

MY ROOKIE YEAR IN THE STANDS

A veteran ballplayer turns Little League dad—and learns to step aside. • BY DAVID R. ROTH

It's baseball season again. My son, Asher, moved up this year from Little League to the full-sized field of dreams. Watching him patrol center field, I'm flooded with memories of our first season as father-son Little Leaguers.

Asher was 8. The years when he could have been playing organized T-ball had been spent instead in our backyard. I didn't want him to fall victim to some blowhard coach, so we just played catch or batted tennis balls. When he started bouncing my pitches off the neighbor's siding, I knew it was time for the real deal.

I could tell he was ready. But was I? After 20-plus years of playing competitive baseball and softball, it would be my rookie year in the stands. Could I separate my son's experience from my own? Sitting on the cold aluminum that first game, I wondered if I'd postponed this mainly to protect myself—and to protect him from me.

The regular season went well. Being part of a winning team made it easier. The kids had fun. I was a generally positive cheerleader, aside from one run-in with an umpire who had no appreciation for the subtleties of sarcasm. All in all, not a bad rookie campaign.

Then came the 8-year-old all-star tournament. This was another story—kids from a tiny riverside town taking on leagues two and three times their size. Our coaches had trouble filling out the roster; there just aren't that many 8-year-olds in Morrisville, Pa.

The all-star coaches were serious baseball guys. The head coach didn't even have a kid in the league. His main assistant had been drafted by the Phillies. These guys stressed the fundamentals. I saw a light go on in Asher's eyes—he was learning *The Game*. I was thrilled. I started to relive those early days of learning to break quickly toward the ball, to involve yourself in every play and to develop the instincts that have you moving at the crack of the bat. These kids were good—strong defense, surprising pitching. They played so well I forgot they were just a bunch of kids.

We won our first three games of the tournament, but Asher struggled, and I struggled with him. I so badly wanted something good to happen for him—hit a line drive up the middle, rob another kid of a hit—something to make him smile. When Game

4 ended as a 9-6 loss, we were relegated to the losers' bracket.

Game 5: This could be our last game of the season. It's hard-fought. We take a 3-0 lead. They chip away and tie. Then it happens. Top of the sixth and final inning. Men on first and second. Two outs. Derek, our star pitcher, struggling on the mound. He has already walked the two runners who are on base. He needs a defensive gem to get him out of the inning. He winds and delivers. There it is, a ground ball to short. Shortstop—that would be Asher! He positions himself well and picks it clean, then straightens and lets loose a nice overhand throw . . . which sails to the right. The first baseman, Alex, can't come down with it. The ball goes to the fence. The go-ahead run scores. The next hitter knocks in two more unearned runs.

Why my kid? Why me?

In the bottom half of the sixth inning, mothers are praying their kids don't get up with the bases loaded and two outs. Fathers exile themselves to areas apart from the mothers. Our kids leave the bases loaded and we lose, 6-3.

Third out of 17 teams—it's the best any all-star 8-year-olds from Morrisville have ever done. But there I am, thinking, "Okay, I've got to turn this experience into a Lifesaver commercial"—you know, the one

where the father throws his arm around the dejected kid and they both realize what's really important? Only I'm the one who needs the Lifesaver. I can't erase the sight of the ball leaving my son's hand and sailing past the first baseman. I consider softening the blow by deflecting some blame: Derek never should have walked those two hitters; Alex should have come off the bag and kept the throw in front of him; blah, blah, blah.

The moment arrives. Here comes Asher, and he has a trophy. He has a bunch of new friends. He is proud and smiling. He doesn't need a Lifesaver; he needs me to realize that I have a great kid who just might learn to love playing the game as much as I did—if I can manage to stay out of the way. ■

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