

Lessons in Mediocrity

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Dedicated to:

Lane Kiffin and JaMarcus Russell

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Introduction

I am above average when it comes to being mediocre. I realized this on a recent trip to my hometown in Delaware. Going down stairs one morning to help my dad and brother take down a bookshelf to make room for a pool table, I saw that the decaying wooden bookshelf was littered with trophies. The ones adorned with the names of the teams that I played on as a youth, The Hawks, the Celtics and the A's respectively, all have one startling thing in common: they are all second place trophies. With the dusty, cobwebbed trophies glaring at me in the face, I realized that the place where I have been the most mediocre throughout my life has been sports. Paradoxically, not only am I mediocre, I am also totally obsessed.

Nothing has made me question the purpose of life more than playing sports as a kid and watching sports now in my early twenties. The funny thing is that when it comes to professional sports, I could have chosen any teams to cheer for, but I somehow managed to choose all teams that are incredibly mediocre right now. Ok, maybe the Raiders are just plain bad, the worst team in the NFL, but I still love them. I also love the Sixers, who are now out of the playoffs, the Phillies, who currently have the worst record in the National League, and the Flyers, who are also currently out of the playoffs. Who knows, maybe I like those teams because of their identifiable mediocrity. I could never

cheer for a team that is constantly winning, like the Yankees. Though I do like all of those teams, the one that means the most to me is the Oakland Raiders.

Ask anyone what I'm like after an Oakland Raiders loss, and they'll tell you how I take it personally. When the Raiders lose, it's not just the team that loses; I also lose. I take full responsibility. If I had worn my black Tim Brown jersey rather than my White Lament Jordan jersey, maybe things would've been different. If I had worn my baseball hat instead of my ski cap, they would have won. If I had stuck to listening to the game on the Internet rather than studying for my senior literary comprehensive exams, they would have won. I have something to do with every loss the Raiders endure, and while my father blames God for these losses, I blame only myself.

Yes, my father actually blames GOD when the Raiders lose. It's that personal to him. The being that he believes created the entire world actually took time out of his or her busy schedule to make sure the Raiders lost just to infuriate my dad. Like I said before, I don't blame God, I blame myself.

I don't think that I've cried over more in the past few years than I have during Raiders games. And I'm not talking about crying in a normal sense, you know, the way you kinda cry when Jeff Buckley hits the last note of "Halleluiah" or the way you always cry when Little Foot's mother dies in The Land Before Time, I'm talking about a death in the family crying. My face gets red, my eyes well up, and I just sit in my room and cry. It is *that* serious.

If I were addicted to anything else in the world, my friends would have had an intervention by now. My mom would be in the corner crying while a fellow Raiders fan sits across from me explaining how he was once an addict as well. I would sit all huffy

puffy slouching in my chair not listening to the words of wisdom from this fellow sufferer. I'm sure that even if I went through rehab, I wouldn't be able to shake the addiction to sports.

Fans like me should have to go door to door before they move into a neighborhood; neighbors should have fair warning. Although I would loathe going door to door like The Jesus in The Big Lebowski to explain my situation to my neighbors, they deserve it. Precautionary measures need to be taken should the Raiders ever blow another second half lead to a division rival.

A recent date asked me if I liked sports and I regaled her for nearly ten minutes about my love for the Raiders. I talked about the silver and black license plate on the front of my car, the matching sticker on the back, the many t-shirts, jerseys and hoodies and hats that clutter my closet. When I finally caught my breath and saw that she was no longer paying attention, I knew that I'd be lucky to go out on another date with her. By the time I regained my bearings and remembered to ask her questions about herself, she already knew the score. She wouldn't just be dating me; she'd be dating the Raiders.

I start every morning by checking the Raider fan forums, scouring the Internet for any morsel of news. When they hired their new coach Lane Kiffin in January, I listened to the press conference and analyzed his every word. At this point, he sounds good, but ask me a year from now and I'll probably be calling for his head.

Any fan of any team or any person addicted to a particular sport knows what I'm talking about. I have a friend up in Delaware who refuses to go out to bars in the winter until the Flyers games are over. There was a woman at my church who could give you

any stat on any of the Philadelphia Phillies players at any given time. This addiction could not have appeared out of thin air, and I believe the source of it all to be my dad.

My dad's addiction became my addiction. While some kids inherit blond hair or brown eyes from their parents, I inherited a love of sport. Every Christmas he'd give us gifts like Marcus Allen or Bo Jackson jerseys, and we named our family cats after famous Raiders like Howie Long, Marcus Allen, and Dokie Williams. All three of these cats died within a month of living with our family, Marcus got hit by a car and Howie and Dokie died of cancer, and if that doesn't ominously foreshadow the demise of the Raiders organization then I don't know what does. He let my brother and me stay up late to watch Phillies and Sixers games when we were little, all the while explaining the merits of players like Mike Schmidt and Charles Barkley. I didn't realize it then, but I know now that he only let me stay up late to watch the ends of games in order to groom me into a sports junkie like himself.

