

Big League

by Joe Dworetzky

“This is Jim Fitzgerald,” my voice mail said. “I’m looking for a Joe ‘Doorsky’. If you are him, please give me a call. It’s about Kensico Little League.”

Kensico Little League?

Kensico was where I played baseball as a boy. My family moved away more than thirty years ago. I had never heard of Jim Fitzgerald.

I called him back and gave my name.

“Are you the one?”

“Which one?” I asked.

“The one who played Little League in Valhalla, New York.”

“Yes, I’m that one.”

“Great!” he said. “I’ll go to the other phone”.

When he reached the other phone, he was breathless. “We’re having a parade on April 17 to commemorate the 35th anniversary of your Little League All-Star team winning the Tri-County Championship. We want you to come! I am sorry for the late notice but it’s been hard to track down the team after all these years.”

“You’re having a parade to commemorate our Little League team winning the Tri-County Championship?” I was incredulous. I wondered how much this was going to cost me.

“Yes!” he said. “We have some type of celebration every year on opening day. When I realized this was the 35th anniversary, it seemed perfect. Some people didn’t even know!”

Didn’t know that thirty-five years ago a team of eleven- and twelve -year-olds won the Tri-County Championship? Hard to believe that anyone could be so out of touch.

“We found eight so far, counting you. Say,” he said, “have you kept up with any of the guys?”

I had to shake my head. I was standing in the kitchen of my house in Philadelphia three dozen years from the last time I saw any of my Little Leagues colleagues.

“No, actually I haven’t.”

“Well, do you think you can come? We’d like you to throw out the first ball and if you have a son or daughter who is Little League age, we’d like them to catch it.”

I tried to imagine my kids driving to New York with me to celebrate my Little League team’s triumph in the Tri-County Championship game. Lydia, the fourteen-year-old, was hopeless, but if I pitched it properly, maybe Eli, my seven-year-old son, would let himself be dragged along. Particularly if I didn’t tell him how far New York was.

“I’ll try to swing it.” I waited for him to ask me for a contribution to the Little League stadium fund or the grounds project or the mother’s snack bar but he didn’t. I was still trying to figure out his angle when he rang off.

I went outside to find Eli. He was in the back yard by himself. We had purchased a new sprinkler, the sort with the sprayer that shot water in a circle as the head turned around. There was a knob to adjust the force of the spray and he had twisted it down so that the water zoomed out in a hard, tight spray. He was wearing a pair of over-large bathing trunks that his mother, my ex-wife, bought him. Tommy Hilfinger was emblazoned on his butt and they hung down below his knees like oversized Bermuda’s.

He was walking around the stalk just faster than the circling of the nozzle so that he stayed dry, though only barely so. Then he shot ahead so he was half a circle—180 degrees—ahead of the spray. He made his stand. He faced the center of the turning spray. He bent both legs and lowered himself into a crouch. He spread his knees far out to the sides of his body and extended both arms in front of him, palms up. That got me, the way he put his palms up. He opened and closed his hands and began to talk trash to the spinning faucet: “Come on, waterman, come and get some if you want some. You want me? You got me. Come on.” He said it derisively out there all alone in the front

yard, him and the sprinkler having it out.

In the midst of the tough talk, the spray reached him and sprayed with all of its focused force directly into his crotch. His eyes bugged and he leapt back holding himself in one hand still talking, “Oh man, you got the jewels. You got the family jewels....”

I waited until he came back to the house.

“Dad, am I at your house tonight?” Eli’s mother and I split up when he was two and since then I had remarried. My ex-wife moved across the street from us, and Eli lived half of the time at my house and half at his mother’s. He did not seem to find it strange to live in two houses on the same street but he had trouble keeping the schedule straight.

I said he was. Then I explained about Kensico and the parade.

“So,” I said feigning casualness, “do you want to go to this Little League thing with me?”

“Are you going to be in the parade, Dad?”

“That’s what they said.”

“And you’re going to throw out the first ball?”

“That’s what they said.”

