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Opinion

Allen Mendenhall: The innings of life

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Now that the school year has receded into the hazy distance, our household has turned its attention to the languid pleasures of baseball, particularly the Atlanta

Braves.

During my formative years, the Braves stood as a solitary beacon of Major League prestige in our Southern landscape, save for the Rangers and Astros, although Texas has always maintained a certain renegade spirit defying geographical categorization.

The Marlins of Miami and the Rays of Tampa Bay had not yet materialized from the humid Florida imagination. Those Missouri franchises, the Cardinals with their storied heritage and the Royals with their midwestern dignity – well, they remained creatures of a different meridian, too far removed from our red clay and slow-drawn sensibilities.

“Where were you when Sid slid?”

That question once fell into conversation as naturally as summer rain, requiring no further elaboration. Everyone of consequence understood the reference: Sid Bream’s theatrical descent toward home plate, legs churning through molasses, destiny hanging upon each fraction of a second. That singular, improbable moment, occurring with two outs in the bottom of the 9th inning, clenched the Braves’ spot in the 1992 World Series.

Francisco Cabrera’s hit scored the run. As we hovered near the November presidential election – between Democratic Gov. Bill Clinton of Arkansas and incumbent Republican President George H. W. Bush – both Democrats and Republicans across the South united behind one phrase: “Francisco Cabrera for president!”

Had his name appeared on the ballot, he might have carried Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee and the Carolinas with the ease of a Sunday stroll.

This miracle followed the 1991 metamorphosis: when the Braves transformed themselves from baseball’s most pitiful team to its most divine. “From worst to first,” we used to say.

Baseball was magical for me in those days. I was just a boy.

Then came that cruel summer of '94, when the players' strike descended like an executioner's blade, severing my innocence. Not even the Braves' triumphant World Series the following year could reverse my feelings. The bitterness had calcified, hardened into something permanent and unforgiving.

Worsening matters was the grotesque carnival of the era marked by Bonds, McGwire and Sosa, whose exaggerated physiques and impossible statistics distorted the game into something resembling professional wrestling's choreographed absurdity.

I observed with sorrowful clarity that baseball was changed. The sacred records, which had carried our national pastime's reverence through decades, began toppling with vulgar regularity. I was witnessing the desecration of a temple, each homerun another blasphemy against memory and tradition.

I turned away, unable to bear further witness to this betrayal. The television fell silent on summer evenings. The radio no longer crackled with play-by-play poetry.

My relationship with baseball ended with quiet abdication. I ceased to watch, ceased to care, ceased to believe. I grew up, went to college and built a career.

Then one evening, amid the tireless symphony of crickets, something unexpected happened. My son, Noah, not yet eight years old, summoned me to the back porch where a television is mounted on the brick wall. He asked whether I might watch with him. There, framed in the flickering light, were the Braves, phantoms from a previous life.

I settled into a wicker chair that groaned in protest as my adult frame gave its weight. Something stirred within me: a dormant ember glowing faintly after years of darkness.

The Braves secured a victory, though I recognized not a single name or face on their roster; they were strangers wearing familiar colors, inhabitants of a kingdom I had long ago abandoned.

Noah's eyes sparkled with a luminescence belonging exclusively to children witnessing wonders, so we repeated this scene the following evening. Atlanta won

again! Yet I found myself watching Noah as much as the game.

In his unguarded enthusiasm, his spontaneous applause, his earnest questions about rules and strategies, I glimpsed a reflection – not of myself as I am, but of who I had once been, before disappointment became cynicism and I learned to protect myself from life’s inevitable betrayals.

There he sat, my son, not yet acquainted with the world’s sharp edges, still inhabiting a cosmos where heroes exist and games matter and summer evenings stretch toward infinity.

Many baseball seasons have come and gone since then. The Braves even claimed the World Series in 2021!

Noah is a teenager now. We still watch the Braves together, a ritual that has evolved: he arrives with his phone perpetually in hand, splitting his attention between the game and the ceaseless digital murmurings of his generation.

Recently, though, as twilight gathered around us, Matt Olson homered, causing Noah to leap from his chair in celebration, momentarily forgetting his performative ennui. For a split second, he was seven years old again, pure joy uncontaminated by self-consciousness. Then awareness returned, and with it the careful mask of coolness he’s perfecting.

We’re both changing, aging differently, but the Braves remain our common ground. So long as we keep tuning in side by side, I can be sure that the boy who once called me to the porch still exists somewhere beneath the young man who is already practicing his goodbye.

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And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."
Matthew 4:19



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