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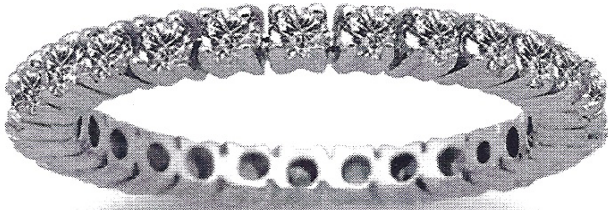
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Frankly Plank

By Duane Plank

All of the excitement from the Gundo Little League's first couple of victories on the road to making history in Williamsport, PA got me to thinking about my All-Star career in youth baseball. All about me, remember? All right, mostly about me.

And if all went well Tuesday night, the Gundo squad should be playing Thursday night, with a chance to move on to the next tourney.

We had a stirring victory last week against the kids from PV, but a rehash of that game would be a bit dated. Suffice to say, down 5-0 in the second inning, the kids came back to post a raucous 6-5 victory in seven innings.

As discerning readers know, I try to take most of the credit for any of the victories, but I did nothing here. The kids clutched up, the kids came through. I will save my brilliant coaching maneuvers for a game down the tourney road.

All right, so back in my day, there were no 9-and-10, 10-and-11, and 11-and 12-All-Star teams. The Manhattan Beach league that played west of Sepulveda had one All-Star team, composed mainly of 12-year-old kids.

We hosted the 1971 District Tourney on the beautifully manicured field at American Martyrs grammar school. Back then the field had grass. And dirt. Seems to me that we practiced for a week or so, then came out and won our first game. Don't remember who we beat, but I do remember that I played second base and got a base hit in the contest.

So we were flying high as we prepared for our second game in the single-elimination tourney. Yup, back in the day, there were no mulligans--no second chance. One and done. You lose, you go home to spend the rest of the summer annoying your parents and the neighbors, running around the neighborhood, playing kick the can or whatever else we did in the "good old days."

Unfortunately for the MB kids living west of Sepulveda, we ran into a juggernaut of a team in game two of the tourney. Not the kids from El Segundo or Hermosa, or Redondo Beach, but our neighbors to the east, the team from MB's own Premier Little League.

In the '70s, the Manhattan Beach Little League and the Premier League were separate entities. We on the westside knew of the athletic prowess of some of their kids, having played with and against them in youth basketball leagues, etc.

Well, Premier had a budding phenom, one Don Morrow, who was a lights-out pitcher, shortstop, and all-around stud. Seemed like Morrow was about 5-foot-10 and threw 90 miles an hour, but that is probably an exaggeration. Cuz I don't know if Mr. Morrow ever hit the tape at 5-foot-10. And yes, locals, it is the same Don Morrow who now runs the very successful football program at Mara Costa High. Which wasn't all that successful until he came on board in the early '90s.

We ran into the buzz saw that was the Premier team and were bounced from the tourney in game two. Don't remember the game being very close. Think we lost something like 5-1. And that was it for the All-Stars from west of Sepulveda. Adios, boys.

The Premier kids went on to win the District 36 tourney, and a few more games down the tournament road, I believe. One-and-done was a tough way to go out. Every game was nervous time, because basically one misstep and you were sent packing.

Who knows how good our MB team was? Maybe we were the second best team in the area? After all, Premier beat up a bunch of other teams before they met their tournament demise. Maybe we were a better team than the ones Morrow and company crushed? Who knows?

I kinda like the double-elimination format cuz it gives the kids a little room to breathe during the hoopla of the tourney. And after two weeks or so of practice, the kids deserve the chance to actually get out on the diamond

and play in a game or two that matters.

One more add Little League: Brother Chris' All-Star team, circa 1977, won the District Tournament, also played at American Martyrs. They won a couple of other tourneys and ended up in the Divisional tournament, where they lost to the kids from El Cajon, who represented our region in the LL World Series in Williamsport. The El Cajoners didn't win the whole enchilada, finishing second; the eventual champs turned out to be the kids from Taiwan.

Back to me. The next season (1972), I was selected as an alternate on the 13-14 All-Star team in Pony League. Which was quite okay with me; I had a darn good season at third base for my team, the Tigers, who ended up winning the highly-coveted league championship. And Don Morrow was now a teammate on our tournament team.

I was happy just being an alternate on the All-Star squad cuz I figured that I would pee my pants if I had to play in an actual game. Well, as luck would have it, the starting third sacker left town on vacation before the first game. Maybe he was too afraid to take the field, just like me?

Kidding on that one. Dude could rake; hit the ball harder than any kid that I can remember. Anyway, he left, and for some unknown reason, I came off the alternate list, right into the starting line-up. Maybe because my regular season manager was the All-Star manager? Got a base hit in my first tournament at-bat, thought this wasn't so bad.

We won the first local tourney, out in the Torrance boondocks somewhere. Went on to the Sectionals, which were played in either Lakewood or Long Beach. 1972, remember? Obviously I don't.

Didn't advance out of that tourney, which was played in the double-elimination format, by the way. Never did pee my pants, but also never got another hit.

Was a sure-shot selection on the 1973 Pony All-Stars. And I gotta say that I raked in both the District and the Sectional tourneys. We won the District, which was hosted in MB at Dorsey Field. Then went on to the Sectionals, which were played in either Lakewood or Long Beach. Again.

Continued to tattoo the ball in the Sectional tourney. Okay, if the truth be known, everything I hit seemed to fall in play. Broken-bat singles, seeing-eye grounders, bloopers here and there. But I did finish the tournaments something like 12-for-18.

Alas, we lost twice in the Sectionals, despite my batting prowess.

To be continued as we travel the road to Williamsport...


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