“Then I’m going to be there.”

I was a catcher on the Kensico Little League All-Star Team. There were fourteen of us, drawn from the six teams in the league. It was a big deal. We had our own uniforms and we got to walk with a swagger. We were the best of the best, cocky twelve-year-old boys who lived for baseball.

I was a catcher because I was tall and slow. My Dad thought it was a great position for me because the catcher was the field marshal of the team. A catcher not only had to be tough and gritty, he had to be smart. Not intelligent, *smart*. The catcher was the one who told the pitcher what pitches to throw. You'd never let a pitcher with their constitutional flightiness and vanity decide what sort of pitch to throw. I mean, can you imagine a pitcher *studying* a batter's stance to know whether to pitch him low and

outside or to jam him up in the hope that his handcuffed wrists would lash involuntarily as he bailed out backwards, squibbing the ball mound-wards in lame embarrassment?

No way could you expect a pitcher to *understand* the game. And no way could you expect the right fielder to appreciate that when Murray Hertzberg was zipping them in the early innings, none of the hitters were going to get around on the ball and therefore the action in the outfield was going to be down the right field line and so it would be useless and foolish and, again, *lame*, to be playing the batter to pull.

It was the catcher who won the close games and the best part about it was that only those rare few who really knew baseball would know. When I went to a game, I didn't concern myself with the latest media stars, I watched the catcher. I got seats so you see what the catcher was doing down there in his crouch, pulling the strings that made all the intricate wheels of the defense turn so effortlessly, made those double plays snap and sparkle, made those line drives so relentlessly seek the mitts of the brain damaged outfielders. It was the catcher who made everything work. It was the catcher who was in *control*.

And then of course there were the special skills of those who lived behind the plate, the skills that came out at crunch time. Who but the catcher, mask ripped off and face tightened into its own grim mask, would plant himself in front of the plate, immovable, while the throw would gun in from the outfield heading at the cutoff man's head? The catcher gauging the hurtling speed bearing down on him from third and the other runner streaking towards second and that little pill on a trajectory never quite right and the catcher, in the split part of a split second, making that decision that no one else could ever hope to make, much less make correctly time and again, and then—just then—the catcher bellowing to let it come through, and the cutoff man would step out of the way, and the ball and the runner would arrive at once and there was no way that the catcher was going to yield an inch no matter where the ball was going, and then the grab and the dust and the ball and the glove and the bare hand all slamming down like pounding a spike and the runner sliding at that last instant because he understood that it would be the same as running into an oak if he stayed up to challenge this magnificent creature, this catcher.

That glory would be all the crowd would see, but down in some deep unfathomable region of the human spirit that only catchers can enter, the catcher would know that there was another runner out there, another runner who had circled second with the certainty that there'd be a collision at the plate and a dropped ball and who was now vulnerable and naked and didn't even realize what was happening as the cannon exploded from behind the catcher's right ear. And then that ball was rocketing down to second and the hapless runner just then realized that he should never have taken liberties with a *catcher*, but by then it was way too late and even a desperate headfirst slide couldn't get the runner back to the base and he must suffer the final humiliation of finding that at the end of his slide, his momentum spent, he was still two feet from the bag and lying in the dirt exposed while the joking second baseman took a step over and stooped down to languidly tag him on his head or his butt and then the inning was over and the catcher walked that bowlegged strut over to the bench scowling at his shoes all the way and spitting for good measure...

There wasn't anyone in sport who could eat at the same table with a catcher.

Lydia, Eli's older sister said, "Eli has a confidence problem."

"He has what?"

"He has a confidence problem. Did you hear what he wants to be?"

"Oh. That." For years, Eli had refused to answer when he was asked what he wanted to be. The question gets asked with surprising frequency to small boys and they are supposed to have some sort of answer. We expect them to want to be firefighters or pro athletes. But Eli would ignore the question or change the subject. Now, however, after years of ducking, he finally answered. He said that he wanted to be "one of those guys who work at the cash register at the grocery." He wouldn't give much of an explanation for his thinking other than to say that they did not need to read or do reports.

