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“Wilson Davis, Baseball, and some of Life’s Little Lessons” May10, 2004 - By Joel Hancock

On Monday I spoke for a few minutes at the memorial service for Wilson Davis. Obviously, I was honored to have been asked to participate. I understood that I was invited for a specific reason. I am not family, at least not genetically. I was not his pastor. I was his insurance agent, but that had nothing to do with why Sally asked me to tell some things about her dad. I know very little about horses, or horse racing; and even less about coon hunting (two things that he loved dearly). Rather, I was there because I shared with Wilson, and in many ways because of Wilson, a love for something that was an integral part of our lives. That common denominator was simple. It was - it is baseball!

There are some others who may have spent more time with Wilson, and perhaps had more or better stories to tell than I will. But I am comfortable that there are none who appreciated more the influence that Wilson had on their life, then and later, than do I.

I assume that I must have been a teenager before I realized that the name "WILSON" stamped on baseballs, gloves, and catchers' equipment was something other than Wilson Davis' signature.

Cap Anson, one of the earliest heroes of baseball (a player and coach for the Cincinnati Redstockings of the old National Association) chose to have the following inscribed on his gravestone. "Here lies a man who batted .300." In baseball, there is something magical about that number. Hitting .299 and everything below it is failure, or at best mediocrity. But a .300 average and all above it means you did it right; you were a success. What about Wilson? Was he a lifetime .300 hitter?

One of the main lessons I learned from Wilson was that the game of baseball is supposed to be fun. There is a reason that each game, according to the official rule book of the game, must begin with the words, "Play Ball" You should play it hard and play it well, and play to win, but baseball, like life, should be fun. As he once said, "If it ain't fun, you ain't doing it right." Hence the following story that I have heard so often over the years.

Many years ago, a downeast team was playing at Salter Path. Wilson was the catcher. Approaching shadows had caused it to get late early (to mimic Yogi Berra). In the final inning, with two outs, but with a full count and the bases loaded, Wilson had an idea. He walked to the mound and asked the pitcher to leave the ball in his glove, and feign a pitch to the plate. He would handle the rest! And that's what he did.

As planned, the pitcher went through a full wind-up but left the ball in his glove, while appearing to throw a normal pitch towards the plate. Sure enough, Wilson popped his catcher's mitt and the umpire yelled, "Strike Three." As might be imagined, bedlam broke out as the downeast players scurried to their cars and headed for home. Wilson was trapped for a while in the heated argument, but when finally he was reunited with the rest of the team, somewhere between Salter Path and Atlantic Beach, he could hardly wait to announce that the Salter Pathers had sworn that the last pitch was "high."

I knew Wilson almost all of my life. I had hundreds of conversations with him, maybe a thousand, and BASEBALL was part, in one way or another, of almost every single conversation: how to play it, how to enjoy it, what it teaches us, what it meant and still means.

Even as we grew older; especially as we grew older, the lessons we learned in baseball seemed to have more relevance.

In Ray Kinsella's classic novel, "Shoeless Joe," one of the characters (depicted in the movie "Field of Dreams" by James Earl Jones) makes an observation as he heads to the left field corn rows and into eternity.

"The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It's been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt, and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game, is a part of our past, Ray. It reminds us of all that once was good, and that could be again. ..."

There is a reason that old men go back so often to see the game they once played, because more than any other, it has remained the same from generation to generation. Old eyes look again on the game they played as boys, and if for only a brief moment, they are somehow young again.

*When young men cross the lines of white
Things are as they seem.
Boys play pall, the throw and hit
And run the fields of green.*

*Then as old men they come once more
To cross those lines some day
But its in their hearts and their mind's eye
That once gain they play.*

*For when young men cross lines of white
Things are as they seem
But for old men it something more
It becomes a Field of Dreams.*

(Field of Dreams-Joel Hancock 1985)

But if baseball were of value and interest only for old men, wishing they were still young, then it would not have become the generational glue that it truly is.

"Somewhere, at this moment, [in eastern Carteret County] ... in a backyard, a young child and a parent begins to play catch. The child holds the too-big glove on his hand, outstretched, while the parent tosses the ball underhand toward the glove. Missed. Again, underhand to the glove, hitting the webbing and out onto the soft green grass... Methodically, this parental attempt at the small success of the first catch can go on for hours, days, weeks. Sooner or later the ball softly thrown lands in the glove and the too small free hand clamps down over it, trapping forever in leather and love the sweet, satisfying moment of a child's first catch.

"This is work, often tedious and unrewarding. Most parenting is. Yet it is every bit as necessary as the difficult work done by a builder when he digs deep into the ground to lay a foundation. Once completed, the foundation is never seen again. It is buried under sand and dirt, covered with layer after layer of heavy block, designed to support the whole base. It will only be noticed again if its defective.

