

On the Ball and Off the Wall: Childhood Education

Since as far back as I can remember, I was a young idiot and obsessed with all sports. Little has changed, as I am still an idiot, and totally fascinated with sports from A-Z, and even more than that, if possible.

While as a child I spent hours listening on radio or watching my beloved Philadelphia Phillies, the Eagles and Warriors on TV (eventually *cum* Sixers, and hockey's Flyers came later), it ended up having the side effect of teaching me math better than anything I learned at school.

There is a famous book about childhood teaching titled, "Why Johnny Can't Read," an indictment of public education. Fortunately, my father taught me to read early on by sitting me on his lap and reading the Sunday papers' comics to me slowly and pointing out the words. Armed with literacy prior to first grade, the rest seemed simple, except for those damn numbers.

Then my father dropped the other shoe. Never mind the 2+2 crap. If you're wondering why Richie Ashburn is hitting .320 and Puddin' Head Jones is at .230, here's how you figure it out. Same goes for why Robin Roberts has a 2.50 earned run average, while Curt Simmons is at 3.00. (We're not going into details here about how this works – and it's pretty simple – but suffice it to say it involves division.)

First, all you have to do is look in the sports pages at the daily baseball box scores. Virtually the same for decades, they would baffle even a modern data wizard or a number-crunching junkie who knows nothing about the game or how it is played. Sorry boys and girls. And that code is the key to the highway.

To the sports neophyte, a box score interpretation is tougher than a Sunday NY Times crossword puzzle. But for freaks like me, it tells an entire encrypted story. And it is more than this if you want old-school numbers.

I once spent an entire Sunday with an official baseball scorebook, filling in every pitch, including the infamous K for strikeout (and registered backward for struck out looking) which is like a sports spreadsheet that would make an accountant whinny, for a New York Yankees doubleheader. Yes, I was bored to death and the earlier reference to idiot to boot. But the satisfaction was immeasurable.

Unfortunately, our new dependence on "statistical analysis" like "wins above replacement" and other obscure, over-thought sorts of non-applicable and bogus measurement crap rule the roost, it is tough to make a case for meaningful evaluations of players. How about, "He/she knows how to play the game." A lot better than a kid's math lesson being taken seriously.

I'll stick to the basics. What's your batting average or ERA? I can figure it out for you. And I never failed a math test. Thanks, Dad.