Lydia was disappointed with his lack of ambition. She wanted to know whether I was going put up with it. In her view, I was unsatisfactorily tranquil about the matter. She was exasperated with both of us; him for lack of ambition; me for failing to treat the

issue with the seriousness it warranted.

For his part, Eli seemed content with his choice of career. He asked me whether the checkout guy needed to add up each item after it went through the scanner. He was pleased with the thought that the cash register did all the adding.

The teammate I remembered best was George Hayes. George was a nervous boy and a nervous pitcher. He chewed the knuckle of his forefinger on his right hand relentlessly; it was always red and puffy with the skin broken and partially scabbed over. When it got really raw, he moved on to the knuckle next to it and so on down the back of his hand. He couldn't sit still. He'd gnaw his knuckle and jiggle his knees relentlessly as he waited, and as a pitcher he did a lot of waiting. He'd pitch an inning and come in and sit on the bench and chew his knuckle and wait for us to get some hits because no matter how good a pitcher he was, he couldn't win without hits. He had a pair of white Converse All-Stars. On the left toe, tattooed with the ink of a blue Bic pen, it said, "STAY" and on the right toe it said, "CALM!"

The little town where I came from, Valhalla, was in those days a remote suburb of New York. When they moved there, my parents believed that they had come a long way from Manhattan both geographically and otherwise. I remember that when my Grandparents would come to visit, they would pack as if they were on a safari, so far were they from Gristedes and Nedick's.

In our town there was the Grand Union for groceries and a pharmacy called Slotnick's that we called Snotlicks. Little League was big business at Snotlicks cause after your game you *had* to stop there and get a milkshake or an ice cream and there were games almost every night for one team or another and so it was standard to find yourself unable to fit in the door at eight o'clock because of all the kids and lapping on cones as they hooted about this hit and that error. About the time that Johnny Domenico lost a fly ball in the sun and it came down right on the crown of his head and popped into his glove just as if that was the plan from the start.

George Barnabec was on our All-Star team. He lived down the street from me. Big, soft-spoken, and powerful, George was an asset as far as Little League baseball went. He could hit the ball and, when he hit it, that ball would travel. He was left-handed and somewhat awkward insofar as fielding was concerned, but he had a powerful arm and he made a big target at first base.

I remember one time I came dragging home to my house after having had the shit beat out of me by a high school kid named Don Platz. My nose was bloody, my face streaked from tears and dried snot. As I passed by George's house, he came out and asked me what had happened. Chokingly, I told him. He said, let's go back and find Platz. We turned around against my better judgment and went back to the place where Don Platz had bloodied me up.

Platz was an oily kind of guy. He wore sharkskin pants and black beetle boots. He had just started to drive and he had a jacked-up Chevy Nova of which he was extremely proud. He called me "Jack" though he knew my name because he liked to make the same tired joke whenever he saw me: "Hey Jack, you late?"

Platz didn't have any particular animus for me, which made my thumping all the worse. He was one of those high school guys who occasionally, at random, decided to beat the shit out of a ten-, or eleven- or twelve-year-old for the sheer joy of it.

We found him lounging in his driveway by the side of his blue Nova. He was smoking a cigarette and snickering with two other high school guys.

"George" I hissed, "This is a really bad idea." But there was no stopping George Barnabec. Before I even had time to understand the plan, he pushed me by the shoulders and said, "Let's go!" He galloped forward, fast and hard, straight at Platz. I had no desire to be smacked around again by Don Platz and his friends, but I could not let George fight my battles on his own. I took a deep breath and plunged after him like I was jumping from a plane.

Platz turned as we were running towards him. His face registered a stupefied amusement. He held that look up until the very moment that George Barnabec's right shoulder crashed into his chest and my dogged arms closed around his knees. He went right over on his back. His friends had no idea what to make of it, but they showed no

interest in participating. They backed away if we might get their sweater vests dirty. George sat on Platz's chest and I sat on Platz's feet. George wailed on his face. It was exhilarating. It was frightening. It was like we were sitting on a thrashing crocodile. I could not imagine the retribution that was going to befall me, but while it lasted, it was the greatest feeling of all time.