How do I crack the ice with strangers? I ask them about their thoughts on whether or not the Phoenix Suns can win an NBA championship this year. What's my favorite way of pre-gaming before heading out to a bar? By watching any hockey or college basketball game on TV of course, and if the Raiders happen to be playing at night, forget going out all together. Even if it's a meaningless pre-season game, I will watch all four quarters just to analyze the subs and third stringers to see how they play against the other teams shitty reserves. This is all because of youth sports.

I can still remember the game that I first scored a goal in an organized youth soccer game. My team squared off against the Concord Cobras on the field located in the back right hand corner of the Western YMCA sports complex. Some train tracks ran just

behind the far goal, and every thirty minutes or so, the din of the crowd would be smothered beneath the chugging and churning of the railroad cars. My goal came in the second half with our team already up by two goals. A cross came in off of my friend Jefferson's foot and instead of jumping up and using my head like I should have-I still hate heading the ball to this day-I simply let it drop over my back shoulder. This confused my defender and caused me to have an easy opening to spin around and kick a little dribbler that somehow trickled in past the goaltender. In my short twenty-two year existence, I still can't think of many things that top the pure elation that ran through my body as I saw the net ripple from the slight impact of the shot.

Though good memories like this blossom from youth sports, bad ones do as well, and while the victories are long forgotten, the times when I came in second place remain burned into my memory bank. I would rather be dead last than second. I would rather have my beloved Oakland Raiders be the worst team in the NFL than the second best team in the league. It hurt so much more when they lost in the Super Bowl back in my senior year of high school than it did when they came in dead last this year. At least they get the first pick in next year's draft for coming in last place; for coming in second they only got the thirty-first pick.

I would like to shake the hand of the person who came up with the saying, "Second place is the first loser." It is true in so many ways. Think about it, if you got passed over for a promotion these days but were the runner up and second choice for that job, would you think that second is the best? Hell no, you'd be agreeing whole-heartedly that second place is indeed the first loser. And you know something, you'd be right.

Second place is the horror of watching the culmination of everything you've worked for during a long season come up short. It is getting to the end of Jenga and pulling the wrong block out causing the whole foundation to collapse. Second place is like shaving with a rusty razor and gasoline.

Well this is for all of those out there who have come in second place their entire life. We are the perpetual middle of the roaders, the forever "average" guy who's a great friend but just an ok lover, and it is time that our story was told. I will begin this tale from the start, at youth league soccer.

Soccer

I sway back and forth in between the two goal posts. I stop the first shot fired off of Jefferson's foot, but let in the next ball, shot by my friend John, and the next one, shot by Sarah. My father, the head coach of my soccer team, The Hawks, watches, with his two assistant coaches, Mr. Jones and Mr. Bedford, standing by his side. Jones smiles at me and shrugs his shoulders, but Bedford and my dad stand staring at me with stone faces before they turn to talk to one another. My dad walks over, his white Polo shirt with a red Hawk emblem plastered over his right shirt pocket drenched in sweat, his black Seiko brand stopwatch swaying from his neck, his black Addidas' covered in mud and grass stains from last Saturdays practice in the rain, I already know what he's going to say.

He takes me aside, tells me to get on my regular red uniform, that I will be playing mid-field and that Michael Marsh will be taking over in goal. Tiny tears begin tearing at my eyelids, trying to burst forth. I hold them back. I take off my shiny orange jersey with purple lightning bolts streaking down the sides. I rip off my velcro gloves, toss them on top of my bag, and look back at dad. He is watching Michael stop nearly every ball that is shot at him, he is smiling his crooked toothed smile.

His teeth hadn't always been crooked. They used to be straight and perfect and white, but then he began playing soccer. He played goalie and his brother, my uncle Willie, played the field. One day they were playing with some friends on an old dirt lot behind their middle school, and my uncle's friend had a break way and when my dad

tried to stop him, he missed kicking the ball and instead kicked my dad in the mouth. The blood gushed forth and his two big front teeth held each hands as they intersected across the front of his mouth.

While I put on my jersey, I look over at my uncle and watch his team as they warm up. They look better, faster and bigger than us, and a sense of dread slowly slides down into my fingertips, causing my skinny arms to hang numb beside my sides. I wouldn't even have been playing soccer if it hadn't of been for my uncle.

When my Uncle Willie decided to start a youth team of his own for my cousin and his friends, my dad decided that he had to start a team consisting of my friends and me. Delaware is a small state, and news travels fast, so by the time my uncle got wind of this, he began preparations for the first ever meeting between the two households.

My Uncle Willie was like the Megatron to my father's Optimus Prime, and though I don't believe my Uncle to be anything close to a Decepticon, he was, for a time, my father's arch nemesis. But before they could begin clashing with one another on the glorious clean-cut lawns provided by Delaware's Western YMCA and Kirkwood soccer fields respectively, they had to first assemble teams. For his team, my dad didn't have to look far.

