

BASEBALL DIGEST



OPENING DAY EDITION



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By Abe J. Shear
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Youth baseball, that game for “the boys of summer”, is changing due in no small part to my friend Neal Freeman. Neal and his company have long been one of the leading (and quietest) of Atlanta’s retail development companies, building one family center after another, all while Neal was finding ways to address his passion for baseball.

This first occurred to me when Neal explained to me how he could take fallow land behind one of his centers and convert this unused (and low basis) property into a baseball field, a swim center and a play area. His perseverance and persuasion were remarkable as he overcame one hurdle after another and made it happen.

When he first explained the LakePoint project to me, I knew that I should be attentive to his vision, one which merged youth sports, sportsmanship and fellowship, one unlike any project ever built, one which correctly identified that youth tournaments can include both structure and entertainment.

LakePoint is barely 20 minutes north of the Interstate 75 and Interstate 285 intersection. It has 3 miles of highway frontage. Players are playing baseball there not just in the summer but nearly 10 months a year. Soccer tournaments are being held. The wakeboard park is open, as is the beach volley ball facility.

Neal has made reality of his bold aspirations, certainly with the help of others, but LakePoint is Neal’s vision and his belief in youth sports and family values.

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Neal Freeman

“Youth Baseball And More”

Shear: I’m with my good friend Neal Freeman. So Neal, tell me what are your first memories of baseball?

Freeman: Well, it was Saturdays when there was only one baseball game a week on TV. I think it was Joe Garagiola and Tony Kubek announcing and I remember watching that every week and then after watching that, pretty much every night of the week I would take the rubber baseball and throw it against the brick garage and play my own imaginary games, a lot of times based on the game I had seen that week or the article I might have read in The Sporting News that week. That was my first memory.

Okay. Did you play baseball as a youngster?

When you were a little boy did you read avidly about baseball? Or just really watched it on TV?

Well, it was both. I watched it on the game of the week but also I loved The Sporting News. I memorized The Sporting News to the point where my father’s golf buddies would ask me each Saturday on the golf course what was the batting average of Felipe Alou? How many strikeouts did Don Drysdale have? How many home runs did Al Kaline have? I could immediately spit them out because it was something I just loved and literally read every word of the magazine every week.

Did your family talk about baseball at the dinner table?

“I remember playing in bare feet as long as I could.”

Yes. I played as early as T-ball at 6 years old in Cairo, Georgia. I played pretty much every sport every season. I certainly looked forward to baseball season. One of the memories I have is that we all had dirt fields, the softball fields and American Legion fields, and I remember playing in bare feet as long as I could convince my father I was faster that way. He would let me do that. He also let me play barefooted in football but said I was probably going to get hurt and I disagreed. Then, my first sweep play as a running back I broke my toe in a pile up.

Well my father played American Legion ball. He was a second baseman. So we talked a little bit about that and I enjoyed watching him play. I became a middle infielder because that is what he was.

Did you pitch when you were in little league or in youth league?

Yes. I was a pitcher and was not known for my speed but for a lot of accuracy, I guess because of throwing that rubber ball against the wall. I got to where I could be Greg Maddux kind of accurate. Generally, just taught myself a lot about baseball by just impersonating what I saw. And then my son Philip actually got

better than I ever was at impersonating.
So I need to take you to the county fair with me if I need to take home some stuffed animals.

Well you could have then but I don't do too much to help with that now. I would have been your man then.

Did you play high school baseball?

I did not play after ninth grade but played up until then. In ninth grade I'd become a pretty accomplished golfer and baseball and golf competed in the same season. Neither coach would allow me to play both and I thought that I could get a college scholarship playing golf. I actually got a few offers but didn't play golf in college. I chose golf over baseball. I regretted it to some degree but I wasn't the greatest at hitting a curve ball so maybe that was the right decision.

You taught your son to pitch?