We left Platz lying on the ground in roughly the condition that George had found me. His face was bloody and he was choking back tears and anger. Best of all, his friends were snickering at the sight of him. George and I walked away. It took all my self-control to walk no faster than George.

Our town was not wealthy but Little League baseball was serious business. There were separate uniforms for the All-Stars for post-season play. My pants were made for a boy taller than me and so they flapped at the knees when I wore them the way that we thought was clearly the coolest—showing a lot of sock, both that outside sock of the most ruby red and that inside sock of brilliant white. Both socks gracefully emerged from those black spikes, which even though rubber on the bottom were still *spikes* with everything that name implied. We thought of them no different than spikes of gleaming metal, knife sharp, filed into weapons for the blazing feet of Ty or Honus. When we relived a game—and in those summers that was just about all we ever we did—one of us, my brother or I, would fly into second, spikes blazing, the hapless ground-bound second baseman twisting to rise above those razor deadly spikes, ever in our replays unsuccessful.

It wasn't obvious at first that I could be much of a catcher. In that first year of Little League, when nine-year-olds played with grown men of eleven and twelve, baseball was cruel beyond measure. I had a cheap catcher's glove that had appealed to me because of its nimble flexibility. I had not yet learned that when a pitch hits the ground a foot in front of you and you have to jam your hand, fingers down, into the dirt to prevent a passed ball (how I hate that name even now: a catcher whirling up from the crouch with the runners streaking down the bases, hyenas of merriment, mask flung off, wild-eyed searching for the ball caroming off the pinball backstop) and if your glove

wasn't hard-spined and rigid along the back, your fingers would *jam*, and no matter how proud you were, you couldn't help but cry.

I did a lot of crying that first season, for once I'd jammed that miserable long middle finger and suffered with the ice packs and the blue red bruises that would start on the palm side of my hand and then work their way round to the other side, I'd find that I couldn't really get the damn thing to heal, and even though it felt like I was okay and indeed I was okay playing catch in the backyard with my brother, when it came to game time there'd be another low bouncing pitch and it'd happen again just exactly the same way as before. And again, I would cry. Which was its own misery because if there was one thing no catcher ever did, it was *cry*.

By the time I was ten I had a new mitt and my perpetually jammed fingers had gotten better and I had become more resistant to the urge to cry and besides, I was ten, a man compared to the baby nine-year old's whose parents forced us to let them on the team. And in that year of being ten there came a feeling that for the first time in my life, I was someone who had to be *confronted*. That feeling was a powerful intoxicant to a boy who only a year before had been a mewling pup. And if all I really had was an occasional feeling of confidence, I rode that hard and by the time I was twelve I was an All-Star.

John Saldi had a beard. They said he shaved twice a day. He was six-foot-tall with huge hairy arms. Arms made to tattoo. He pitched for the Cubs and I remember standing at the plate listening to the sound that his fastball made when it popped into the glove of the catcher behind me. I heard the sound before I saw the ball leave his hand.

The first time I faced him I was terrified. I knee-knocked to the plate with a size twenty-eight bat: the smallest size you could use in the Little League, a twig. My only hope to get a hit off him was to get my bat around quick. But his heart-wailing fastball popped the catcher's glove behind me before I could move the bat off my shoulder. I wasn't thinking of a hit. I was hoping for a walk but if I could not have that, I prayed that I would not to go down with the bat on my shoulder. That was the one thing you could

control after all; you couldn't force him to pitch outside the strike zone and you definitely couldn't count on hitting one of his pitches, but you could swing the bat when there were two strikes. And even though there was a heavy racing sound in the back of my head like a freight hoist had somehow been secretly installed in my brain, when the count was 0 and 2 and he reared back to fire another one of those blinders, I swung. I actually swung. And though I swung before he even threw the ball, by the time my bat came around the ball was right there, right over the plate, right where my weenie bat had reached. And then, miracle of miracles, there was an explosion. An explosion so powerful that I was dazed for a moment. I saw the fantastic truth. I had hit the ball. I had hit a Saldi fastball. While it was a little dribbler down the first base line, foul to boot, I had actually hit a Saldi fastball.