The neighborhood I lived in had plenty of kids my age for my dad to choose from. Since we usually spent our time terrorizing the surrounding cul-de-sacs with games of ring and run or shoplifting Air-Heads from the local convenience stores, the idea of assembling us into a team and getting us out of trouble seemed ideal to my dad. And so he recruited his first three players for the Delaware Hawks.

My friend Jefferson Taylor became the first friend that my father enlisted to play on the team, and in him, he had a natural born striker. At that age, when dribbling skills are at a minimum, the only real requirement for being a striker is speed and Jefferson had plenty of that. Each year, Jefferson would take home the tin foil gold medal at our grade school Olympics for the 100-yard dash. I remember one year I finished third to his first and swelled up with pride.

Jefferson had a year-round tan, thanks in part to his dad's Italian heritage, and a brown bowl cut, which we all had at that time. I am convinced that sometime in the late eighties, parents got together and had a meeting where they decided that the bowl cut would be the only appropriate form of haircut for kids ages nine to twelve.

Another player, John Irvin, lived right next to the park and we hung out at his house after school. His mom made the best fluffer-nutter sandwiches, which I loved cause my mom had a firm policy that the only substance to accompany peanut butter on a sandwich was jelly, and so she put a lifetime ban on fluff in the Thomas household. His dad had a massive thirteen piece shiny purple drum set and taught us about some crazy musician who could actually make his guitar talk, a guitar player who I know now as peter Frampton. Irvin had a blond bowl cut, and he had a lighter year round tan than Jefferson's. In Irvin, my father found his central midfielder, or as he liked to say, being a huge Civil War history geek, his field general.

Seamus McNaughtly, one of my closest friends, would've loved to play with us if an older team hadn't already picked him. Seamus was a pale redheaded kid with freckles who gained notoriety amongst my friends and me by farting whenever asked and having to endure many "piggy back" rides from our creepy old gym teacher, Mr. Noble.

Mr. Noble had a bony face with skin that sagged off his decrepit skeletal cheeks and a bald head covered in islands of olive colored liver spots. Everyday he dressed in baggy blue gym jogging pants and the same smelly gray collard short sleeve shirt. Noble spent our gym classes by raving about the horrors of McDonalds fries, though I swear I saw him once order a Super Size combo meal at a McDonalds after church, and making Seamus hop on his back while the rest of us played basketball. While my classmates and I shot foul shots, Mr. Noble made laps around the gym with poor pale Seamus clinging to his back with the fear of Christ in his eyes. Of course we ridiculed the hell out of him for it, more so because of his terrified facial expressions and the way he clung to the old man's back like a baby Koala Bear than the fact that he was being semi-molested in front of us. Looking back, I can't recall why none of us ever told our parents about the inappropriate laps around the gym he made with Seamus on his back.

Because of his size and speed, my dad really wanted Seamus to play for us, but he had already committed to another team. The other kid in our neighborhood who didn't join the team right away, but did in later years, was named Jack Kincaid, or Jacky as we called him. Jacky had dark brown hair, of course matted down in an bowl cut, and pale skin with piercing green eyes. He always made me laugh with his perfect Pee-Wee Herman impersonations, but he never smiled when the opening whistle of a soccer game blew, and he would always be the first to let my teammates and me know if we had made a mistake.

The last person from our neighborhood to join the original Hawks' roster was me, the coaches' son, who played goalie. At that age I had blonde hair, which has since gone brown, and blue eyes, which have since been splattered with hints of green. As the

goalie, I was the final wall that separated my team from defeat. This is an extreme amount of responsibility to shoulder for a nine year old, but one that I willingly accepted because the goalies got to wear cooler jerseys than the field players. Little did I realize that goalie is probably the worst position in all of sports because you can never do anything positive like score a goal; you can only do negative things like let in a goal.

Our attackers were the two Tim's, Tim One and Tim Two, and Jefferson. Tim One was short, quick and hardly ever spoke, while Tim Two was tall, strong, and incredibly loud. In the mid-field were Ricky, John and Stephen, the three best ball controllers on our team, which at the age of nine meant that they could actually dribble the ball for a few steps without kicking it out of bounds. Finally, at defense, we had Sarah, a long-haired brunette and my first official crush, besides Paula Abdul, who played stopper. Greg and Tiffany, another brunette, played the two outside defensive backs, and Dan, or as we called him Stomp, played at sweeper. Two other coaches, Mr. Jones and Mr. Bedford, whose kids were Dan and Ricky, came aboard to assist my dad.

Jones had a brown crew cut and big gold rectangular glasses. He kept all the kids laughing by doing things like talking in a high pitched Kermit the frog voice, and naming us after characters from the movie *The Mighty Ducks*-he labeled me as Averman. Bedford took on the role of drill instructor and harped on us to improve our technical skills. Standing six feet four inches tall and equipped with a menacing handle bar mustache, when Bedford asked us to complete a drill correctly, we always complied. My dad was somewhere in between, though he definitely leaned towards Bedford's side when it came to games. Bedford took a strange pride in getting kicked out of more games than any other parent on the team.

