

PHOTOGRAPHER'S JOURNAL



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SOAPBOX

That Was a Strike, Hon

By GRANT GLICKSON

I WAS recently drafted to umpire my first Little League baseball game. Upon further review, I would really rather do something less stressful, like balancing the state's budget while wrestling a wolverine.

Despite 30 years of playing baseball, watching baseball and writing about it, I have to admit that I was nothing but a nervous rookie out there. After all, it's one thing to second-guess umpires from the comfort of a La-Z-Boy. But it's a whole different ballgame when you're the one making split-second decisions that can psychologically scar third graders for life — especially when one of them happens to be your own son.

With sweat already stinging my eyes, I surveyed the ball field and noticed that the ump's equipment rested behind home plate. There was no way that this middle-age weight-challenged body was going to spend the morning leaping out of the way of scattershot hardballs.

Negotiating from a position of strength (nobody in their right mind wanted job), I smartly demanded and received permission to call the game from the pitcher's mound. The only instruction given to me was to call anything near the plate a strike. But I had a different agenda after watching Kyle, my oldest son, cry last year after he was called out on a strike that would have been high on Shaquille O'Neal. I was determined not to let that happen to another kid.

Grant Glickson is a member of the sports staff of The New York Times.

On this day, the Alley Cat and Muck Dog pitchers would have to throw legitimate strikes. It didn't matter to me that 8-year-old pitchers rarely — if ever — throw the ball over the plate. Nor was I even aware of the "five consecutive ball rule" — until midway through the game — that requires the manager to pitch to a batter after a successive sequence of balls was complete. So if a strike occurred after four straight balls,



Tom Bloom

the ball count was reset.

To make matters worse, when the manager finally came in to pitch, the umpire was no longer allowed to call balls or strikes. Batters gazed at dozens of pitches before getting a hit or an out.

The first Alley Cat pitcher threw hard, but was mostly high and outside and thumped the backstop a lot. (That could have been me!) By the time the manager pitched to the fourth batter of the first inning, I ditched my booming umpire voice and replaced it with virtual silence, calling balls mentally (didn't want to embarrass young pitcher) and discreetly waving the manager in to

pitch relief.

The next Alley Cats pitcher wasn't quite so wild — the manager pitched to just three batters — but he was so short that every time the catcher threw the ball back to him, it ended up in center field. The outfielder would then gingerly retrieve the ball and overthrow the pitcher, and the viscous cycle would start all over again.

Between the wildness of the Alley Cats pitchers and my unreasonable strike zone, my son's manager tossed — in three innings — as many pitches (142) as Al Leiter of the Mets did in Game 5 of the 2000 Subway Series.

Before the third Alley Cats pitcher (my son) trotted in, a crazed baseball mom (my wife), headed onto the field between innings to say, "They are going to have to find another umpire because there's no one to warm Kyle up." I told her in my best umpire's voice, "Kyle will be just as good without the warm-up, and please exit my ball field."

When my son took the mound, I continued to call balls on him like everyone else. Then I realized — almost two hours into the game and just in the fourth inning — that my son's team was losing by 17-0. Largely because of my strike zone. It was definitely time to turn those balls into strikes. So my son struck out two batters and the game mercifully ended (thanks to the two-hour rule).

After the game, I declared myself to be the worst umpire to ever set foot on a New Jersey Little League field. Being the Charlie Brown of umpires, I felt that I owed everybody involved written apologies as well as a signed contract to never call another game.

Needless to say, I was outta there.

LETTERS

Another Step For the Conservatives

To the Editor: The impression given in "Divided and Conquered" (June 12), on the two major conservatives in the recently concluded New Jersey Republican gubernatorial primary — me and Bret Schundler — is that conservatism was a loser in the election. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The conservative agenda of smaller government, less spending, eliminating waste of taxpayer money and property-tax relief were the dominant themes throughout the primary. Not one of the seven Republican candidates in the race espoused more government programs and nearly all of them criticized the wasteful urban education spending foisted on taxpayers by the State Supreme Court.

Gone from the primary debate was the Whitman-era moderate agenda that included more spending on social programs and more capitulation to big-government liberal Democrats. The G.O.P. debate moved decidedly in the direction of the smaller-government, home-rule philosophy of the conservatives, and nearly all the candidates saw Trenton politics as the biggest problem New Jersey faces.

The unmistakable message coming from the primary is that the New Jersey Republican Party has shaken off its image as a co-conspirator in the waste of taxpayer money by Trenton politicians. Conservatives have made the G.O.P. fiscally responsible and we are leading the charge for homeowners who are sick and tired of escalating property taxes, corrupt government and failed social policies.

In fact, it can be argued that the conservative agenda has also affected the Democrat Party, which suddenly has woke up to the fact that they must cut the waste and abuse of taxpayer money or lose the election. It is gratifying as a conservative to see Democrat lawmakers scurrying around Trenton trying to find ways to cut spending.

But, we know the Democrats' new zeal for cutting waste is not real; it's an election-year ploy. They have no commitment to smaller, leaner government. They are the party of waste and corruption and more programs and more regulations. The Republicans, on the other hand, are committed to ending business as usual in Trenton, and that commitment stems from the conservatives who have played an influential role in reshaping the G.O.P.

STEVE LONEGAN

Steve Longan, mayor of Bogota, was a Republican candidate in the gubernatorial primary.

'Ragtime' Captures The Early 20th Century

To the Editor: Naomi Siegel is off the mark with her review of "Ragtime" at the Paper Mill Playhouse ("But Where's the Model T?" June 19). To her credit, she recognizes the high caliber of the music and outstanding singing of Quentin Earl Darrington. But she ignores the equally fine singing of Kenita R. Miller.

And there is so much more: Unfamiliar with the book, my husband and I expected an entertaining musical. We were unprepared for the drama of this depiction of the volcanic changes taking place in the United

States during the early years of the 20th century. The credit goes especially to Mr. Darrington's acting, which is as powerful as his singing, and to the acting of Neal Benari, which in its own very different style is equally effective.

To me, the use of lighting and minimalist sets to evoke scene changes only added to the dramatic effect since they make it possible for the playgoer to fill in the blanks through his or her imagination.

SANDRA DEMURLEY  
River Plaza

New Jersey

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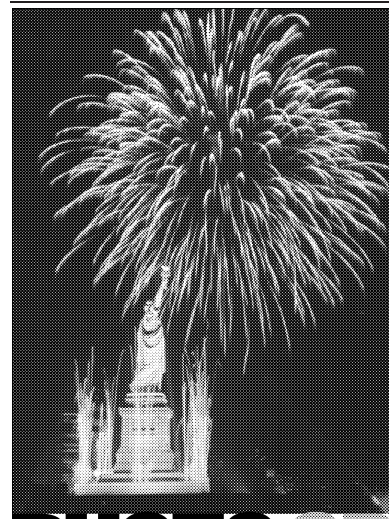
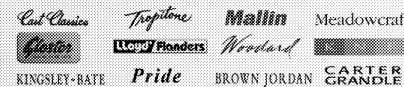


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