"Tell me a joke," Eli said.

We were in the car driving north to Valhalla. I said, "I am all out of jokes."

"Come on Dad. Tell me a joke."

I said, "How many surrealists does it take to screw in a lightbulb?"

"Dad, how many?"

I said, "to get to the other side."

His look was fleetingly quizzical but quickly dismissive. "Yeah, yeah," he said, "now tell me a good one."

I remembered one that was a little complicated but I decided to try it anyway.

I told him about a guy who buys a brass statue of a rat in an antique store. When he leaves the store, he is startled to find that he is followed down the street by a rat. Soon there are tens, then hundreds, and finally thousands, of rats following him. He avoids being stampeded only by racing to the edge of an ocean pier and throwing the brass statue into the surf. In a frenzy, all the rats leap to follow and drown. The punch line comes when the guy goes back to the antique store and asks if they have any brass lawyers.

I looked over and he was asleep.

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The drive from Philly to Valhalla was only two and a half hours. For all the years that had passed, I had only moved 120 miles from where I lived that long-ago season, but it was as if I was travelling backwards in time. The invitation was so implausible that all sorts of other hopelessly implausible possibilities occurred to me. Perhaps my father (then two years dead) would be there. Maybe I would see Don Platz and his Chevy Nova. Perhaps, somehow, I would be asked to don a catcher's mask and the other gear and crouch once again behind the plate.

But when we arrived, I came back to reality.

There was a parking lot filled with little knots of people: boys in uniform, mothers and fathers sipping coffee from Dunkin Donuts, cars slowly threading through the crowd. No one was in charge. We walked into the center of the parking lot and stopped. Eli and I formed our own little family knot. I looked around trying to figure where I was supposed to go. Eli assumed that I would know what we were doing, where we were going, but I was just a Little Leaguer again, waiting for the grown-ups to get the game organized.

As I looked around the crowd, there wasn't a single person who looked like the twelve-year-old kids who I had hung with thirty-five years ago. I didn't see a person who even vaguely looked familiar. Then a short and very fat twenty-five-year-old with a John Deere cap and a clipboard walked through the milling crowd. He called out, "All-Stars. Any Kensico All-Stars?"

"I guess that's me," I said.

He looked up from under the bill of his hat. "Which one are you?"

"I'm Dworetzky, Joe Dworetzky."

"Oh, wow from Pennsylvania! I'm Jim Fitzgerald. You've come a long way! Great to have you! Did you bring any kids?"

I put my arm around Eli and pulled him forward. "Here's Eli."

"Well, this is just great," he said. "We're going to start out over there. Just a few minutes. Let me go find the rest of the guys."

We walked over to an area by a tree and milled around as affairs slowly

organized. Out of the chaos a parade was formed and soon I found myself marching down the main street of the little town where I had grown up. There were several other men of my vintage and they had similar looks of sheepish confusion. None of them looked familiar and the haphazardness of the organization made it quite unclear whether they were my former teammates or parents of this year's crop of Little Leaguers. I felt like I ought to have a better idea of what was going on, but Eli seemed to like the whole idea and so I gave up trying to figure out who was who and just marched along.

There was a high school band that made discordant marching music and maybe 150 kids in uniform who followed along behind our cluster. There were parents on the sidelines but the notional demarcation between the parade and the sidelines did not last long. Soon we were a throng, all moving from the main street across the train tracks and onto that little road that took us down to the Little League field.

