a bucketful of progress during practice quickly revealed its emptiness in the game situation. Catching a ball tossed directly, by a friendly teammate, into your glove from a few feet away was quite different from staying calm in the face of an unpredictable ball in a hostile context. It was easy to get flustered, to take the easy, safe way out. Those were the times you told yourself, "It's only a dumb game."

It wasn't long before Mr. Robbins started making suggestions. "Dana," he'd say to Mrs. Robbins helpfully, "why dontcha try . . ." And she'd flash

him the look of death. But it was he who really taught us—taught us, rather than expected us to teach ourselves. He understood that it was our instincts, not just our shoulders, elbows, and wrists, that had to be trained. He assured us that our gloves would protect us—it was merely a matter of positioning. We were in the habit of holding our gloves out and as far away from our bodies as possible, heels of our hands facing up in a hopeful, supplicating way. “Hold the gloves up!” he exhorted. “UP! In front of yuh faces!” So we learned to hold our gloves up—first as a shield, then, tentatively, more and more as a receptacle.

But more importantly, he told us over and over that we had to be *standing in the right place*. It did no good to stand to the side out of harm’s way and sort of stick out your arm in a well-meaning gesture. If you harbored any genuine intention of catching the ball, you had to be smack in front of it. That way, even if you didn’t catch it with your glove, you still had a chance of stopping it in some other creative and spontaneous manner. Since we so frequently had to resort to the creative and spontaneous stopping methods, this lesson was critically important. It was, at any rate, a start.

We lost every game but one—the last one—that year. At every game at least one girl cried, usually several. But that final game gave us a tiny glimpse—far, far in the distance—of an alternate future, and the following year we all came back.

Lesson 2: Catch with both hands.

The second year, Mr. and Mrs. Robbins took the team as co-coaches. I suppose we ought to have known this was not a felicitous plan. I wonder, now, how they could rationally have come to that decision. Anyway, it did not work out well. Mrs. Robbins grew more touchy and defensive. Mr. Robbins seethed and steamed. The two boys grew more boisterous and unruly, and both of their parents yelled at them a lot.

But we girls were noticeably less afraid of the ball. We were ready for the next lesson.

“Use both hands!”

Sometimes, with a great cry of triumph, one of us would hold the ball aloft, netted serendipitously in the web of our glove. But Mr. Robbins knew dumb luck when he saw it. He knew we could not be counted on to do it again. He knew we had closed our eyes and stuck out our hand, and the ball had fallen in. He would not congratulate us for unearned good fortune.

“Use both hands!”

Worse, there were the times when the ball would be there, it would be there, and then it would be gone. Bounced out. Then Mr. Robbins would smack his forehead with his bony hand.

“Both hands for God’s sake! Trap that ball! Get both hands up theah!”

I should mention that on the softball field we all spoke with strong New England accents, even those of us who normally didn’t. It wasn’t an effort to be someone we weren’t. It wasn’t some kind of affectation. It just came with the territory. In my town, you never heard anyone pronounce the “r” in “batter” in “She’s no batter.” You might just as well call out, “She is not any batter,” that’s how stupid it would have sounded. The word was “battah,” and any other pronunciation would have led to misunderstanding.

Madeline Berdy, who was a great friend on the field but would never speak to me in school, was our team’s beauty-to-be. Woven silver rings covered every finger. She had long wavy brown hair that she would never tie back in a ponytail, bright silver braces, and silver earrings. She gave off a great glinty, silvery impression on sunny days, and she didn’t like to use both hands. It looked too effortful.

“Berdy,” Mr. Robbins would say. “Yuh drop even one ball because yuh didn’t use both hands, I’ll deck yuh.”

And even after we were able to catch the ball solidly, competently, convincingly, he’d still frown at us until we had quickly, quickly brought up our right hands to cover what we held—firmly it seemed, but who knew, perhaps not firmly enough—in our left.

That year we went 6–6.

Lesson 3: Throw the ball ahead of the runner.

By the third year, Mrs. Robbins and Mr. Robbins were getting a divorce, and Mr. Robbins took the team on his own. No one was surprised. The parents, sort of nervously joking among themselves, would say, “It was the team that did it,” and since all we girls knew about Mr. and Mrs. Robbins was what we saw on the field, we sort of thought that was true. We kind of felt bad about it, but not really. People were getting divorced all over the place at that time, and Mr. and Mrs. Robbins seemed fairly amicable. Sometimes she would still come to games with the boys.

“When he moved out, the only thing he took with him was his clothes and the Flickers team picture,” she told everybody, laughing.

By this time, having taught us to use our bodies, Mr. Robbins was trying to teach us to use our heads. It was slow going.

"If yuh runnuh is headed to first base, wheah do you throw the ball?"

Silence.

"Wheah do you throw the ball?"

"Uh . . . first base?"

"NO! The runnah's practically theah. If yunna hurry to throw her out, yuh gonna make a bad throw. Yuh throw it ovuh the first baseman's head, and now wheah's yuh runnuh? Headed for SECOND! Then whaddayuh do, first baseman?"

"Um . . . throw it to second?"

