

## Chasing Flies

A year ago, my teammates from the 1986 Williams baseball team romped around Shea Stadium, courtesy of Jim Duquette '88, then general manager of the New York Mets. I am told the afternoon session included batting practice and an infield-outfield drill. More likely the "boys" did a phantom infield, a pantomime without the ball that we used to practice in hopes we might distract our archrival Amherst before the game. In the end, we were good actors, but Amherst had the better team.

In 1986 we called ourselves "super street fighters." It was part of the easy-going humor that had developed among the six seniors on the team through ups and downs. The good times included annual trips to Florida for spring training. There was sunbathing, swimming, nights on the town and ribbing each other endlessly. On one trip, a wickedly clever teammate told our gullible right fielder that a Detroit Tigers scout had seen his powerful stroke and wanted to give him a tryout. The poor guy sat on the curb of our Lakeland motel for half an hour, his face sagging with each passing minute's realization that some dreams don't come true.

But humorous anecdotes couldn't hide our frustrations about losing. Many of us had also played football, and by the spring of 1986, we hadn't had a winning record in either sport. Baseball was our last chance.

Trusted coach Jim Briggs '60 returned after a two-year hiatus to manage us, and things came together on the field. Kevin Morris '86, our ace pitcher, finally got some luck on the mound—he had once pitched eight no-hit innings against Amherst and still ended up losing! The rest of us mixed in well with a younger group of talented players. We ended up with a record of 19-10 and were told that we had won more games than any Eph baseball team in decades.

Memories of that final season were batted about in the e-mails leading up to the Shea Stadium reunion. My work in Central Asia ruled out a return to the U.S., but the whole affair got me reflecting on how much I connected baseball with being American.

The son of a diplomat, I spent the first seven years of my life in Southeast Asia. When we returned to the U.S., I fell in love with the game. I soaked my first glove in oil, wrapped it with rubber bands, and slept on it for months to get it ready for my first Little League season. In the evenings, I would count my baseball cards or memorize my favorite player's batting average.

But my version of paradise came to an end in 1973 when Dad told us we were moving to the People's Republic of China—the land of cadres, communes and the Cultural Revolution. I would have to leave behind the green fields of Chevy Chase, Md. There was no room for bourgeois baseball in Mao's China.

Dad tried to substitute weekend trips to the Ming Tombs for those fields, but it just wasn't the same. On home leaves at my grandparents' house in Myrtle Beach, S.C., poor Dad, who had bad knees from playing college soccer, would try to make up for lost time by setting up drills for me on the beach—pitching to me, hitting grounders and smacking long fly balls.

I was as happy as can be tracking down those flies as the tide rolled in. It was freedom and success in quick, measurable ways. The kinds of ways that living in China didn't offer.

So I have always identified baseball as being American in tangible ways. Call it the willfulness to be more productive. When I returned from China, rusty from two years of not playing, I had to sit on the bench. To get better, I would practice on my own, hitting a fly in the air, then grabbing my mitt to chase after the ball. It sounds ridiculous now, but I was a fanatic about improving.

Three decades later, I find myself again halfway across the world. And the story that comes back most vividly, not surprisingly, is chasing after a fly ball when I played center field that final year at Williams. We were playing Tufts and had a comfortable lead with star pitcher Kevin on the mound. A Tufts batter ripped a ball to the gap in left-center field. I streaked after the line drive, dove for the ball and ended up driving my head into the plywood outfield fence. I lay on the outfield grass, tingling sensations shooting down my arm. When I came to the bench, Kevin was shaking his head. "Lills," he said, "you *don't* have to do that. We are up 6-1." Good-hearted Kevin was worried about my wrenched neck. But for me, it was a fly ball that had to be tracked down and caught, just like all the others.

There's more to the story. Our left fielder, a small-town boy from western Massachusetts named Jim Duquette, actually pulled the ball from my glove and threw it back into the infield. Jim was at the start of a career that would culminate with him being named All-New England and a Div. III All-American. The story goes that Jim needed just one vote to put him over the top—and it came from the Tufts coach. "Well, he's got my vote," the coach said, "because he made the greatest catch I have ever seen."

So if I can take credit for launching Jim's successful career in baseball, I certainly will. For his part, I suspect Jim will let me take a rain check on the Shea Stadium event. Perhaps in a few years when we return to the U.S., he will let me bring my two young boys to Shea. They will be more than happy to run on the green fields of America.

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*Jeffrey Lilley '86 works for the International Republican Institute, helping political parties develop in the Kyrgyz Republic. He is co-author with his father of China Hands: Nine Decades of Adventure, Espionage and Diplomacy in Asia.*