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The Base Hit

By William Patsis

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by: **William Patsis**

Sometimes there is that rare moment that causes one to reflect on those matters that are deemed important and deflect those that are not. It is a very humbling experience but a nice feeling nevertheless. I had one of those moments.

Spring time has many activities for kids. The most notable, or at least it was when I was young, is baseball. Moving into a new area and signing up Evan (10) and Dimitri (8) in the winter was originally intended to have them participate in an activity they were familiar with and hopefully sidetrack the wonderful memories they had in our previous home during the moving transition. Signing them up came with conditions, particularly from Evan. He would play if I could become his coach. Now the pressure was on me. I knew agreeing to this condition would make my already hectic life even more difficult. But there comes a time where you just do it, and live with the consequences. I agreed to become a coach.

Little League was divided into 4 divisions. T-Ball, Coach Pitch, Major Minor, and Little League. Since Evan was 10 and they were unfamiliar with his abilities, he had to participate in a tryout. If he wasn't picked, he would automatically go to the Major Minor division. Dimitri already qualified for Major Minors and did not need a tryout. If he did tryout, they would've discovered a natural athlete who already possessed skills that surpassed his older brother. The tryout was preceded with a voluntary clinic which we participated in. Watching him from the sidelines with the other boys, it was apparent that he really wasn't skilled at the game. It was disheartening since this was a game that I played faithfully throughout my youth and ended as a starting pitcher for my high school team. I started to feel very guilty watching him at the clinic. Why did I not spend more time with him teaching the game? His frustration showed but he completed the clinic. During the clinic I was told by one of the organizers the coaches for Little League were intact, basically the same ones from the previous years, but there was a need for a Major Minor coach and that Dimitri could play for me and if Evan was not going to be picked for Little League he also could play for me. I agreed to do it and looked forward in seeing both of my sons play together and under my direction.

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The tryout was the following week at the local high school gym. The gym was divided by an air wall. I observed the parents sitting in the bleachers while some kids were warming up by throwing to each other. On the other side of the air wall were the coaches conducting drills in groups of 5 or 6. Parents were not permitted to observe the drills. I asked Evan to go on the floor and start warming up with some of the kids, but he was reluctant. Being shy to begin with, coupled with not knowing any of the kids; he was very hesitant to go out. It was frustrating to me since I knew he really needed the practice. Finally he went on the floor to throw. Just watching his poor mechanics made me feel bad again. I felt this was going to be a damaging episode to his ego and eliminate any idea that baseball was a cool sport. They called his name and he disappeared onto the other side. Afterwards when asked how he did, he simply said OK.

Much to our surprise, we received a call from Frank a coach for the Little League, who informed us that Evan was going to play on his team. Evan was elated, I was shocked. Never in my mind did I think he

would make it.

Frank, we were told by others in the league, was a tough coach who approached the game with a no nonsense attitude. At this first practice, this was very apparent. He was a drill sergeant, calling kids knuckleheads, demanding their utmost attention and not tolerating a bad effort. Despite his apparent demeanor, I learned this team, the Rockies, won the league last year going undefeated. In fact he lost very little over the years. When I asked him if could become an assistant coach, he calmly told me he already had 2 assistant coaches, the maximum allowed under league rules. I could however, participate in the drills if I wished. So I did. I helped out a coach named Phil, whose son was on the team and one of the stars, with the outfield players of whom Evan was grouped with. The other coach, Kevin, was usually working with the infielders.

Evan could not catch a fly ball nor throw it with any strength. But he seemed eager. Coach Phil was very encouraging and afterwards told me the things he felt I should do to help him get better. I listened. I did not want to be arrogant and explain to him I knew the game of baseball. If I did, how would I explain why my son was so poor? When Evan came to bat it was even uglier. Standing close to the backstop with Frank throwing batting practice, he did not hit even one. But Frank was encouraging, time and time again saying it was his fault for not throwing better. This might have been somewhat true since Evan was the last one to bat and his arm was probably shot. The rest of the kids already had gathered by the pitchers mound knowing Evan was not going to hit anything remotely close to the infield. And gathering the balls was too easy since they were all laying around Evan's feet from all of the pitches thrown and missed. It was disheartening.

As time went on and I started to get more involved with coaching my own team and Dimitri, getting to see Evan practice was difficult. His catching and throwing seemed to improve slightly but his hitting was the same. But somehow he hung in there, and fortunately, the rest of his teammates never made fun of him. There was camaraderie with the boys and the coaches. The coaches continued to be supportive and encouraging.

Then the games started for real. Evan would play for an inning or two in right field and typically bat just once. He had made a couple of nice plays in the outfield but his batting consisted of either walking

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(rarely) or striking out (mostly). He never complained nor did his attitude change. Come practice or game time he was eager to be out there, listen to the coaches, and enjoy the practice of being a kid with the rest of his teammates. The team lost their first game of the year. Afterwards the dejection and silence emanating from the dugout was prevalent except from Evan. He made a statement heard by all, "hey it's only one game, and we are not going to lose them all". I was stunned to hear him say that, but very proud. So were his coaches. Evan had no idea how winning was all that most kids knew playing under Frank, but he brought it all into perspective. The team bounced back with some wins. They were not going to be the dominating team they were last year, but they still were among the top. But as the games went on, he still struck out for his only time at bat. But the coaches still kept encouraging him. Frank kept saying not to be discouraged and Phil kept working on his swing.