Once, when we were somewhere up in Maryland playing in a tournament a female referee happened to make a call that Bedford didn't like, and he promptly exclaimed, "Why don't you just stay in the kitchen!" The game stopped and the woman ran over to the sidelines and kicked Bedford out of the game.

One day Michael Marsh showed up at practice. He came onto the team wanting to play the field, but instead of coming on as a field player, he joined the team as a goalie and being decidedly taller and bigger than me, he had a huge advantage. But I wasn't too worried because I knew that having my dad as the coach meant that I'd never be benched. My dad would never pull me out of goal in favor of another stranger's child, right?

Wrong. My dad pulled me out and made me into a midfielder. He would rather win that have his son happy, and while I wanted to play goal, Michael did not. So my dad had to sell the idea of Michael being a goalie to him and his parents while at the same time convincing me that being a midfielder would be a lot more fun than being stuck in the goal, even if the goalie got to wear a cooler jersey.

Perhaps it had been his plan all along. Since mid-fielders ran more than any other player on the field, he could teach me all the tactics of sprinting, like running on the balls of the feet rather than the arches, a technique I still haven't mastered.

A coach first and a parent second, my dad did what all good coaches would do and made me the back-up goalie. Eventually I would learn to love the field and hate the goal-keeping position, but at the time it made me angry. As it turned out, moving onto the field became a blessing because it gave me more of an opportunity to talk to Sarah.

At the age of nine, it seemed so much easier to become boyfriend and girlfriend. You simply had to ask a girl if they liked you or not, and if they said yes, then they were

your girlfriend. Of course, it was a girlfriend only in title and perhaps if you were lucky they'd give you a kiss or hold your hand or something.

My favorite memory of her is when we went to a Gettysburg tournament for my brother's soccer team. Since my brother and her brother played on the same team, their games and tournaments enabled me a chance to hang out with Sarah at places other than our games. At this particular tournament, we opted out of watching the game and went back to my parents' car where we proceeded to listen to John Mellencamp's cover of Van Morrison's song "Wild Night" three thousand times in a row.

We sat in the back seat, our knees knocking together in time with the tempo of the song, pearls of sweat swimming down our foreheads, singing the song together, missing every note in unison. I realized she looked different as I reached up to rewind the tape. Her caramel skin looked darker, her eyes warmer, her lips softer and more inviting. At the realization of these thoughts, I slunk back uncomfortably into the backseat and tried my best to ignore her.

I focused more intently on the brilliance of the song, and my chance at asking her to be my girlfriend or at the very least surprise her with a kiss floated away into the blistering summer sky. Sarah probably didn't reciprocate my feelings and may have run crying back to her parents if I had tried to plant a smooch on her.

Soon after the tournament in Gettysburg, my team had its first ever meeting with my cousin's team. My dad spent countless sleepless nights devising plays and coverage schemes for the Hawks to use in order to beat his brother. He even tried to employ a four-four-two line up, that being four defenders, four midfielders, and two strikers, a plan used by most high school and older teams successfully but a plan much to complicated

for nine-year olds to comprehend. So after one chaotic and miserable practice, we went back to the four-three-three offense, four defenders, three midfielders and three strikers.

With the game rapidly approaching, I knew that I had to get a new look to christen the special occasion. So before the game, I asked my mom if I could do away with my bowl haircut and get something a little more stylish, the most stylish hair cut around at that time. So before the game arrived, I went to the hairdresser and got the Sinatra of haircuts, the mullet.

Not only did I get a mullet, I got a mullet with lighting bolts cut into the sides and my number carved into the back. I remember walking into school the Friday before the game with my black and yellow pumps, a Steve Urkel shirt and silver and black Zubaz and not thinking but *knowing* that I was without a doubt the coolest kid in the history of the world. If only Zubaz, Urkel and numbered mullets hadn't gone out of style...

Then Sunday came. The elder Thomas brothers would finally have it out the old fashion way: on the soccer field, competing through their kids. My Nana and Poppop showed up, and being as impartial as possible, decided to stand on my uncle's side for the first half and my dad's side for the second half. With my whole family watching the games every move, the epic battle began, but instead of being an epic battle, the game soon turned into an epic slaughter, like the last part of the Trojan War when the Greeks sneak into the walls of Troy and commence to rip apart every person they can find.

We lost the game four to nothing, all four goals coming in the first half of play before my Uncle decided to cut his brother some slack and put in his reserves.

"This is simply pathetic!" My dad yelled at us during halftime. "Do you even remember what we worked on in practice?"

He even told the mother who brought the orange slices to get away. A youth soccer game without orange slices is like an episode of Miami Vice with Tubbs and no Crockett, it's simply unheard of, but it seemed like good motivation for us as our starters played their scrubs to a zero-zero second half.

After being pulled out of the goal in warm-ups, I hardly played at all in the field during the game. At one point my mom walked up to my dad and ask, "You do know that Adam hasn't played yet, right?"

"Of course I know he's not in, now go sit down!" My dad snapped back. He eventually let me in for the meaningless second half.

