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Saddie and I met in Sister Theresa's fifth grade classroom. I was a transfer student from a school in New York City. Outside of the fact that we were both male, I have no idea why she chose to place us in adjoining desks. In Sister Theresa's class you see, as in all Catholic elementary schools of that day, little boys sat on one side of the room, and little girls on the other. Separating the two groups was an aisle the size of an airport runway. For reasons I can only guess at even today, this was the format of a good Catholic classroom.

One day in the confines of that room Saddie's name was born. Sister Theresa was forced to leave for an inordinate amount of time, and one of the girls was put in charge. This, by the way, was another fact of life in a Catholic grammar school. Whenever Sister had to depart for awhile, one of the girls took over. The girls were always considered a little more mature than the boys. Personally, I attributed this favoritism wholly to the fact that boys entrusted with this detail generally adopted a laissez-faire attitude, whereas the girls were overly conscientious. They had a nasty little habit of recording the names of any offenders (invariably boys) and presenting the list to Sister upon her return. Of course, this was a big hit with us boys. Looking back on it now, this may have been one of the reasons for the runway-sized aisle.

In any event, these short leaves by Sister T. gave Saddie and I a chance to relax a little. We both loved baseball and we relished these times as opportunities to discuss our upcoming Little League season. A few weeks earlier, simply by the luck of the draw, we had been placed on the same team. Over the course of the school year we had become close friends, but now our friendship was assured of continuing through the summer months as well. Some

of our classmates would be in the league also, so Saddle and I took to evaluating them and our chances against their respective teams. We devised a system which rated each player's strengths and weaknesses on the baseball field. At the top of the heap were the guys we considered to be the best in the class. They came under the category of being BAD. By mutual consent, I was the leader of this group. At the other end of the spectrum was the SAD category, the one unfortunately lead by my friend whose nickname eminated from the category he (by his own admission) occupied in our rating system.

On occasion, we took to applying our system to all of our classmates, including those having nothing whatsoever to do with sports. Sometimes we even stuck the girls in there somewhere. In these cases, our only judgment criteria was academic performance. Outstanding students were honored by our BAD designation, lesser ones fell into the SAD unit. Once again, poor Saddle, who was no scholar, was a prominent member of the latter group. Right here I should point out that Saddle was by no means a particularly slow or dull learner. It was just that he showed very little interest in areas the good nuns had deigned tantamount to our education. Daydreaming his way through a religion class, time and again Sister T. would interupt the lesson to toss a tricky question his way. Since his mind was usually vacationing eslewhere, his answers never satisfied her, and were sometimes outrageously off base. On these occasions, the entire class rocked with laughter, with one notable exception. At this point, her face flushed with anger, Sister T. would beckon Saddle to the front of the room. There, while a deafening silence replaced the rollicking laughter of before, he awaited his forthcoming reprimand.

Poor Saddle. I really doubt that he daydreamed any more than the rest of us, but for some reason, he was always nailed. Maybe it was just that when he left, he left lock, stock and barrel. He'd have such a far away look on

his face. She only had to glance in our direction to realize Saddle was no longer with us. Those reprimands were embarrassing and demeaning, but they never served any purpose. He simply refused to focus on the classroom material which held little or no interest for him. As I, along with the rest of the world, would discover many years later, his mind was attuned to something other than fifth grade subject matter.

While I forgave him his academic lapses, it was another story when I found out they weren't confined only to the classroom. Through the course of our summers together in Little League, time and again his lack of concentration became evident. Eventhough his limited ability had earned him a permanent spot in right field (usually the furthest from harm's way on a Little League team), more than once he cost us a run or two in crucial situations. I was the type, even as a Little Leaguer, who personified Lombardi's dictum, "winning isn't everything, it's the only thing." Saddle was not. It was following these games that our walk home together would be somewhat tense.

He would usually be the first to break the ice. He'd admonish himself for singlehandedly being responsible for yet another of our team's setbacks. I'd nod in agreement. He'd continue on about trying harder next game, but still I offered no sign of appeasement. We'd walk another few blocks in silence, when all of a sudden he'd blurt out a glowing account of some particular play I had made in the course of the game. Now I'd brighten a little. He'd go on about how spectacular the play was (a hook slide into home plate) and if only we had replays like on TV, he would love to see it again. Now he had me. At this point it no longer mattered that we had just lost a game. He had me sliding across peoples' lawns and in and out of flowerbeds, reliving my contributions to the game for the entire neighborhood to see. By the time

we arrived at his place, I had forgiven him completely, and we could hardly wait for our next game the following evening.