"NO! She's theah! Throw it to third, or hold on to it and run it into the pitchuh. Don't staht throwing that ball around!"

Mr. Robbins stood at the plate and hit balls to us in the field. "Runnuh on third!" Crack! "Wheah do you throw the ball? Stop the runnuh yuh know yuh can stop."

That was hard to learn, because it was counterintuitive. When you saw that girl running, you wanted to stop her, even if you knew it was too late. It was hard to ignore that front runner and focus on the one sneaking up on you from behind. It was hard to think in terms of damage control. But Mr. Robbins, I guess, knew all about that.

That year, we went undefeated and won the championship. If this were fiction, I probably would have to change that in the interests of verisimilitude. It strains credibility for any team to go from 1-11 to 12-0 and the championship in three seasons—that kind of thing only happens in bad movies starring adorable child actresses who grow up to be substance abusers. But I'm not making this up, so there it is.

Lesson 4: Make them throw you out.

By the fourth year, some of us were ninth graders and had graduated into the Senior Division. Mr. Robbins stayed with the depleted Flickers that year, and those of us in ninth grade had to suffer through a year with Mr. Marino, Lauren Marino's father. I began to understand that the fact that Mr. Robbins didn't have a daughter made him a much better coach. Lauren—naturally curly dirty-blond hair—got to play whatever position she wanted. Mr. Marino made me play catcher one game, and I actually swore at him. This was something I wouldn't have done in my ordinary life, swear at an adult, but my softball life was different. I swore at Mr.

Marino and threw the catcher's mask and got thrown out of the game. Mr. Robbins used to say he would retire from coaching once all the Flickers graduated to the senior division. But then he came to see Mr. Marino coach a game. After that, we were able to talk him into moving up to Seniors instead.

In the Senior Division, the teams were given cat names. We were the Jaguars now. Our shirts had three stripes on the sleeves, and there was now enough room on the front of the shirts for the apostrophe.

Softball had become indistinguishable from springtime for me. The season started when the weather was still cold, the grass brown and breath white. We played softball through dim evenings, April rains and resulting mud, first birdsongs, discarded windbreakers in a pile. It ended in late June, when the outfield wore a humming, low-lying cover of bugs and we in the green outfield wore jeans to protect our legs against them, even when the rest of the team wore shorts.

By the time we were in the Senior Division, most of the girls possessed basic catching, throwing, and hitting skills, and our lessons became more complex.

"People will make mistakes if yuh give them enough chance," said Mr. Robbins. "So give them as much chance as possible."

He was teaching us how to run bases. When you're running to first base, you have a choice to make. You can veer to the inside of the first base line as you run, so that the curve of your path naturally takes you into foul territory after you touch first and you cannot be thrown out, so the other team won't try. Or, you can veer to the outside and then you'll run fair, towards second. When you do that, whoever has the ball will throw it to first. You run a risk, of course, that they will succeed. But there's always the possibility that they'll screw up. So you create that opportunity as often as you can by heading for second.

At the other bases, there's never any question. You keep running for the next base and make them throw the ball. If you force them to throw the ball, chances are they will miss, because two people are involved—the thrower and the catcher. Where two people are involved, the possibility of error is very high. Other teams did not know what to make of girls who would not stop at the next base but instead kept on going. Other teams had not been taught as well as we had been to hold onto the ball, and would start throwing it around with increasing frustration in an effort to catch us. Every time they threw the ball, more people became involved. With more than two people involved, a mistake is almost inevitable. So the idea was,

as long as you could run you ran, and kept running, and didn't stop until they made you.

Of course, this general rule required some fine-tuning. Overrunning third base, for example, became an issue because of Nanette Doiron, who couldn't seem to learn that it wasn't enough simply to keep running, she had to run *towards home*. Nanette had lank, shoulder-length brown hair, and a turned-up nose that seemed perpetually sunburned. She wore a shell necklace tight around her neck. Nanette was a solid hitter. If she was up, you could pretty much count on her to advance the runners. But even senior year I remember her overrunning third base—not towards home, and not by some discreet, correctable amount, but straight into the bleachers while the other team calmly threw her out. Mr. Robbins clutched at his by now quite thin hair, but no one could get angry at Nanette. It simply did no good. The third-base coach could hold up both her hands and screech “Nanette! STOP!”—to no avail. Nothing could stop Nanette; she was determined to run into the bleachers. Who can explain it?

But generally, for everyone other than the Nanettes of the world, the advice is sound. The other team may be able to stop you eventually, but you should never, ever, make it easy for them by being the obstacle in your own path.

Lesson 5: Run and look over your shoulder.

By sophomore year in high school, I had become established in left field. The outfield: where they stick the kids who can't catch. Left field was not quite as ignominious as right field. The Junior Division had been able to claim only a handful of hitters strong enough to reach the outfield, and none of them batted lefty, so right field might as well have been left protected by the weeds. In left field, at least some modicum of attention was required. Back in the Juniors, I wanted so badly to play second base—not first base (too much responsibility), and not third base (too far to throw to first), but second. I wanted to be up front, close to what was going on, part of the inner circle.