Thus began the routine of my team getting trounced by my cousin's team every time we played each other. After awhile, the sting went away from the losses, and the goal differential slowly began withering away. The closest we came to ever beating them was a zero-zero tie, a fact my father proudly boasts of to this day.

The Hawks may not have been the greatest team in the world, but we tried, and it helped me realize that in a world of the mediocre, a zero-zero tie is just as good as a four nothing win.

Basketball

I can't remember any of my family members' birthdays. I know my mom's is somewhere around Valentines Day, my dad's somewhere in November, and my brother's is on the day Bob Marley died in early May. Although I have deleted these incredibly important dates from my memory, I can still remember the exact day when I scored a whopping seventeen points in basketball for the first time in my playing career.

The game took place on Saturday December 20th of 1997, the year I started the seventh grade at Shue-Medill Middle School. A harem of all the popular and pretty girls, led by the blond haired Rebecca Thompson and the lovely brunette Jenny Daniels, had decided that the best thing to do on that particular Saturday afternoon was to come and watch my friends and I play basketball. This gave us a distinct advantage. While we had actual girls in the stands to impress, the other team simply had parents.

One of the most important parts about playing youth basketball as opposed to youth soccer is the fact that it's played indoors. While all the shouting of parents during soccer can be somewhat drowned out and forgotten, on an indoor court every single word gets heard. Shouts and groans throb and ricochet off the walls and hardwood floor. The sounds are trapped inside a bubble and nothing escapes. Not only do the sounds of the parents and the cheering of middle school girls fill the stadium, but the sounds of the game do as well. Referee's whistles, rubber souls of sneakers squeaking as players stop suddenly and turn, the basketball bouncing up and down off the floor as the point guard

brings up the ball, that hypnotizing *THUMP... THUMP... THUMP* coming and disappearing at regular intervals.

This always bugged me about youth basketball because while I could hide my mediocrity as best as I could on a soccer field, there are only nine other bodies on a basketball court so it is impossible to blend in. The fact that the girls were there dissecting my every move really got to me, but at the same time, I think it fueled me to my seventeen point performance. I called for the ball confidently every time I posted my opponent up down on the inside paint, as opposed to other games where I would just wait for one of my teammates to see me and feed me the ball. When I blocked someone, I talked some trash instead of remaining silent. I even tried my hand at being a point guard, though I made the first available pass after getting the ball across mid-court and then ran down to the low post. That feeling stayed with me for only that one game, and every game after that was spent trying fruitlessly to get it back. Besides the girls cheering for us, another reason why I played so well had to do with my coach.

Silvio Moretti was a very quiet coach but one who got the job done. He never berated us when we were playing badly and always made the perfect substitutions at the exact moment he saw one of us running out of steam. He looked similar to a pony, with a long gentle face and a curly grey and brown mullet that fell down just below the back of his neck. My father likened him to Rick Petino, not so much because of their shared Italian heritage, but more so because of their coaching styles.

Like Petino, Moretti taught his team to run, run, run, until the other team couldn't take it any longer. At the start of every practice, he would have us run wind sprints up and down the court before we even got into the fundamentals of basketball. He

demanded conditioning over polished skills. In fact, one of my favorite parts about youth basketball was the practicing.

I remember we practiced in various gyms during the icy winter months, my body thin as death stumbling onto the hardwood floor, my small knobby knees knocking together. The snow would stick to my sneakers, making me slip across the court. I'd throw bounce passes a second too late or when I received a pass, it would slap down off my cold flat palms as I tried to return warmth to my icicle fingers. Whenever we would break for water, I'd run outside with the rest of my teammates and we'd take turns sucking on my friend Sean's inhaler just for fun, tasting the nasty bubbles that stung the back of my throat like unflavored, highly carbonated soda. After fooling around outside for a few minutes, we'd go back inside to work on pick and rolls, high screens, and of course, backdoor passes.

For the first two years of Moretti teaching our team, the league rules forced him to teach us to play man to man defense, a defensive style where each player is assigned a particular man to guard, in order to make the games fairer. But the year I scored my seventeen points, he employed the tactic of zone defense, where a player guards a particular area and not a particular player, and even taught us the full court press.

The first years under his tutelage, we were unable to run the full court press defense, a defensive style that allows one team to guard another team on the whole floor as opposed to waiting for them to bring the ball over the half court line, but since this year we moved up an age group, the full court press was allowed and all bets were off as to how we would handle the new pressure defense. As it turned out, Moretti's plan worked perfectly. That day, we ran the other team out of the building.

Though our whole team played well, I remember only the moments where I shone. I posted opponents up like Timmy Duncan, passed the ball like Steve Nash, and shot like Gilbert Arenas. In fact, I even fouled out with ten seconds left just so I could brag that I actually got fouled out of a game at some point during my athletic tenure.

But alas, all good things have to come to an end and after that game, I returned to my stint of average sporting servitude. The next game we played, I took shot after shot but nothing fell. I only scored four points the entire next game, and those came thanks to free throws. Not only did I seem to come down from that unattainable high, but all my teammates did as well, and that year we came in second place of the league for the third straight year. Even with the fancy full court defense and the suffocating zone press, we still came up short.