Yes, and he became a very accomplished pitcher all throughout his travel ball and high school career and his specialty likewise was amazing control. His two years in middle school he had like 120 strikeouts and only 4 walks. He did the same thing I did growing up. Instead of rubber ball he took a tennis ball and threw it against the wall for hours and hours and I credit that towards his accuracy and really a lot of his arm strength.

You know today they would have some sort of restrictive covenant in your neighborhood that you can't throw against the wall that much for fear that it would bother the neighbors and reduce the property values. Did you follow the Braves when you were a youngster?

Well I lived in south Georgia so we really didn't pick up the Braves too much. I was a Florida State fan for entertainment. Then we moved up to Atlanta in 1970, I instantly became a Braves fan, a season ticket holder. My fondest memory, even with the 100 game a year losses, was just watching Phil Neikro. I just enjoyed Felix Milan and Darryl Chaney. Everyone on the Braves was my hero. So I was definitely a Braves fan in spite of their record and still to this day live and die by how they do.

When you came to Atlanta, did you watch the game or did you listen to it? Which would be your preference?

They have such great radio announcers that I actually enjoy listening just as much as I do watching. I do enjoy both because I like watching. Growing up, I enjoyed imitating swings and throwing motions of Juan Marichal or Luis Tiant or Carl Yastrzemski. They were so unique and I enjoyed emulating them. As a hitting coach at Wesleyan, I enjoy watching a swing pass and some of the techniques. But the announcers for the Braves are so good that I enjoy listening to that as well.

You ever try to announce a game?

I have done the PA but I've never done play-by-play. I hear it's quite difficult. I think it's really hard. I tried to do it just once. I thought it was really, really hard.

“Being a hitting coach is the greatest thing because hitters don't normally come to you unless things are going poorly.”

Back to the Braves – you are a homer for sure?

I always have been a homer, always for the Braves even when I used to go to games when they lost all the time, being one of 500 people at the park. I remember Neikro, but I love the days of Rico Carty and the Alou brothers.

Did you come to the Braves games when you were living in Cairo?

I don't remember ever doing that. We really thought our whole life was going to always be in south Georgia and then my father got an offer to come be a CFO for Watkins Trucking. So we loaded up the vehicle from South Georgia and moved up to the big city of Atlanta. Until then we really didn't go to Atlanta, the only thing we did was go to Tallahassee to the Florida State football games.

I know there were a lot of players, but who were your favorite players?

Big fan of Bob Gibson, just the way he was just dominating. I was a front runner so I loved the Yankees and Mickey Mantle, really whoever was popular at the time. I loved the Oakland Athletics, so Catfish Hunter, Rollie Fingers.

Did you follow the games on TV or radio or newspaper?

Mostly, I would work my schedule to make sure I was available for that Saturday TV game. It's funny how things have changed. We cherished that one game and it didn't matter who was playing.

I agree and I don't remember if the Braves had a big network that extended all over the state.

No. But when it did and I'll never forget Andy Messersmith and Channel 17, which I thought was so hysterical. But from that day until now I've been a season ticket holder and been a monster Braves fan. Live and die with them.

Do you remember the first game that you went to?

We used to always try to go every July 4th. I can't remember the first one. But one game was weird. I remember this one July 4th that Darryl Chaney hit a triple in the corner to win the game and the fireworks were extra special. Just a very good family memory with my father and brother.

Did you collect baseball cards as a child?

I did, but not too intensely. I'd say I had a moderate collection, which eventually got cleared out and thrown away. Another memory growing up I remember is with my brother. We would play whiffle ball one on one and we had a short porch so we'd hit 100 home runs a day and somehow we lost our whiffle ball and we decided to play with a real ball and said nothing bad is going to happen. First pitch, my brother hit a home run and knocked out the window.

Does he remind you of that 100 times? Absolutely.

Did you ever collect autographs?

A little bit but not too much. I really just was more fascinated with watching the players perform and, again, I was so into impersonating that it helped me to learn the game, just by watching

their mechanics. And until this day as a hitting instructor at Wesleyan I still do that. I watch still pictures. I still watch the swing path.