It was a great looking field. The parents had paid for an electronic scoreboard and there was a fence and a tower where the PA announcer could see introduce the batters when they came to the plate. There were stands on either side of home plate and a hot dog vending establishment underneath. Very nice digs for Little League. Much better than in my day, for sure. In centerfield there was a construction tarpaulin over part of the fence. That was a shame, I thought. Too bad they couldn't get the field fully ready for opening day.

The parade spilled onto the apron of the field and then the stands filled and the players raced around grabbing each other's hats and butts and shrieking with laughter. A group of us were herded over to the dugout. Eli stayed with me.

I felt a big hand on my shoulder and turned around: George Barnabec. There could be no doubt. He was still a couple inches taller than me and wider, bigger and clearly stronger. His hand felt like a saddle resting on my shoulder.

"You're Joey," he said.

I hadn't heard the name Joey applied to me in so many years that I thought he was talking to someone else.

"George? How are you, man?"

He said he was fine and introduced me to his kids.

Then some of the other men came up and introduced themselves and pretty soon I was shaking hands and patting the backs of a bunch of beefy fellows that I wouldn't have recognized on the street but when you looked at them for a while and you started to think of them with half the weight and twice the hair you could start to see that this one was Cliff Hendricks and that one was Murray Hertzberg. With some of the others I couldn't find any landmark to remember, but we all made a good show of camaraderie.

I didn't feel bad that I didn't remember some of the players. We had played on different teams during the season and it was only for a couple week period at the end of the year that we played together as a team, but I could tell that Jim Fitzgerald was disappointed. Somehow in conceiving of this event he had developed an idea that thirty-five years ago the Kensico All-Stars were a tight band of fighting fellows who scrapped their way to the Tri-County Championship relying on the smarts and support of their gritty teammates. Of course, they stayed bonded together for life; they were brothers in arms.

We lined up by the home team dugout. A number of the dads had a boy or girl of Little League age with them and then the announcer on the PA system—surprise! it was Jim Fitzgerald!—began to introduce us. He called our names and we walked out to the mound one at a time and formed a line. The idea was that as each of us came to the mound we'd throw a "first" pitch to our son or daughter who would stand at the plate and catch.

Eli had no idea this was coming. He was just short of eight years old and baseball was only vaguely in his field of vision. He was happy to come to New York and march in a parade but he didn't realize he would have to stand in front of a lot of people and catch a pitch thrown from the mound. He looked at me in the endearing way that he had. He was saying, "Whoa, what's this about? Can you get me out of this?"

I looked back at him in a way I am sure he did not find endearing, "Not a chance."

He walked to home plate resignedly as I stepped to the mound. Maybe this was not a good idea. But the die was cast. I was sure of only one thing. I did not want to

bounce the ball on the way to home plate. I hadn't played a lot of baseball in recent years but I played squash and ran around a lot. I saw no reason to think I couldn't throw the ball to home plate if I gave it a little oomph. But now I had another consideration. I didn't want to fire it in there and have it hit Eli in the head, or even hit his glove and pop right out. No, I had to throw it hard enough to get to home plate but soft enough that he could make a good try for it.

I stepped onto the rubber. I decided that I had to have some kind of windup. I would look like a dweeb if I didn't have a wind up throwing out the first pitch. But no high kick. I would definitely look like a dweeb if I did a high kick windup. I stood sideways on the rubber, looked at the plate, reached back and threw a nice soft toss right over the plate. It was smooth as could be. Eli opened the mitt and snagged the ball like a natural. Then he passed the mitt to the next kid, kept the ball for posterity and walked off to the sideline. I caught up to him and gave him a little punch on the shoulder. He was glowing. He liked having caught that ball under pressure. I liked it too.

I figured we were about done when the eight of us finished throwing our eight first pitches into home plate. But it turned out there was more. Jim was still up in the announcing booth and now he launched into a description of the triumphs of our team, including our glorious victory in the game that won the Tri-County Championship.