The only thing worse than coming in second place is coming in second place three years in a row. Just ask any fan or player of the Buffalo Bills back in the early nineties, a team that reached the Super Bowl an astounding four straight times and lost every single one. If there were history book written of the youth league Delaware YMCA basketball teams of the mid to late nineties, we were certainly the YMCA's version of the Buffalo Bills. Those losses were extremely excruciating because we lost to the same team in the finals three years in a row.

These losses made me hate the other team. Every year, I'd have to sit back with my friends and watch as they villainously hoisted their first place trophies with smug smiles slinking across their faces. Were they really *that* much better than us? I hated them for their happiness. I wanted their joy for my own. They should have to feel the

sting of losing at least once in their miserable happy little lives. The worst one of them all wasn't even a player but a coach.

Dennis Harper coached the team and also, conveniently, served as a referee for the YMCA. I can't begin to remember how many times he screwed our team during regular season play. Whenever he refereed our games, our team always seemed to commit more fouls than the other team. He also somehow managed to get the first pick each year in the draft and would take a pair of brothers who were the Jordan and Pippen of the league. Perhaps that isn't an accurate analogy because while one brother was a Goliath like creature, standing about six foot three inches in the seventh grade, the other brother resembled a Tolkien Hobbit, so maybe it is more appropriate to say they were the Shaq and Wade of the league. This worked to their advantage, however, and while one brother would dominate the inside, the other would navigate the perimeter and shoot three pointers like a sniper.

We thought the full court press would slow them down, but it only seemed to make them angrier. In the third championship game, I had to guard the huge brother and because of this assignment I had to face him in the tip off. I can remember laughing outwardly thinking I had no chance against the behemoth, but his size hindered his jumping ability. I actually won the tip-off, and while only a small victory, it acted as kerosene to fuel the freak's fire. He rejected about twenty-five percent of the shots my team took and grabbed an ungodly amount of rebounds while his little brother just could not miss.

Besides the tip-off, the game did not produce any real memorable moments other than the fact that we lost. In other losses, there were great moments like the first

championship when my frustrated friend Jacky had the ball stolen from him. The opposing player cruised in for an easy lay-up, and our whole team just watched defeated from half court with our hands on our hips, when out of nowhere Jacky came flying in and pushed the kid from behind. The kid's body nailed the concrete wall face first and the player crumbled to the ground like a discarded Styrofoam cup, and Jacky got awarded with a technical foul. Luckily, the player received no permanent damage from the play, and he sank both of his free throws.

The other time we lost, we were playing in a two game elimination tournament and we had made it to the finals undefeated. There we met Harper's team for the second time, and since they had already lost one game earlier in the tournament, we only had to beat them once while we thought that they had to beat us twice. We lost the first game, giving each team one loss in a two-loss elimination tournament, and were gearing up for the second game when we found out that they would just be awarded the first place trophy while we would get our second acidic swig of arriving in second.

My friend, Jeremy, who was a little bit older and came to watch me and my friends play, waited for me on the bleachers as I slumped over with my small, second place trophy clinging barely to the tips of my defeated fingers. My dad stood next to him, a scowl smeared across his five o'clock shadowed face. He had his glasses off and was rubbing his eyes in disbelief, like someone who just witnessed an alien spaceship land in a parking lot.

"You know what you should do?" He asked as he walked down from the bleachers with his hands firmly entrenched in his green Eagles jacket.

"What?" I asked, my eyes longing for guidance.

"Put that stupid thing in the middle of the floor."

"Seriously?" I raised my trophy to my face and looked at it. Sure it was crappy and little, but did I really want to lose a memento of one of the greatest screw jobs in YMCA history?

"Do it...fuck em."

I couldn't believe Jeremy used the word fuck in front of my dad, but even more surprising, was that my dad stood next to him with his hands folded across his chest and nodded in agreement. Hesitation gripped me. Refusing a trophy I had rightfully won was the YMCA youth sports equivalent of burning a draft card during the Vietnam War. I looked behind them. All the other parents had the same expression of disbelief plastered on their faces. My friends limped off the court and sadly handed them their trophies. Revolution boiled in my belly. I looked up at Jeremy, tightened my jaw, and strode out to the center of the court.

In the midst of the other teams celebration, I clomped over and slammed my trophy down on the middle of the floor. It seemed like all the eyes in the arena were on me, I could hear parents thinking about how much of a punk I was. I started to feel alone. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jefferson standing by my shoulder, and he too threw down his trophy next to mine. The Chris, then Timmy, then Sean, then Jacky, then Dante all lined up next to us and put their trophy's down in the middle of the court. We looked at each other and smiled. Behind us Coach Moretti put his fingers in his mouth and let out a deafening whistle. The parents cheered. It didn't matter that we lost the game, what we won was something that would last longer than victory. We had won each other.