How did you decide or why did you decide to be a hitting coach? You obviously have other things to do with your time.

It was just something, maybe because I already had coaches on my staff who came from a pitching background. So some of it just started out that I was just filling in the gap, the pitching was covered, base running was covered, so I said I'd handle hitting and I really got into studying videos and the geometry of hitting and being a hitting coach is the greatest thing because hitters don't normally come to you unless things are going poorly. So the bar of making someone feel better is pretty low and it doesn't take much, just a little technique change or geometry change. Mostly it's a psychological change and you can make them better. Very rarely do they say that you made them worse because they don't come unless they are in a ditch.

Would you rather work with a hitter that is an average hitter trying to get to be very good or would you prefer a good hitter that was trying to be great? Which one of those is more coachable?

Good question. I work with both. Both of them are rewarding. I just love any kid or any adult that wants to get better and seeks help. I think that's great and if I can aid in that process, I'm willing to get up at whatever time in the morning to do that to help someone who wants to get better. I've helped both. One of my most rewarding was a fairly average hitter at Wesleyan who had maybe two home runs but was struggling. We were going into the playoffs and he wanted to hit better. One technique that we really worked on was hitting off that back hip and he went on to hit 10 home runs in the playoffs, one with two strikes, two outs, with us down by one against Holy Innocents and then we moved on to the semi-finals in the state and ended up playing for the state championship. So that was probably one of the most rewarding.

Is it easier to coach your own children or other children?

It's easier to coach other children. All three of my kids were great athletes - all of them were great hitters - all took instruction well. It's hard to differentiate between coach and dad - is the coach trying to make me better - or is it my dad not happy with the way I'm doing things? So that is a hard thing to delineate. It really is harder on the child because I'm giving the same instruction. **I'm guessing you probably got your volunteer spirit from your parents, the importance of volunteering.**

Yes. My father was a CPA with no computers, he just had a hand calculator. He had to work extremely long hours but he was great. My mom always took me to where I needed to go. My mom was a teacher so she was always volunteering and giving of herself.

What is it about baseball from the seventies that you wish you saw more in today's baseball?

The intensity, and again I go back to Bob Gibson. I don't see pitchers truly attacking like he did. That Pete Rose intensity. Certainly, you see a little bit of the entitlement but I'm old school. I like old scoreboards, traditional uniforms. **Some of the teams that I remember when you were coaching travel ball played 100 games or more. Is it really realistic to have kids play that many games when they're that young?**

That's a good question too. I only did that one year and that was the year we decided to play all three seasons. Spring, summer and fall. And I will say that it probably was more challenging on the parents than the kids. I probably had 25 pitchers. I was a believer in pitch count before it became popular. I certainly did not let any of my kids throw curve balls before twelve years old, but what I did teach is command of the fast ball, confidence in the change up and because of that we managed to win 5 championships without throwing curve balls.

I'm sure the kids still stay in touch. They are still best of friends. My wife just yesterday had lunch with about 10 other parents, the mothers of that team. We traveled around and had a lot of success which made it fun, but we did so much off the field together as well as on the field. It made the team a family. A lot of tragedy, some of the

parents got cancer, some are deceased. We had the typical family challenges and it's been amazing to see how this team family has come together to comfort one another and it's really like a close knit multi-generation family. What was the best tournament that you went to?

There were three that stand out and, fortunately, we won them all so maybe that's why. One was at Cooperstown Park. You know, it was twelve year olds and that was great fun with the tradition of the Hall of Fame. The second one was at Omaha. We would go play during the day and get together for the College World Series at night. The other one was at St. Louis. We did a lot of fun things outside of the game. We won 12 games and the World Series and that was kind of my "Aha" moment for LakePoint. We went a day earlier and went to Six Flags. While we were there we saw the St. Louis arch. We went to the paddle boats on the Mississippi River. We went to a Cardinals' game. All while we're winning the World Series. When we got back the reporters were asking the kids tell us about winning the World Series and they didn't talk a thing about baseball. All they talked about were the things we did outside the lines and to me that was a real moment for me. There is a lot more than baseball.

