

OCTOBER SOFTBALL

Two remarkable things have happened to our weekly softball game this year. First, the weather has been a blessing, like a belated reward for childhood prayers we've long forgotten, or maybe for those quiet moments of adult courage that usually, for some reason, take place in kitchens late at night. The rain has obligingly side-stepped Sundays and our season has stretched on, the days golden, warm and dry, the grass changing color as unobtrusively as baking bread. Already for a few weeks now on the field beside ours the young horses have been lugging footballs toward goal lines marked by orange traffic cones; soon pint-sized witches and goblins will be shuffling through the fallen leaves just beyond the chain link left field fence; and we'll have managed to play far beyond our usual limits, all the way to that mysterious moment when the hour of daylight we borrowed in the spring has to be returned on the chilly edge of November.

The other remarkable thing is that, long after we'd given him up for lost, Kerry came back. He just showed up again a couple of weeks ago, glove in hand, quietly acknowledged our greetings and trotted to the outfield during batting practice, where he chased some flies before taking his cuts at the plate and playing his usual game as if he'd never been gone.

Now someone's not being there for a couple of Sundays isn't so odd in itself: our group has a floating population and especially in the middle of the summer when the weather gets hot

and there are vacations it's sometimes hard to round up even ten people, which seems to be about the minimum necessary to support a couple of hours of play. But such absences are usually brief and easily accounted for. After all, most of us know each other pretty well so that when someone isn't on first base more than likely one of us can tell exactly when he or she left for the Cape or when they'll be back from visiting in-laws in Ohio. Kerry lives in Belmont, though, and he's always come to the games by himself, ever since he was brought into the circle a couple of years ago by Dan, who didn't get tenure at the place he was teaching at and moved to Seattle. About all we know about Kerry's home life is that he's married but his wife isn't a player and nobody's seen her or his two kids.

He's a big guy with a mustache that manages to be short and droopy at the same time and eyes that remind you of a bloodhound's. He must be about thirty-seven or thirty-eight, he works with computers. He's a solid long ball hitter and a couple of years ago you'd play him very deep because he was likely to hit one over the fence every other game or so but lately his drives have fallen about ten feet shorter--I've noticed the same about my own. He plays the outfield competently, he'll catch most of the balls hit his way but every once in a while--like the rest of us--he'll surprise you by covering more ground than you think he can, sticking up his glove and snatching one that we all thought was headed elsewhere.

It's these moments that most of us play for. Brendan on third base is a big loud-talking Irishman, the kind who seems more at home glad-handing his way through a noisy bar, beer-belly first, grabbing people by the arm, throwing back his head as he tells stories, getting wet-eyed when he sings hoarsely about the Black and Tans. In short he's everybody's stereotype of the Irish pol with gravy on his tie and though he works for the housing authority you could easily believe he's some hack in the county clerk's office who's reading the obituaries with an eye to a seat on the school committee. He's likely to show up late on Sunday, as often as not he's hung over and these days he's more concerned about his custody fight with his ex-wife than with protecting the third base line but every now and then a batter will really connect and send a shot skittering along the grass at just under the speed of light and before any of us has time to think

about it we'll realize that Brendan's big body has moved with unbelievable swiftness to intercept the ball we've already recorded as a hit. In one motion he sweeps the dirt with his glove, scoops the ball up, digs it out and fires a perfect throw to first. The stunned batter, who hasn't had a chance to charge more than a couple of steps down the line, stops dead in his tracks and stares wide-eyed like a man watching films of his own execution, the slap of the ball against the mitt resounding with the impact of a falling guillotine blade.

When something like that happens everybody's talking at once, there are shouts of "Great play" and "Way to go" but for a while we don't really know what to do. Even Brendan, kicking at the dirt like a nervous bull, seems embarrassed and he's as grateful as the rest of us when he bobbles the next easy one and he can throw up his hands, asking for our commiseration.

As you can see, it's softball but it's not just softball. Sometimes things happen on the field that have their origins miles away. Once when Vicky was batting and she let pitch after pitch go by without swinging Sam yelled something from first base about all of us growing old while we waited for her to hit and she snapped at him, which isn't like her at all. For the rest of her time at bat we watched her, tall and skinny, standing there with the bat in her hands like a gunfighter who's vowed, after mistakenly killing his best friend, never to draw first. In a silence so palpable it was as though Niagara Falls had been shut down to a single drip-drip- drip from a leaky faucet, we listened to the ball drop again and again into the catcher's glove. Later during the week we learned that her superior at work had criticized her for being too quick to jump into a situation without analyzing it. "And her boss is a woman," Connie reminded Al, to whom she'd told the story, "so she can't turn that into one of her feminist things."