I doubt that the first place trophies that the other team won still sit proudly atop their dressers. They are probably collecting dust down in their basements somewhere. I don't know, maybe it's just sour grapes. Maybe that championship meant more to the other team than I think it did. What I do know is that those losses bound me to my teammates forever. We still hang out to this day and whenever I am back in town, we rehash the old memories happily at the bars.

Jacky still gets ragged on for pushing that kid into the wall. We still talk about experimenting with Sean's strange and alien inhaler out in the cold breath of winter. Losing made me appreciate what I had around me. I never won a championship with those guys, but maybe what I played for wasn't trophies at all, but friends. In that sense all of us won, and even if that other team did beat us three times, at least we all got to experience the three losses together.

Baseball

Baseball is about smells. It's about hotdogs and French fries fresh from the fryer. About hamburgers sizzling on the stove, grease sliding down the sides, simmering on the heat. It's about the warm nachos and even warmer cheese that fills a small slot in the upper left corner of the plastic container. About the scent of summer swimming through the air on the back of cleanly cut grass clippings, barbeques and soft breezes.

Baseball is also about sounds. About the sound of leather pounding into leather, about the crackle of the fluorescent lights popping against the black backdrop of night, about the crisp PING of the aluminum making contact with a fastball as the wooden bleachers bend under the weight of the fans standing in unison. It's about the PLUNCK of a pop up sinking into the freshly cut grass, about the sinking sound of a players foot touching third base as he heads for home. It's about the SSSSTTTTTRRRRIIIIIKEEE THREE of the umpire.

It is these sensory details that I best remember when thinking back on my playing days, and they are probably the catalyst for my triumphant return to the baseball diamond at the age of twelve after taking a year off. I told everyone that I didn't want to play anymore because I liked soccer better, and though that statement held some semblance of truth, the real reason that I stopped playing baseball had more to do with my fear of being hit by a pitch than my love of soccer.

When I started playing at the age of nine, I witnessed a horrible incident involving my friend Jacky Kincaid getting beamed by a fastball. The pitch didn't have the courtesy to hit him in his guarded helmet, either, but instead drifted just down below the protection and smacked him square in his unprotected neck. Jacky never played baseball again, and witnessing him get pelted by a pitch left me with a sickly fear of stepping foot into the batters box.

I finished off my nine-year-old season with the Royals and then went ahead and played as a ten year old in the minors again, the minors were for nine and ten year olds while the majors were for eleven and twelve year olds-and of course the coaches sons who happened to be ten and were somehow so much better than the rest of us. All the time I played, however, I always loved the field more than batting and never hit anything more than a double. Because of this, my managers had no idea where to put me in the batting rotation. They needed me on the field, because I could hold my own when it came to fielding ground balls or pop-flys, but I usually batted around the sixth or seventh spot my entire baseball career.

When I returned to play at the age of twelve, I knew I would be forced to play in the majors, because league rules make all twelve year olds to move up from the minors, and thus would have to face bigger, stronger, and f

While my dad and coach Moretti were decent coaches, Greenpot had neither the patience nor the experience needed to lead a team of twelve and eleven year olds. Armed with a handle bar mustache dripping with the stench of old tobacco and Pabst Blue Ribbon, a dark mullet sliding down the back of his neck, and massive forearms and skinny biceps, like a real life Popeye, Greenpot rarely communicated what he wanted without repeating himself. For instance, instead of just saying, "Come on take two now" meaning go for a double instead of a single, he would say, "come on take two, take two now!" Other key phrases that he liked to utter were, "Ok, here we go, here we go now" and "be a hitter, be a hitter now!" It seemed impossible for him to end a sentence without using the word "now!" I bet when he asked his wife to marry him he got down on his knee at a restaurant like Applebee's and said, "Will you marry me, will you marry me now?"

Despite our manager's ineptness we started off the season as the hottest team in the league with a record of eight wins and two losses. In a ten game season, a playoff birth seemed imminent, and we probably only needed four or five more wins to get there, but unfortunately for my teammates, they were playing with the perpetual average player.

I can remember the exact game when things went down hill for my team. It was a night game in late May or early June and as we took the field, the sun began to set so I had to borrow my coaches absurdly huge Ray Ban sunglasses so I could properly catch my teammates throws at first base. Being tall and lanky, I fit the position of first base naturally, and preferred it to any of the other positions on the field. If I learned one thing from coach Greenpot, I learned to place my foot on the side of the bag and stretch rather than stand on top of it, a lesson that I practiced all throughout that season.

As I trotted out to first with my head lifted towards the sky in order to keep the shades on my head, I saw a familiar figure sitting on the bleachers near the first base line and froze in horror when I realized that it was none other than Mr. Noble, the creepy liver spotted old gym teacher that used to torment my friend Seamus by giving him piggy back rides every gym class. As soon as this revelation dawned on me, the revelation of my identity also dawned on Noble and our eyes locked. I didn't know whether to acknowledge him or just ignore him and hope he forgot my name, but as I tried to decide, the glasses fell off of my face and down into the grass causing him to yell, "Boo! First baseman can't catch!"