Do you think youth sports is really into team building and is even more important today than it was back then? Maybe today kids don't play as much outside. They don't pick their own teams like we did.

Absolutely. I'm a big big believer in team sports. I hire a lot of people based on, "Did you play sports? Can you get along with people? Do you know how to compete? Do you know how to persevere? Do you know how to practice getting ready for a performance?" So many great life lessons and business lessons derive from team sports. Really not just baseball but any team sport.

What pieces of baseball would you most likely teach your grandchildren?

Probably the things I just mentioned about perseverance. For baseball, its technique certainly. I would certainly say you've got to get the technique right, but a lot of people have great technique but don't have the heart or

the drive. There were some that had average technique but had great desire and succeeded, so I would try to teach all aspects – heart, mind, soul.

When you watch a youth game, what makes you really smile?

The passion, just the fun. Just the pure unaltered fun. The camaraderie. The crazy things that they come up with. The handshakes and shoulder bumps and the kind of funny stuff they can do. I had certainly insisted on sportsmanship. I insisted on win with humility and lose with grace. But when kids were being goofy within a proper manner, I actually encouraged it. That was fine – they're still kids. That's the one thing I would encourage coaches to do. I guess that would go back to the question of what would I teach my kids. It is that it's still a game. You don't work at baseball – you play baseball and remember it's just great fun.

It seems to me when I really think about youth baseball, particularly little kids, it really is probably the only team sport where everybody gets on the stage and has to play. You can't be ignored in the batting order. It seems to me, and I'm curious as to your opinion, that it is important for a young child, 5, 6 or 7 year old, to really know that you're an important part of the team as opposed to a bench player. It's so important and as a coach I strongly encourage others to spend as

close to the exact amount of time with the worst player on team as with the best player on the team. Number one, just because it's the right thing to do. Also, we were playing travel ball you could bat just 9 or all 13 or 14 players in the lineup and we played some teams that just wanted to beat us and played 9 in just a regular season game. I always batted around 14 just for that reason, because they need to learn how to be on that stage and be in that moment. Because you never know - more than likely you get in the tournament and that number 14 guy on your team is going to come up in that situation and hopefully you would have given that child positive reinforcement, that experience. And that is what happened. Teams that only played 9, they would have somebody who would not have been in that situation and it would not be a huge success. So I strongly encourage full participation and to treat every kid exactly the same.

When I coached, I usually took the worst 6 kids while the other coach took the best 6 kids on the team. I really thought that we could win by coaching up the worst 6 players because the best 6 players already were good players and they may not be able to get much better. For the worst 6 players, you might make them average and then you really had a pretty good team, but your best players are already best players. They were already hitting the

ball or pitching the ball.

You are so right. In high school, our mantra was that you win state championships with 7, 8, 9. And indeed when you look back most of the big hits came from 7, 8, 9.

It doesn't sound like you're going to stop coaching anytime soon?

Well, the only thing keeping me from doing it every day is my big project at LakePoint which is taking up most of my time. But I still try to get a least a few lessons in the mornings until they won't let me do it anymore. I am going to be a hitting coach as long as the kids want to get better.

Tell me a bit about LakePoint.

Traveling around with our traveling baseball team stars, we could not find a place that had great athletic facilities connected to retail, hospitality and entertainment. I said one day I'm going to do that, to make them all merge together. I knew what the coach and players would like to see. A lot of what I'm trying to do is just that wow factor for kids and to create lifetime memories and great times. One of the things I try to do as a coach is just be focused on the fact that you're only a kid once and you only have your children as players from about 8 to 16 and then the high school takes them over. So it's a finite time and we should just cherish those moments.

That's probably a pretty good place to end. This was absolutely great.

Neal Freeman
"Youth Baseball
And More"

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