And then of course there was the time a couple of years ago when Charley startled us all by playing like Ty Cobb, racing around the bases with the fury of a man who's been told by his doctor that he has only seconds to live, sliding--my God, sliding! as if running hard wasn't likely enough to turn the ankle, pull the hamstring. It certainly isn't all that difficult to get an extra base with us: our fielding can be erratic a lot of the time and the arms of our outfielders don't usually strike fear in the hearts of our baserunners--except once when Marge brought her twenty-three

year old brother along from Springfield and the kid, who'd been out partying the night before and according to his report hadn't slept a second, threw one in from deep center field straight as a clothesline and so hard it just about tore off Pete's glove. We looked at each other after that and no one even had to say "twenty-three" aloud. But when Charley was going crazy on the base paths as if he wanted to hurt someone, himself most of all, there was no rifle arm in the outfield and mostly we just stepped out of the way as he sped around the bases trailing a cloud of dust like the Roadrunner, his thick brown mustache swept back, it seemed, like a pair of wings. Then without announcement he and Ellen were gone for a couple of weeks by themselves in New Hampshire, the kids left with Ellen's mother, and when he came back he was willing to settle again for a base hit when that was what he got.

But as I said, Kerry has always been a kind of peripheral guy, dependable but peripheral. After the game, when Rich or Lou are likely to have people over their house for beer, Kerry will politely decline. It's always been back into his pale blue Pinto and off into Belmont. So that when he didn't show up two weeks in a row--this was in June--I suppose we all had our theories. "You know," Charley would say, stroking his mustache absently, "sometimes I think we didn't make him welcome enough. Especially after Dan left. That might have been pretty traumatic for him." Charley's in counseling, he once went to divinity school where, as he's told us more than once when he's had a few tokes, he got radicalized in the late 60's. "Horse shit," Brendan would answer. "Kerry just found himself a softball game closer to home." A better one? some of us wondered, hurt.

And so we went on playing without him, as we've played for almost ten years--though that's hard to believe, a little scary to subtract ten years from our ages and think we've been playing all this time. Ron, who's always in the middle of a passionate affair with a new health club, still goes at it with maniacal abandon, crashing into the chain link fence chasing fly balls--and so far his guardian angel has been dependable; but most of us husband our energies, stopping well short of going all out, letting the ball fall at our feet without diving after it, because anyone can calculate the trade-off between an out for the other team and a separated shoulder. The

body's betrayals are always there at the back of our minds. If the next day's aching muscles are a delicious pain that reminds us of our heroic strivings, everyone's picked up his or her share of jammed fingers, inflamed elbows, groin pulls and the like and sometimes the playing field can seem like a game board where the dice can just as easily land you on a treacherous patch of turf that will turn your ankle as one that will let you get to the ball.

I was the first one to get to Jeff when he went down in center field a couple of years ago. "Try to stand on it," I said but he waved me away, his glassy eyes looking beyond the field, the color gone out of his face. "It's broken," he said dismally. "I know." He'd been charging a short fly of Pete's and he'd decided at the last moment he couldn't get to it. He told us afterwards that when he tried to come to a sudden stop all his rushing weight turned on his left ankle and he heard a shredding like a head of lettuce being torn apart--it was his ligaments and their tearing put all the stress on the fibula, which then snapped like a breadstick. He was operated on that night, he missed six weeks of work. For the whole next season, though he was healed he seemed to run with a limp, or a memory of that misstep in center field--maybe he could always hear the sound of shredding lettuce--and we all watched him very carefully whenever he ran. Now that he's back to normal we all feel better. It's as if a shadow's passed over us briefly and we've felt the need to wait a while after it's gone to assure ourselves we're really back in the sunlight. I still remember the first time I visited Jeff in the hospital and saw the full leg cast elevated above him in his bed. He was very tan, the accident having happened right at the end of the summer, and the cast was very white. We didn't know--"at his age" was the phrase we kept muttering--if he was ever coming back.

With the exception of the people who've moved away like Dan we haven't had anyone who's had to leave the game yet, though a lot of us are in our forties now and some of our kids are beginning to show up occasionally. Why a kid would want to spend three hours with us on a Sunday is beyond me but I think we all like the fact that our game's continuing into another generation. Still, Kerry's unannounced and unexplained disappearance really did bother some of us.

I mean, we all know life isn't all champagne and wedding cake. In an idle moment last week I calculated that the left side of our infield represented five marriages and three divorces, there were two single parents in the outfield. And the guy at bat was an ex-priest! Not all happily ever afters. Maybe that's why there's something comforting about the way the softball game just goes on.

We'd pretty much resigned ourselves to having lost Kerry and to having lost all contact with him when Marie found out what was happening. She has a cousin who, it turns out, works in the same building with Kerry and somehow when the cousins got to talking they put two and two together and Marie heard the story: Kerry had fallen desperately in love with a woman who'd been hired by his company to do some graphics. She was a young painter and, according to Marie's cousin, she had no redeeming qualities. "She's not even attractive," Marie said her cousin told her, though she conceded that some people might find her interesting. "But selfish, spoiled and a cold-hearted bitch." She was quoting her cousin now.

