

The Street Players



The passing of St. Louis Cardinal's Hall of Fame manager Whitey Herzog made me nostalgic for his *Whiteyball* teams of the 1980s. I read all the tributes to him. I re-watched the hilarious commercials he did with Jack Buck for Busch beer. I relished Whitey's quote "I don't need a team leader, I'm the leader" and Joe Buck's comment that "Whitey didn't need a spreadsheet to spot a good player." I remember Whitey grabbing his young shortstop, Gary Templeton, and throwing him in the dugout (and then trading him) after he flipped off the fans in 1981.

With legendary players like Ozzie 'The Wizard' Smith, Willie 'Skates' McGee, Hall of Fame closer Bruce Sutter, 'Silent' George Hendrick, and speedster Vince Coleman, Whitey's Cardinal team's won the World Series in 1982, and finished runner up in '85 and '87.

Cardinal fans went crazy.

I miss Whitey, and I miss those St. Louis Cardinal teams of the '80's. But I miss another team from the 1980s more.

The Street Players.

The *Street Players*, named for when we played baseball in the street as kids, were a men's CYC team that I put together with my brothers, then all in our 20's, to keep playing baseball. We played for three seasons, 1984-1986, against other similarly baseball smitten young men, most of the games played at Forest Park in midtown St. Louis.

Unlike Whitey's teams, the *Street Players* never won a championship. But the *Street Players* did not lack for colorful players. Players such as:

- Mike 'Rag Arm' Hollenbach, our slick fielding second baseman and second place hitter. Mike led the team in average while never hitting more than a single. Mike's extremely weak throwing arm was legendary.
- Bryan Hollenbach, our hard ass catcher, took shit from no one. He often called for a "knock down" pitch by standing up with his catcher's mitt behind the batter's head as the hitter stepped into the box.
- Greg Lange, our pitcher with a "million dollar arm and a ten-cent head." Greg threw a 90 MPH fastball but had zero confidence. Bryan rode him mercilessly. As a result, Greg often cried on the mound.
- Kevin Hollenbach, the only *Street Player* who had played college ball. Our centerfielder and lead-off man, Kevin did not lack in ability or confidence. As a left handed relief pitcher, he did lack control. Kevin threw the 'holly hook,' a great curve ball. One time, Kevin unintentionally beamed a coach who was standing outside the third base dugout.
- Al Buckley, our third baseman and a smart ass. Once an opposing player took offense at Al's remarks and threatened to come on the field and kick Al's butt. No problem for third baseman Al, he just moved over next to the shortstop for

protection. Al's positioning foreshadowed the infield shift that was adopted by the major leagues thirty years later.

- Pat 'The Kid' Wilkinson. A five-tool nineteen year old who still dreamed of playing in the show, Pat once hit a 500 foot home run that crossed a street and landed in a golf course.
- Terry Millard, our ace pitcher. Terry had a funky wind-up, great control, but not much of a fastball. Bryan once caught one of Terry's pitches with his bare hand while extorting Terry to "throw the damn ball!"

The *Street Players* had no equipment budget, no batting gloves, no sliding mitts, hats, and perhaps three bats for the entire team. During one game the catcher's chest protector broke and Bryan caught without one. All of us had full time jobs, some of us had kids, and players often arrived at games just as they were about to start.

There were plenty of other teams such as ours. We played a team from rural Missouri that we called the glassblowers; a bunch of hillbilly's whom sported beards like the rock group ZZ-Top. Another time we played an all-black team from north St. Louis that almost resulted in a race riot. One game we were short on players so my Dad stepped in as the designated hitter. Dad claims he homered, we remember it differently.

Damn it was hot, and we usually forgot to bring water. The fields were in rough shape with dirt infields and dead grass outfields. Sometimes there were pitchers mounds, sometimes there weren't. We brought our own bases and set up the fields ourselves. The night games were illuminated with lights that had been reclaimed from Sportsman Park, which had been torn down in the 1960s; more bulbs burnt out than lit. At most we had 15-20 fans; my dad, some wives, some girlfriends, sometimes our little kids in strollers. One time I had to call time out and walk off the field and attend to my two-year daughter so my wife could use the bathroom. The *Street Players* truly played only for the love of the game.

Like Whitey's Cardinal teams from the 1980s the time of the *Street Players* has passed. Baseball, at all levels, has changed.

In the Major Leagues, *Whiteyball* is dead. Big league teams rarely steal bases or bunt. It's all analytics. Players are judged on launch angle, exit velocity, swing speed, pitch count, ad nauseam. Fielders have note cards in their hats telling them where to

position themselves. Pitchers are told what to throw by text message. There's a pitch count, a pitch timer, ghost runners in extra innings, and umpire calls can be reviewed and overturned. Hell, umpires will soon be replaced with robots.

Kid baseball is worse. Recreational leagues are all but gone, kids play on a select team or don't play. Games are televised on I-phones and can be watched on an app. Each player has multiple \$300 bats and gloves, sliding mitts, batting gloves and two different jerseys (home and away). They play on major league caliber fields, wear jewelry like the pros, have their own 'walk-up' songs played over the loudspeaker. Parents attend every game, even the practices. They pay for year-long personal lessons and travel to out of town cities for tournaments. Somebody's dad is not coaching nowadays, the coaches and managers are paid employee's of the league.

I guess the kids are having fun. But I'll bet not as much fun as we did in our recreational leagues or pick-up games. And a league today for a team like the Street Players? Forget about it, you couldn't even schedule a field or hire an ump.

Perhaps I'm just a grumpy old man complaining that baseball was better in my day, my memories embellished by the passage of time. Surely, at least, I am guilty of misremembering. Maybe I'm wrong, and baseball is better today.

But I am certain of this. Once upon a time Whitey Herzog managed a big league team that electrified a city. Once upon a time a group of 20-somethings played on a team called the Street Players. And once upon a time kids played baseball in the street.

I'm damn sure kid's don't play baseball in the street anymore. And that's a shame

That's all I'm sayin'

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