"As we look for answers, for solutions to the mysteries of raising children, we need to recognize the

familiar as a way to build a foundation that will support our children throughout the epic shifts they will inevitably face in their lives. With baseball, the simple, purely American game of baseball, parents are afforded an opportunity to play with their children and, at the same time, teach them the rudimentary and the subtly discovered lessons of life." "Rules of the Game" - Hohenstein

In 1965 I was the youngest (not quite 13) player in Carteret County's Babe Ruth League (we still called it the "Pony League.) Wilson was my coach. I began as an infielder, but soon he convinced me that playing infield was for "Sissies." Real men, like him, always played the same position; they were catchers. ("Back catchers," who wore equipment that was called "the tools of ignorance.")

Our very first game was played on the field behind the old Beaufort High School. In my first at bat, Wilson prepared me with this advice. He (the 15 year old pitcher for the Beaufort VFW) was so much bigger than me that he would try to over-power me. I could assume that his first pitch would be a fast ball down the middle. That would be my pitch to hit.

I took his advice and swung. I was a little late, but just a little, and I hit a rocket down the first base line and past the first baseman. Soon I had rounded first and was heading for second. In this situation I had been taught that now I should look to the third base coach and let him tell me what to do next. As I looked in his direction I could see Wilson with both hands high in the air, telling me to hold at second. Once there I looked behind me and saw that the right fielder still had not gotten to the ball. (There was no outfield fence at the Beaufort field. The ball just kept rolling until it stopped.) Seeing that, I headed for third. Again, Wilson held up his hands and stopped me once more. This time as I looked back I could see the ball just now making it back to the infield.

"Why did you hold me up?" I asked. "I could have had a home run." It was then I learned that in the heat and humidity of the summer's evening, Wilson had decided to clean his "coke bottle thick" glasses as I went to bat. Everything happened so fast that his glasses were still in his hand as I began my trip around the bases.

Explaining that to me he added, "With my glasses off I can't even see who's pitching, must less follow a three inch ball. I kinda felt like as little as you are, you ought to be satisfied with a double!"

He made it a point to never hold me up again without a good reason.

As earlier mentioned, I was but one of many boys and men, and through them, our wives and children, whom Wilson touched. I am relatively sure, that he never received so much as a penny in compensation, but it was obvious then, and to the very end, that money was not what he was looking for. Oh, it was fun to him, maybe even more fun than coon hunting, but it was more than fun; it was a way of life.

After her stopped coaching Pony League, he worked and played with the Eastern Blues and several other teams, made up mostly of men like him, who still enjoyed playing a boy's game. In retrospect, maybe that was what we loved the most. Once inside the lines of a baseball field, we were all boys again, if only for a couple of hours; if only for nine innings! It helped him to keep everything else in life in a proper perspective.

Case in point. Many years later, on one of his frequent trips to West Virginia, he had a heart attack. When finally he returned after a lengthy convalescence, I asked, almost jokingly, "how was your trip?" He began to outline his trip as follows, "I had a heart attack, but I won a stakes race. So I guess, all in all, I had a good trip!"

As we gather today to say goodbye one last time, I think he would tell us that same thing. "All in all, I had a good trip!"

As we look back on his life, and the game that he loved, I am reminded of George Carlin's classic monologue about the differences between baseball and football.

"... The objectives of the two games are completely different: In football the object is for the quarterback, also known as the field general, to be on target with his aerial assault, riddling the defense by hitting his receivers with deadly accuracy in spite of the blitz, even if he has to use shotgun. With short bullet passes and long bombs, he marches his troops into enemy territory, balancing this aerial assault with a sustained ground attack that punches holes in the forward wall of the enemy's defensive line... until he reaches the end zone.

In baseball the object is much simpler. It is to be safe! And to go home! - I hope I'll be safe at home!

Only slightly more sublime is the following observation made by Ken Burns & Geoffrey Ward in the preface to their book and documentary on the history of the national pastime.

"At the games's heart lie mythic contradictions: a pastoral game, born in crowded cities; an exhilarating democratic sport that tolerates cheating; a profoundly conservative game that sometimes manages to be years ahead of its time. It is an American odyssey that links sons and daughters to father and grandfathers...It is a haunted game, where each player is measured by the ghosts of those who have gone before. Most of all, it is about time and timelessness, speed and grace, failure and loss, imperishable hope, and coming home."

Now, finally, Wilson Davis, has rounded third for the last time and crossed the plate. I trust that he will be safe at home!

Harmon Killebrew, a Hall of Famer from a generation ago, tells this brief story,

My father used to play with my brother and me in the yard. Mother would come out and say, "You're tearing up the grass." "We're not raising grass," Dad would reply. "We're raising boys."

For all of those boys and men, I stand today to say, thanks for having helped to raise us. And when I take my sons and grandsons to see his tombstone, I feel I can tell them, without reservation, "Here lies a man who hit 300!" They play baseball. They'll know exactly what I mean!