

First Pitch

Niles Reddick

I tried to like baseball when I was a kid, but I didn't. I couldn't throw or catch, but I could run. Because of imagination, I don't often pay much attention to anyone or anything, hence not a star pupil as old yellowed and musty report cards clearly reflect. A friend of mine's dad even took me and him to Atlanta to see the Braves' Hank Aaron play, but I was more interested in the planes coming and going and the Atlanta skyline from the Braves stadium than the game.

This backdrop made for an interesting reaction when I was asked to throw out the first pitch at the University of Memphis and Middle Tennessee State University baseball game held at the Jackson Generals (B team for Seattle Mariners) stadium in Jackson, Tennessee. At first, I was flabbergasted. I couldn't actually recall when I'd thrown a baseball. It had to be elementary school or when I was involved with the Royal Ambassadors at the Baptist church, where I'd used the Lord's name in vein when I got hit by a baseball and nearly got thrown out of the church. The minister had come to visit with my parents; they'd been exasperated with me, but knew that no amount of churching was going to stop the invasion of genes I'd inherited from wilder relatives on both their sides.

In addition to my initial reaction, I wondered why they'd chosen me until one of the athletic department public relations officials said, "You've got to be pretty good if you're related to Josh." Josh Reddick from the Oakland A's, formerly from the Boston Red Sox. Yes, I had been asked by people from time to time, and what I said was, "Yes, we are distant cousins, and I've never met him." I never, no matter how bad I wanted to name drop and make connections, a true Southern behavior, did I misrepresent. So, I laughed that off and told my wife and kids three days before the big event I needed to practice.

We went into the front yard. I marked off sixty-six yards from the edge of the driveway and my son Nicholas and daughter Audrey got their gloves and I started moving my arm up and down and around to make sure it wouldn't come out of its socket. I must have looked like an idiot to anyone driving by our house.

After a few minutes, though, I had to admit I wasn't bad at all. Out of forty something throws each night before the big game, almost every one of my throws had been seventy yards and dead center. One did go into the road, and one did hit the bricks on the house, but the others were excellent. I felt good and confident and though my shoulder had a numbing pain from activating long dormant muscles and ligaments that probably had shriveled and disconnected from lack of use through the years, I felt okay, like maybe I wouldn't end up in the emergency room or kill someone as I had almost done golfing years before when my ball knocked someone's dad unconscious at the driving range.

On the night of the first pitch, the weather wasn't good. It was projected to rain. I had bought a long sleeve shirt, school colors, to wear and I asked my kids to accompany me because there were tv cameras and I thought when I'm dead and gone, it would be a good memory for them. They introduced me over the loudspeaker and television cameras were recording as I stepped up to the mound, beautifully raked reddish brown soil, base plates clean and white, and grass manicured and green. It was a stark contrast to the last days of winter, as if spring was just around the corner. I think I was so nervous that I didn't pay attention at all and just threw the ball, seventy yards, square onto home plate. "Great pitch," the catcher said, when my ball hit his glove and some of the crowd clapped.

I had done it. I had proven I could and then I had fantasies that maybe I was really better than I remembered all those years ago, and on the way home, I told my kids I should have played baseball more.