



1819 NEWS

Allen Mendenhall: Running for home

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 06.29.26



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Many family stories survive because something astonishing happened: a war, a fortune won or lost, a scandal sufficiently juicy to withstand repetition. Others survive for the opposite reason: because nothing remarkable happened at all except that, in the peculiar chemistry of memory and affection, the ordinary became luminous.

Time, after all, is less interested in importance than texture. It keeps the sound of laughter longer than the details of a funeral.

The story of my grandmother Bem playing wiffle ball in the front yard of our house in Marietta, Ga., belongs to the second kind. She was Becky Elizabeth Mendenhall – Bem by way of her initials. And she played in her high heels because she liked to dress up; she saw no reason not to.

The rules were simple and slightly savage: you put a runner out not by tagging or throwing to a base, but by hitting them with the ball. It was a child's amendment to the game, democratic and a little ruthless.

I remember standing in what we called the outfield – which was, in truth, just the yard – watching Bem break for first base, near the paved street, her heels finding the ground with an improbable and magnificent confidence.

I threw the ball. She outran it. It sailed behind her into the warm air; she laughed as she scampered, the kind of deep chuckle that arrives before permission is granted and does not stop until it is good and ready. Nearby, a sprinkler ticked methodically across a neighboring lawn; from inside the house came the muffled clatter of dishes being stacked after supper. It's strange what details survive the decades intact.

That's the story that gets told, returned to at holidays and gatherings.

My mother, whose knees have recently undergone the quiet reinvention of modern orthopedic surgery – first one, then the other, with an autumn of tailgates and folding chairs between the ceremonies – has not played wiffle ball in quite some time. Naturally. A woman does not submit herself to the polished carpentry of modern medicine only to emerge immediately into a dead sprint across suburban sod.

Recovery possesses its own etiquette, its own small rituals of caution and negotiation. One learns stairs again. One learns patience. One does not, at least at first, round imaginary bases beneath the warm light of a Southern afternoon.

But then there arrived one of those soft, honey-colored afternoons that belong to the days suspended between spring and full-blown summer, the kind that settles over a backyard with the languid confidence of a cat finding its favorite

chair. My parents live in a different house now, though the old instincts of the area remain: the smell of cut grass, the distant bark of somebody's dog, the feeling that supper is still several pleasant hours away.

And on that day, my two oldest children, Noah and Gabriela, decided – with the absolute authority children reserve for the unreasonable – that the adults were needed on the field.

My mother was the first one ready.

She stepped into the batter's box wearing a grin that suggested she understood exactly what was happening. Not the game itself – though certainly that – but the fact that, after years of aching knees and months of recovery, she was standing there at all. There was a trace of mischief in it, too. She knew the grandchildren were watching. She knew I was watching. And I suspect she intended to make sure we all noticed what those new knees could do.

She took the first pitch, ball outside, then lined the second deep into a neighbor's yard, into a corridor of space that was, by any measure, beyond my reach in center field. She ran to first. Noah was up next. He got a hit.

The facts of the inning blur pleasantly, as particulars of happiness often do, but I remember vividly the moment my mother ran for home. Gabriela, entirely serious and competitive, bolted after her with the ball. Children approach games with the moral intensity of tiny revolutionaries; there are no symbolic victories for them, only victory.

Watching them run after one another, I found myself thinking not only about family but about the invisible chain of effort that had made the afternoon possible.

Not in a philosophical sense – though that too – but in a plain, practical one. The surgeon who replaced my mother's knees trained for more than a decade. The implants themselves were designed by engineers whose names I will never know, refined over generations of iteration and trial by companies operating in

a system that rewards solutions to difficult problems. The physical therapy, the anesthesia, the imaging that told the surgeon exactly what he was working with – all of it the accumulated product of free people, pursuing excellence because excellence, in such a system, is worth pursuing.

Civilization is often discussed in abstractions – in GDP charts, election returns, and policy white papers – but occasionally it reveals itself more tenderly: in a woman hurtling through the grass while her granddaughter chases her with a plastic baseball.

My children will not remember the knees. They will remember their grandmother running for home plate, just as I remember Bem sailing past first base, the ball arcing behind her into the afternoon that in my mind has lasted forever.

What they – what *we* – are really remembering is when human ingenuity met human love, when the world built something good, and someone used it to run.

Bem has been gone a long time now. But she's alive in the story we tell and, now, in the strange and generous chain of innovation and enterprise that returned my mother to the batter's box after several decades away from it.

Memory is its own inheritance, passed quietly, hand to hand, without lawyers or celebration. Someday, I suspect, my children will stand in some yard of their own and watch someone they love do something that should not, by certain estimates, be possible.

And that someone will laugh the whole way and maybe, just maybe, be safe at home.

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