Then he told the next part of the story. I hadn't heard it in a long time but it still sounded good. We played a team from Staten Island and unfortunately a couple of days before the game our star pitcher, Murray Hertzberg, got his finger caught in the door of his mom's Country Squire and it had swelled to the size of an Oscar Mayer. The local paper reported, "When the finger ballooned Thursday night, the whole town of Valhalla began to get concerned." And when "the finger didn't respond to treatment" overnight, Hertzberg was out.

Moreover, our other star pitcher, George Hayes, had pitched a full game a few days before (the very game that won the Tri-County Championship) and under the rules that prevailed in those days he wasn't allowed to pitch again. So we had to face the Staten Island team with our ace reliever, Bobby Klatzkin, as the starter.

Klatzkin could pitch. He's had a couple of high-pressure saves in the run-up to

this game. Only one problem, he was a relief pitcher, used to pitching one or two innings. No way was he going all the way. And after Klatzkin, all we had was our second baseman, Cliff Hendricks.

All these years later I can see Cliff Hendricks clear as day. He had one of those buzz cuts where the barber leaves the front a little long and he had it butch-waxed up, not straight but with a slight slant so his whole head looked lop-sided. His hair was blonde, so blonde you could see through to his scalp. He had a slightly triangular face with glasses and one side of his lip was higher than the other.

Glasses were not common among Little Leaguers in those days and those glasses and his Alvin the Chipmunk face made it powerfully clear that he could not throw the heat. But he did have other talents. He could move the ball around. He had great control. We weren't allowed to throw curve balls or anything with action on it, but that didn't mean that you couldn't take some speed on or off the ball. Cliff specialized in that junky kind of pitch. All in all, Cliff was not a bad pitcher. He wasn't the caliber of our big guns but he was what we had and of course we supported him. The only problem was our chatter. What did you say? "Let's go Cliffy?" "Let's go Clifford?" "Let's go Cliff?" There were no good choices.

Klatzkin was solid when the game opened. But after four innings, the score tied 1-1, they found his number. He was done and Cliff took the mound. Cliff couldn't hold them off. The paper described the end this way: "Blasting 11 hits good for 11 runs in the last two stanzas, Staten Islanders turned the close contest into a rout as, for the first time, the Valhallans lost their poise and began to play like 12-year old's."

We lost the game 12-1.

We were bummed out about it for a while, particularly because we thought that if Murray had been able to pitch, we would have made a game out of it. We had gotten a run, we were tied after four innings, we weren't hopeless. With some pitching ...? But we were done. It was a good run; it was a great run. We settled into the rest of our summer.

Valhalla was a suburb of New York and we got the New York papers. I remember how unsatisfactory the *New York Times* sports coverage of little league was even when

it was a hometown team moving deep in post-season play. But my dad and a bunch of the other dads started picking up the Staten Island paper in town and bringing it home after work. We could read about that Staten Island team as they marched forward in tournament play. We studied the reports of their games, we saw pictures of the boys that we had played against, and we rooted for them as hard as we could.

I can't remember how many games it took, but they actually won the New York state championship and got into the Eastern Regionals where they also won, earning them a trip to the Little League World Series in Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

Williamsport was, of course, the Mecca of Little League. That's where the world champion was decided. Not just the United States champion, the *world* champion. If you had a fantasy as a twelve-year old Little Leaguer in Valhalla, New York, it was to play in Williamsport in the Little League World Series. You could not dream bigger than this. And if our dream had been dashed, we had been on the same field with those guys who were now playing in the Little League World Series! It was unimaginable. As if you knew a kid who had selected to ride in a space capsule.

There are quite a number of games in Williamsport before the actual championship game and we rooted for the Staten Islanders with all our hearts. Our rooting worked. That team from Staten Island made the finals and they actually got to play for the World Championship.

The game was broadcast on radio and some of us got together to listen to it. The Staten Islanders played a team from Mexico. If you go on the Internet and look up the statistics for the Little League World Series, you will see that in 1964, when I was twelve years old, the team from Staten Island beat Obispado Little League from Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico and won the Little League World Series. Amazing.