Time passed and we reached our adolescent years still the closest of friends. After leaving Little League, once again, as luck would have it, we were chosen for the same team in the town's Babe Ruth League (the level of baseball for boys 13-15). But in some respects, things were changing for us now. Saddle was losing his interest in baseball. I kept after him, but to no avail. More and more, he found other ways to spend his time. Instead of playing ball, he often remained alone in his room, his stereo belting out the latest from the Rolling Stones. Instead of showing up for team practices and even an occasional game or two, he opted for hitching a ride to the shore for a day spent on the beach or the boardwalk. He was developing a whole new group of friends and interests outside of sports. For me it was just the opposite. Baseball meant more and more to me with each passing day. Saddle and I were slowly drifting apart.

Our last year in Babe Ruth League together would be Saddle's last year in organized baseball period. We had an excellent team that summer, head and shoulders above the rest of the league for the better part of the season. However, late in the schedule we suffered a mild collapse. That, coupled with a last minute surge by the second place team, resulted in a deadlock for first place between the two teams at the close of the season. Now, everyone is aware how unsatisfying a tie can be, so something had to be done. In short order, the league officials arranged for a weekend one game playoff to determine the clear-cut champions.

Saturday morning broke clear and warm, a brilliant summer day. I was to pitch that day, for all the marbles, and my adrenalin was really flowing.

There was one problem though. Two of our better ballplayers were not going to make it. In both cases their parents had made commitments for family vacations, scheduled for the two week period between the end of the regular baseball season and the opening day of school. What this meant, in a nutshell, was that Saddle would have to start. None of this phased me, however. I was so pumped up I felt I could carry the team all by myself. And in any event, Saddle would be safely tucked away in his customary right field position, where he would have very little effect, if any, on the outcome.

As I'm sure you've guessed by now, this was not to be the case at all. Having breezed through the entire game with relative ease, I ran into trouble in the last inning. Clinging to a very adequate 4-1 lead, I began to have control problems. Hitting the leadoff batter with a fastball that got away from me, I became a little shaken up and proceeded to walk the next two batters, thus loading the bases with no one out. After a consoling chat with our manager, I settled down to retire the next two hitters on strikes. One more to go. Despite the fact that the bases were still loaded, my confidence had returned in force and I wasn't the only one aware of it. The next batter could sense it as well and this gave me an enormous psychological edge. I zipped two quick fastballs by him before the bat even left his shoulder. Now I was in total command and we were one pitch away from the league championship. At this point though, I got just a little too cute and tried to lay a curveball right along the outside edge of the plate. The batter, a righthanded hitter, swung and caught it just on the end of his bat, sending a soft fly ball toward (you guessed it) right field.

Remember, this was the championship game, however, and this time Saddle wasn't daydreaming. He was ready. As he drifted under the flight of the ball and pounded his glove once, now twice, I knew he had it lined up. He settled

into a stationary position, his left hand extended to make the catch, his right hand shielding his eyes from the sun, and prepared to put it away. He never made it. The ball fell safely to the ground just beyond his reach and bounced remotely away from him. As all four runners circled the bases to make the final score 5-4 in their favor, Saddle ran down the ball in a belated effort to return it to the infield. I couldn't move. Tears were in my eyes already, and all I could do for the longest time was stand on the mound and look out toward right field where my friend stood, equally confused and shattered.

We didn't walk home together that day. We were too upset to face one another. As far as I know, that was his last game of organized baseball. In fact, we didn't discuss the outcome of that game until many years later. By that time we attended different high schools, had different friends, and had lives that were leaning in very opposite directions. At this writing I haven't seen Saddle for quite a few years. Too many. But I read about him from time to time, and I certainly haven't forgotten him. For now, to millions of adoring teenage fans, he is Bruce Springsteen, the premier rock musician of the 70's. But to this day, to me, he is still Saddle, the right fielder, and one of the best friends I have ever had.