But by the time we reached the Seniors, several things had changed. Most noticeably, the body shape of the average SGS player. Several girls who just the year before were skinny and pink-cheeked, their physical futures still hidden in their bones, had suddenly grown large breasts and thick legs. In spite of new women's bodies, though, these girls still wore

pigtails, which made their heads seem quite small. These girl-women hit to the outfield on a regular basis, and it got busy out there.

The other thing that changed, I guess, was me. I had become accustomed to left field. I found that I far preferred standing on the grass to the clumpy, yellowish dirt, and I liked being alone out there. I didn't like how fast you had to react in the infield—I enjoyed the luxury of seeing the ball rise off the bat, knowing I didn't have any responsibility towards it until it had begun its descent. And how often in a suburban life do you get to stand by yourself in a field? How often are you sufficiently far away from anything else that there's nothing to measure yourself against, and you can no longer tell how big or small you are? How often do you get to see how the world is circular and you're in the exact center? I realize that to spectators, infielders, to everyone else, it looked as if I was the one far away on the periphery—but that's a misperception. The truth is, when I played left field, I was in the middle, while the rest of the game was taking place in a distant corner.

Left field was mine in a way that no part of the infield could belong to anybody, with all those people running through, across, and around it. Nothing came into my personal domain without my permission. By the time I was in high school, I knew how to place myself in front of the ball, how to take control of it, how to hit my cut-off person—Lisa Brasington, our sweet-natured shortstop, who had acne and ended up in ROTC—in a clean motion. But suddenly, just as quickly as they had started hitting balls to me, the big girls gained another 20 pounds and started hitting them *past* me.

“Yuh can't back up on those,” said Mr. Robbins. “Yuh run backwards, yuh gunna fall. When yuh know wheah that ball's goin', *turn around and run!* Look ovah yuh left shouldah, keep your eye on it, and reach for it! Reach!” The days of standing and waiting were over.

The first time I made use of this lesson, the batter was a very big girl. Mighty. The word “Sudbury” strained and stretched across the expanse of her chest. I watched her on deck as she swung her bat and surveyed the outfield with her small, buried eyes. She was a righty, and therefore her ball would likely be mine. She stepped up to the plate, surveyed, and pointed the bat in my general direction. I could tell that she had registered the fact that I was the smallest of the outfielders. There was no question now that it was between her and me. Our pitcher, Donna Somers, let fly. The big girl whacked the ball soundlessly, and a moment later I heard the report—the crack always made it out to left field after a short delay. Up went the

ball. There was a lot of sky, and a speck of ball. It hung suspended. Then gradually less sky, more ball. More and more ball—and by now I could tell it was headed past me. I turned around and ran. I was running, and looking back. Right—no, left shoulder. Running, looking back. I wasn't going to get to it, but—"reach!"—I dove and fell. I hadn't felt any impact or heard any reassuring noise, but I opened my glove . . . there it was! and I rolled over and held it up. From the vast distance I saw the big girl, who was just rounding third, throw down her cap, and Mr. Robbins leap in the air. Third out. I casually threw the ball to Lisa and trotted in while the rest of my teammates came out to jump on me and hit me with their gloves.

I heard the other coach consoling the disappointed girl. "It was a *great* hit. That kid just made an *unbelievable* catch. You were *robbed*."

Great hit! She'll never remember that "great hit," since it got her exactly nowhere. Lay it on top of the great garbage barge of memory and let it drift away, honey, along with all the other beautiful might-have-beens, almost-weres. But I'll remember that catch until I die.

That year my teammates picked me for the All-Stars.

I never would grow up to be an athlete. In college, I played softball for one season, but it was a fast-pitch league and I couldn't adjust my sluggish swing. I think some of those girls got into college on the strength of their softball abilities, and I was outclassed by a long shot. The girl who beat me out for left field, a true and graceful athlete who could catch anything as well as hit anything, *had only one arm*. Practices were at 5:30 AM starting in the winter months: the smell of the inside of the cage was of last year's sweat and bore no resemblance to Sudbury's warm fields. We were expected to do unacceptable things like lifting weights and Indian running. This was not the game I knew, and I didn't love it any more. So as it turns out, the first impression of me—that I was not an athlete—was pretty much correct.

It was a little sad, the first spring that I did not play softball. That spring, when I smelled the sharp grassy smell and felt the first kinder breeze lift my hair, I felt there was someplace I was supposed to be. And I still feel that way sometimes, some two decades later—even in the middle of the city where I can't smell the grass at all, I only imagine I do.

But there will always be the year I made All-Stars.

Now, I'm talking about softball, I'm not talking about Life. Although, when I think about it, the things I learned from Mr. Robbins *could* be life lessons. There are many activities people do with one hand that could benefit from the use of both—driving, for instance. And not running backwards is a good

rule in any context. But all I really want to say is that Mr. Robbins knew something about something, and because of him, now I know something about something too. Life seems so swampy sometimes. Statements with subtexts, people who aren't who they seem to be, social conventions that mask despair—all these leave me floundering. But I know, if you place me on a softball field, in that very particular situation I will know what I ought to do, even if I couldn't in reality execute it. For that certainty I thank Mr. Robbins, and I think of him often. ■