"Poor Kerry," I said.

"Yeah," Marie said, "it's apparently breaking up his marriage." And then she recounted the only specific detail her cousin had managed to convey. "This woman lives above a laundromat, she has lots of other boyfriends and Kerry's so far gone for her that one night someone from work saw him standing in the rain across the street looking at the windows of her place above the laundromat."

Poor Kerry, I thought. I tried to remember him in left field as we'd known him. Rich is at the plate and he gets ahold of one. You can tell from the sound of the aluminum bat hitting the ball, this one's going far; and Kerry turns at the sound, he's already taking his first long strides toward the fence, which is only a few steps away because you play Rich deep. As the ball starts descending in an arc that will carry it, if it isn't caught, over the fence, Kerry raises his gloved hand.

And that was as far as my image got. Then all of a sudden I was seeing Kerry huddled in the rain across the street from the laundromat, staring at the window upstairs. He's soaking, his

short hair is flattened against his head, he's shivering, trying to smoke a wet cigarette. He's wearing a raincoat that's no protection at all. He could be at home with his wife and kids. What's he doing standing in the rain like this? As he looks at the window across the street what makes him more upset, I wonder: that there's a light on or that it's dark? Thinking this I realized again that I'd never got to know this man. I wished I'd have met his wife and kids, I thought maybe then I could understand better what would make him stand out there in the cold rain watching for a woman with no redeeming qualities. There was no way, I saw, that I could move from the image of Kerry in left field going after Rich's long drive to the Kerry who was standing across the street from the laundromat.

We talked about him that first Sunday after we'd heard the story but there wasn't much we could say. We'd lost him, we supposed. If we pursued the question at all it was wordlessly, by ourselves, waiting out there in center field where you can get a lot of thinking done. But after you'd visualized Kerry standing in the rain there wasn't any place to take him, not really knowing him; and it was easier to start thinking about some of the things closer at hand, like the different way the sexes approached the game. Coming to it late, without the thousands of innings the men had logged in childhood, when they fantasized as much as they played, announcing games in their heads--or even aloud--seeing themselves as Mickey Mantle or Willie Mays, striving for some ineffable grace; many of the women played the game in a much more utilitarian way, delighting in a tepid ground ball that was no credit to the batter but, being bobbled by one of our less than flawless fielders, got them on base. I tried to explain to Lily once how when you hit the ball well and someone made a great catch you could feel good even though you were out because you'd made solid contact, it was good enough for a hit, you'd just been unlucky in where the ball had gone but hitting that way over a period of time you were bound to get your share of hits. "I don't want them over a period of time," she said. "I want them now." Well, who could argue with that?

So we played through the summer, our game falling victim to the beaches, children's camps, vacations, like some animal that thins its pelt for the warm months; but once September

came and people were back at their jobs our number increased again. Sally brought her fourteen-year old daughter Maureen into the game and the kid played with the swagger and confidence of someone who was at home on the ball field from childhood, catching with one-handed ease and even flair, stroking the ball solidly while her mother, struggling to push a grounder through the infield, must have watched with mixed emotions.

We were just settling into this new arrangement when Kerry came back a couple of weeks ago. At first his timing was off at the plate--no surprise--and he popped up a lot of times; but his fielding was as steady and reliable as ever. Now that he's been back for a while he's recovered his old swing. Of course no one is supposed to know what happened but Marie talked to her cousin who says that evidently he's back with his wife. The whole thing, in the end, only amounted to a couple of months.

So everything's back in place once again with our softball game, just in time too because the season has to end pretty soon. The storm windows have been up for weeks, we're all getting ready for winter. If Kerry, with his slow walk and his bloodhound's eyes, is mild-mannered and quiet that's the way he's always been, never one to make much noise. Still, I wonder. We choose up different sides every week and I played on the same team with him last Sunday. I was in center, he was in left. He hit well, he bounced one off the fence, though the wind was blowing out and everybody was getting a little extra distance. When he huffed his way around to third base we all shouted, "Way to go, Kerry" and he smiled to himself. I forget who won--it's hardly the stuff of history books. But I remember a moment late in the game when I glanced out from my position in center field at the crisp blue sky that looked as though there was a skim of frost over it, the trees across the street shorn of their most colorful leaves, lights already going on in some of the houses beside the park; and I caught a glimpse of Kerry just looking. At the sky, maybe, at one of those lighted windows, maybe at a plane flying high above in the icy stratosphere; and I suddenly had a sense of how little we knew each other, any of us. I saw Marie, Charley, Rich and Lou, I saw Brendan standing at third base puffing on a cigarette and I seemed to see us all from a distance. What was going to happen to us, I wondered; and all at

once I was impatient for the next pitch, hoping that Pete would swing at it and hit it somewhere, sending all those figures running, purposeful, intent, their eyes on the ball.