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Diether Haenicke
Western Michigan University

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Baseball instruction from American G.I. helpful for the German immigrant

*By Diether Haenicke
January 21, 2009*

Many things considered typically American are, for the immigrant, an acquired taste. I am thinking of foods such as pumpkin pie and cornbread, but also of baseball, which has remained somewhat of a mystery to me ever since my first encounter with it.

The first baseball fan I ever met was an American G.I. from the Bronx whom his fellow soldiers called Joe. I was about 11 years old and had no idea what or where the Bronx was or that his name was actually Giovanni. Joe was in his early 30s and a baker, had a son my age back home and was very homesick for his family. My father found all this out when he talked to Joe one day. He could understand Joe; I could not. With my rudimentary English at the time, I thought that English and Bronx were two similar but separate languages.

We had been evicted from our house, which had been converted into a mess where hundreds of soldiers took their meals thrice a day. Joe lived in my house now, plying his baker's trade in the service of his comrades. One day Joe approached me carrying two odd shaped, giant leather gloves and a white ball. Then he started teaching me how to throw and catch a baseball. It became a daily ritual, and a rather boring one for me, but I appreciated the attention Joe gave me, even if it meant throwing a ball back and forth for hours.

My early exposure to baseball had its benefits for my subsequent career. Forty years later, I was asked to throw out the first ball at a professional game in Grand Rapids. Our fine baseball coach, Fred Decker, who coached our student-athletes with class and integrity, heard of this and foresaw an impending major embarrassment for the university. He set aside one hour of practice on the baseball diamond to coach the

president. I was quite pleased to be able to pass the test with my first throw. Giovanni from the Bronx had taught me well.

The first American city in which I worked was Detroit. In the 1960s and 1970s, baseball was huge in that town. The Tigers were owned by a Kalamazoo broadcasting tycoon, John Fetzer, whom I met much later, together with his close associate, Carl Lee, who became my friend. Two buildings on Western's campus carry their names. The big names in Detroit and on Wayne State's campus at the time were Al Kaline, Denny McLain, Mickey Lolich and Mark "The Bird" Fidrych. My secretary had the annoying habit of keeping the radio on during broadcasts of Tigers games, even when I was dictating letters to her.

When the Tigers won the World Series in 1968 and came back to town, Detroit Metropolitan Airport could not handle the crowds that had assembled to welcome them, and their plane had to be re-directed to Willow Run Airport near Ypsilanti. My secretary listened to all this on the radio again, and in the middle of my dictation, she declared she was leaving the office to join the crowd at the airport. I threatened to fire her if she left. She told me to go right ahead. Such was the passion for the Tigers and baseball that year.

Years later in Kalamazoo, I noticed that our provost was often absent during the afternoon. He was Phil Denenfeld, a very smart, very funny and very gentle man, who confessed that he occasionally wandered over to Haymes Field to watch our baseball team. Phil had an abiding love for the game like many other intellectuals who adore baseball. Phil, for many hours, generously pointed out to me the finer points of the game, and I began to see that the real love for a sport always rests on the understanding of its finer points, not just the fundamentals.

I have often wondered if Joe is still alive. He would be in his 90s by now; it is possible. I sure hope he made it home to the Bronx safely. I also hope that he had time to teach his own son more than I had learned from him. I hope he had time to teach him the finer points and thus the real love of the game.

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