In the public address booth, Jim finished his description of our glory days. I figured it was time to head for the stands, but there was one more surprise. Jim asked everyone to turn their eyes to centerfield and two kids in uniform ran out from the infield and grabbed either side of the construction tarpaulin draped on the centerfield fence. They gave it a yank. And there, built into the centerfield fence, was a black and white

photograph the size of a billboard. It showed our Little League team, the Kensico All-Stars from 1964, in all our glory:



Joe is they boy on the far right of the top row

We watched a little bit of the game and we talked among ourselves. I learned that Murray Hertzberg lived within fifteen miles of Valhalla and had his own business. I asked everybody what ever happened to George Hayes but no one knew. I loved to think of him all grown up. Maybe he was a lawyer like me, just as anxious as he had been when he pitched, with the words STAY and CALM on his wingtips as he walked into court, his knuckles bleeding on the handle of his litigation bag.

I talked at most length with George Barnabec who lived in New Jersey and had an office supply business. I told his daughters the story of the time he had avenged my beating by Don Platz and I could tell they thought it was exactly the kind of thing their father would do.

But mostly I paid attention to Eli. Eli would be old enough to enter Little League in two years and I suspected that his heart wasn't really in it. I wondered whether this trip would make it worse. He might wonder what kind of game it is that after thirty-five years

they were still talking about who struck out in the fifth inning of the game against Ossining? I am pretty sure Eli did not want to be standing up to the plate with the idea that a strikeout would be remembered for the rest of his natural life. But he seemed pretty cheerful and afterwards there was a party in the VFW where they had those three-liter bottles of Coke that he wasn't allowed to get near at home. And even better they gave him a "bottomless cup". He poured himself glass after plastic glass and soon was buzzing around the gym like a wind-up toy.

I lost track of him for a while and when I went to find him, he was having a long conversation with one of George Barnabec's girls. I moved closer so I could hear what he was saying.

"... and then," Eli said, "he takes the big rat and throws it in the ocean and all the rats that are there jump right in too."

"They do?"

"And then the man goes on back to the store and asks the man if they have any brass lawyers."

"He does?"

"Do you get it? Brass lawyers?"

The girl nodded her head tentatively, clearly mystified.

"See," Eli said sagely, "he can go throw it in the ocean and that way he can get rid of all the brass lawyers ..."

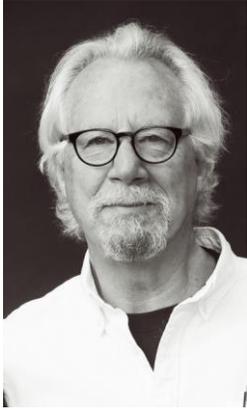
The girl smiled hopefully at Eli.

You could see that Eli was trying to figure out whether she got it. I guess he concluded that she did not, because he went on, patiently, "You see, when he walks down the street, all the brass lawyers will follow him ..."

I could see it was time to go. We said our goodbyes, promised to stay in touch, and began the drive back to Philadelphia. Eli—despite the caffeine—was sound asleep before we reached the George Washington Bridge.

I drove back to Philadelphia on the Turnpike accompanied only by my thoughts. I wondered what Little League would be like for Eli if he chose to play baseball. I hoped he would enjoy it. I looked forward to watching him play. Most of all I hoped that he

would find in Little League—or in something else—a game that was so absorbing that if he got a call about it thirty-five years in the future, it would bring the memories of summers when he was still turning into who he would turn out to be.



After spending thirty-five years practicing law in Philadelphia, **Joe Dworetzky** launched a second career as writer and journalist. In 2019, he was an intern at the *Los Angeles Times*. In 2020, he graduated from Stanford University with a Master's degree in journalism. He is currently a reporter at *Bay City News* in Berkeley, California. More than two dozen of Joe's stories and essays have been published in online and print journals, including *Narrative Magazine*, *Blue Fifth Review*, *Gargoyle*, and *December*. Joe's first novel, *Nine Digits*, was published in 2014 by Second Wind Publishing. Follow his work on Twitter [@joedworetzky](https://twitter.com/joedworetzky).