I forced a smile and let out a light hearted half laugh before turning my back to him and focusing on my warm-ups. The coach hit ground balls to the second baseman, the shortstop and the third baseman and they would each in turn throw the ball to me. When I caught it, I threw the ball to my friend Kenny who played back up catcher and he handed the ball to the coach and the whole process repeated itself. During this warm-up drill, and in fact during the entire duration of the game, Noble relentlessly filled my ears and those of my teammates with heckles like, "We want a pitcher, not a belly itcher!" I decided that I would not stand for this, and had to shut Noble up by showing off my skills on the field.

Luckily for me, the third batter of the game hit a screamer right down the first base line. On any other day I would've certainly missed the ball, but not on this day with Noble eyeing me like a war eagle. I dove to my left and stretch my glove out as far as I could and somehow made the catch. This caught the first base runner off guard and I quickly stepped on the bag to complete the double play and end the inning. I looked over

at Noble and smiled. He sat there stunned, his old jaw dropped in amazement, before he nodded and said, "Nice play first base."

The heckling continued, however, and as the game continued, the score drew closer and closer. By the time we went to bat in the bottom of the sixth, we were down five to three. As fate would have it, the rotation made it so I would bat fifth for the inning, and I prayed that we would get around to my turn. Though normally frightened of batting, I now wanted to step up to the plate and hit a homerun to shut Noble up for good.

Our first batter, Rick, led off with a single, but our next two batters, Jacob and Chris, struck out. Their pitcher had to be at least six foot two and had a demoralizing fastball that would be on it's way back up to the mound before most of us could even swing our bats. The next batter, a redheaded girl by the name of Britney, got down to a full count before smacking a double into right field, and after her, it was my turn to step up to the plate.

I dug my cleats in and twirled the bat over my head as I stepped into the batters box. A cool, calming sensation came all over my body and I actually spit a big loogie out of my mouth, something I never did. As I raised my hand to the umpire, again something I never did, to ask him for some time to get set, I grilled the picture with my meanest game face. As Noble yelled, "WE want a batter, not a chicken platter" in the background, giggling like a schoolgirl to himself as he did so, I focused in and decided that I would swing at the very first pitch.

The ball came in low and hard and I swung incredibly quickly. When I heard the *ping* of the bat, I realized that I had made contact with the ball. I looked up to see it

sailing straight towards the center field fence and stood froze like a statue as I admired my shot. It went higher and higher and farther and farther and I knew that not only did I just hit the game winning homerun, but that I had also just hit my first homerun ever in my professional baseball career. I cockily tossed the bat back towards the dug out and began walking up to first base when to my extreme horror, I saw the ball hit the very top of the fence and bounce back down into play.

"Oh shit!" I exclaimed and took off running as fast as I could. I saw the center fielder pick up the ball as I rounded first, and looked back at home-plate to see that Rick had successfully scored cutting the margin to five-four. Britney rounded third and headed for home as I dug my cleats into the sand and sprinted towards second. The throw came in and I dove feet first into the bag. I looked over and saw Britney only halfway down the third baseline when I heard the umpire scream, "OUT" right in my face. My heart sank. My eyes welled up. Noble cackled into the night. We lost the game because of me. In a game that would've sent us to nine and two, I caused my team to come up just short.

That game served as a turning point for our entire season. We went on a horrible eight game skid after that and finished the season nine and eleven and out of the playoffs. Sure we got one more win in our last game, but it didn't matter. Once again my mediocre sporting career suffered through another season that began promising and ended in heartbreak. While we tied my uncle's team in soccer, and while my basketball team actually got to play three times in the championship game, my baseball team finished out of the playoffs and it's all because my long hit came up just inches short of being a game winning homerun.

A Note from Adam Thomas

Since it is March, I would just like to end this piece on a little interesting note. I am currently SECOND overall at my college in the NCAA tournament bracket on Facebook. That's right, second. There are three more games to play, and while I do feel a certain speck of accomplishment that I successfully picked the Final Four correctly, I am still a little worried about my Georgetown over Ohio State pick. I went with the underdog, I trusted my gut and I made a pick. Do I have a chance to win? Of course, there's always a chance. Will I win? Probably not, but you know what, after a lifelong of coming in second place in various sporting competitions, I'm kind of getting used to it. Besides, I know what second place feels like. If I come in first, I'll be way out of my comfort zone.

Maybe second place isn't that bad after all. One of my college professor's recently told me that I keep complaining about how I "only" came in second and he told me, "I wish I'd come in second in any athletic event." Perhaps I am wrong to be bitching about how horrible it feels to come in second, cause at least I got to feel it. Perhaps I'm wrong about saying the guy who wrote "second place is the first loser" is right. Perhaps second truly is the best and first really is the worst. I won't know until I've come in first, and if that happens, I know for a fact, that I'll miss being the runner-up.

Oh, and yeah, Georgetown lost to Ohio State in the Final Four and I lost in my bracket. I didn't even come in second. I came in seventeenth. Man, what I would give to have come in second.