One day coming home my wife was elated. She told me at practice Evan practically hit every ball that Frank threw to him. This was confirmed by Evan who was noticeably excited by this new development. He started to build confidence. I went to the next practice and noticed that, although he missed a few and the kids were still gathering around the pitching mound when he batted, he did get the bat on the ball. What I also experienced was something you do not see often. The parents of the kids, particularly the stars of the team, showed a lot of interest in the progress of Evan. He was the kid to really root for, the underdog. They were very supportive of him.

Dimitri and I had just finished a practice with our own team and headed to the Little League field where Evan was having a game. We arrived around the 5th inning. The team was winning 4-0. Evan had not batted yet. He saw me and without hesitation asked if we could get Chinese food after the game. At first I told him no, since my wife had prepared a really nice dish. He is crazy about food and the dejection gave him a sour pus. I then said to him that if he got a hit I would get him Chinese food. He relayed this information to Jeff the scorekeeper. Jeff is a school teacher and father to one of the ployers. He has a very upbeat attitude, a lot of enthusiasm and a great liking towards Evan. He came to me and said there may be a possibility that he may not get to bat due to his position in the lineup and the game being late in the innings. But he assured Evan I would get him the Chinese food anyway.

As it turned out Evan got a chance to bat. There were two outs and a man on base. The kid from the opposing team still looked pretty good and throwing hard. Evan had always remarked that he felt the pitchers he opposed threw very hard so I always felt he came to the plate already intimidated. The first pitch thrown was high but Evan swung at it and managed to foul it off. A foul ball from Evan was a cause to celebrate and he received applause from his teammates and from the parents. The next pitch was also high and Evan put his bat on the ball cleanly. It was a grounder between the second and first basemen into right field. A clean hit.

The applause was as if someone hit a homerun. I turned to my wife and gave her a big hug and a kiss. She was elated. I looked at my son at first base and he was beaming. That look of satisfaction was enough to send through my heart this warmth and elation that stopped time, and for a moment I was living his moment. The more he smiled, the more I smiled. The boy was walking on air. The ball was retrieved by the coaches so that he could have it signed by his teammates. They did not score and the inning had ended, but the rousing high fives and genuine love the kids and parents had for this wonderful moment caused him to finally feel like he contributed, he was really part of this team. The

elation did not stop. I have never seen him run so fast to his position in right field.

After the game had ended, I turned to Frank, Phil, and Kevin and told them all "Good job guys". Just a normal thing to say but it carried a lot of emotion. The base hit was a confirmation. The desire to keep on trying, never give up, encouraging others who are less skilled than you. This is what the game should be about. A lesson about life and love.

I took him to get Chinese food, just the both of us. I looked at him and said that was a really special moment. He just smiled and said, "Yeah, it really was, I got a base hit". No son, you and I got more than that.

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Business Start Ups... Let's Play Ball

By Sue and Chuck DeFiore

Starting a business is like starting your own baseball team. Start-up (Spring training) is when you are doing your research, deciding on a business name, zoning requirements, setting up your business, deciding on what form your business will take (sole proprietorship, corporation, LLC). You're assembling all the parts of your business (team), getting ready for the season (your opening day).

Once spring training is over, and the season begins (your business is open) you start making your run around the bases. Getting to first base is the hardest (obtaining your first customer, making your first sale, doing your first consultation). You are helped along to second base by the support staff (players) you assembled. Moving around the bases constitutes all the steps, hurdles, obstacles, however you want to think of daily business grind. This is part of running a business (and what the game of baseball is all about). Having game plans to deal with certain contingencies.

Being aware of what your staff is capable of. Some of your staff will be single hit players. Others will hit doubles. Some will hit or make the triple play, while others will hit home runs. Your employees (players) look to you, the business owner, (their coach), and learn from you. They will look to you for direction (signals), on how they should respond (play the game).

The season (your first year in business) gives you the opportunity to assess your staff (your team) to ascertain where they work best. Do you need to make changes (change the line-up). Obviously, some will perform better than others. It's up to you, as the leader (coach) to decide who belongs in what position, where their strong points are, where their weaknesses are, and how to utilize them to the best of their abilities. Be sure to set up staff (team) meetings.

How successful your team is (your business) will be determined by the end of the season. Are you just one of many new businesses in your area, or will you make the playoffs (distinguish your business, find

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your niche, make a name for yourself in your area).

Making the playoffs and/or winning the championship means your business has made it. You paid your dues. You're in it for the long run. You're part of the business community (recognized by the other teams).

Now you're ready to play every season. You use spring training of each year to feel out the other teams (find out what your business competition is doing) and make any adjustments you need to keep your business (team) in the thick of things for the coming year.

If you listen real carefully you'll hear....."Let's play ball!"

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