



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

Baseball in the Nation's Capital

Baseball in Our Nation's Capital¹

September 3, 2005

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. Today was a busy day. In addition to visiting the National Archives, I attended a major league baseball game for the third time in my life. The first time, in 1961, I watched the Los Angeles Dodgers play another team in the LA Coliseum. In 1977, I watched the Baltimore Orioles play another team in the old Baltimore Stadium.

I have forgotten the names of the other teams who played these home teams because I fell asleep during the games and can't remember anything about them other than never ending incidents of nothing happening.

After the first baseball game, I vowed never to go to another one. Then, in 1977, I relented in order to spend time with some of my friends, and accompanied them to my second game in Baltimore. After the first inning of this second game, I vowed never to go to another professional baseball game. The most exciting part of the Baltimore Orioles evening was a near collision with a sixteen-wheeler as we returned from Baltimore to the D.C. area.

For vicarious thrills, I decided watching a professional golf match was more exciting than watching baseball. For golf, you are treated to hours of watching players stand over their putts. Or if you are watching Sergio Garcia, you can treat yourself to a prolonged visual siege of gripping, ungripping, gripping, ungripping...It's maddening. Sergio, just hit the ball!

The Fine Art of Preening

I was also put off by the preenings of the baseball players. The pitcher's preening before the pitch: Tugging his hat to block out the sun that was behind him, licking his fingers, looking around, spitting, grabbing his crotch, looking at his glove to make sure it was still on this hand, looking at the ball to make sure it was still intact, looking at the catcher, nodding yes or no, if no, looking some more, eventually nodding yes, licking his fingers again, etc. Just throw the ball!

The hitter's preening in the batter's box: Rearranging the dirt, spitting, licking his fingers, looking around, grabbing his crotch, tapping the dirt off his cleats that he picked up while rearranging it in the first place, tugging his hat, stepping out of the batter's box for god knows why, stepping back into the batter's box, and rearranging the dirt he mis-arranged when he stepped out, repeating any number of these preens until the pitch comes his way. Just hit the ball! which he usually fouls-off into the stands.

To the Present

Fast forward to the present. I decided to give baseball another go. As mentioned, it was an opportunity to spend some time with my buddies. My friend Harvey had season tickets for the Washington Nationals games, on the second row near third base. Wow. Second row, near third base. A prime viewing place to witness the inaction. My friend, Rich, added, "I know you're not big on baseball, but they have great hot dogs at the game."

I was tempted to ask, "On the field, or off the field?" But I held my tongue because I am working on curtailing my sarcasm.

My third game left me with a different impression about baseball. For example, as I am writing this story, the Washington Nationals are playing an afternoon game at RFK stadium in

¹ Baseball player on cover is courtesy of Google.

DC. I've thought of going to the game. What happened? How did I suddenly find baseball interesting?

I think the answer to this question would be the same response about my growing affection for watching golf players ply their trade: Baseball and golf are relaxing to watch, and there is a lot more going on behind the scenes than meets the eye. Thanks to my nephew, Ronnie, who is a professional golfer, over the past twenty years, I have slowly gained an understanding of the wonderful nuances of this sport. And having recently taken up golf, I now have an appreciation of the extraordinary skills it takes to play golf---not to mention, play it well.

Sports Illustrated magazine claims the most difficult athletic feat in existence is hitting a moving baseball, thrown by a professional pitcher. I don't know, I've never tried it. From my limited horizon, I think the most difficult athletic feat in existence is hitting a stationary golf ball.

Take the Metro

I made my way to RFK Stadium via the Metro. As mentioned in these reports, I like riding the Metro because I like milling around subway stations and watching the passengers. Who knows? As I grow older, I might gravitate to bus stations.



Figure 1. A typical Metro station.

If you are a visitor to DC, park your car and use the Metro. You will experience less hassle and frustration during your stay. (Try to avoid rush hours.) I took the Metro at Reagan National Airport to the RFK Stadium. See Figure 1. The trip to RFK took only thirty minutes, about the same if I had driven my car to the stadium.

My Friends at the Game

My friends had arrived at RFK before me. I joined them, sat down, and prepared myself for three hours of watching incessant; (a) crotch scratching, (b) tobacco spitting, (c) pitchers nodding yes or no to catchers, (d) managers walking out to the pitcher's mound, and (e) zillions of foul balls. My friends and I are on display in Figure 2. From the left: Rich DeRose, Jim Bollini, Harvey Borkin, and your reporter.



Figure 2. Washington Nationals Fans.

These guys are real sports fans. Rich watches split screen TV sports programs so he won't miss any of the action....or inaction....depending on which sport he is watching. Jim does the same. At our poker games, other players often have to remind Jim that he is an active player at the table, as he watches the Nth replay of a foul ball that was almost a homer. Harvey? I'm not sure about the extent of his fandom syndrome, but he is the one with the season tickets.

And I know he loves baseball. His discussions and tutorials on this night were the main reasons I gained an insight into the game. Harvey helped me view baseball from different perspectives.

A Baseball Luddite

- My friends knew they were in for a long evening when I greeted them on my arrival:
- "Hey! Good to be here. Just one question to get me started on understanding this game."
 - Friends, "Sure. What's the question?"
 - Reporter, "Is it four strikes and three balls, or three strikes and four balls?"

Boring is as Boring Does

Who said baseball was boring? Well, I did. Sorry. But then my benchmark for comparison (in addition to golf) is soccer, another timeless sport. Timeless as in: timeless waits for something to happen. And bowling on TV. Bowling! Whoa, did you see that spare?

Actually, I sort of like watching bowling. I just wish the scoring were a little less complex for the last frame. If you understand it, please send me a tutorial, along with a calculator.

Since my retirement, I've been reading a lot. I have come across some profound thoughts in a book called *Philosophy for Dummies*. One quote caught my eye, "What we do not know, we do not understand. What we do not understand, we do not know. Therefore, because of this closed loop, it is useless to attempt to know or understand anything."

Which is the underlying premise for professional wrestling, riding motorcycles across canyons, Destruction Derby, pre-season NFL games, and NINE innings of baseball.

I'm in favor of more abbreviated events. To add to my list, I would be perfectly happy with FOURTEEN holes of golf. That way, I would have some time left in the day to do something else, say like watch the SIX innings of a baseball game.

More time to do more stuff. Just consider one possibility, “Ladies and Gentlemen, Hello. welcome to the Kentucky Derby. Thanks for coming. Goodbye. See you next year.” Cool, and in perfect alignment with our hurry-up society.

A Grand Slam!

The first three innings of Washington Nationals vs. Philadelphia Phillies baseball game were packed with action. I witnessed my first grand slam in the third inning. As the baseball went over the fence, Harvey exclaimed to me, “Look U.D., a grand slam! How’s that for excitement?”

- Reporter, “Fine. ...What’s a grand slam?”
- Harvey, who looked at me as if I have mooned him, “Bases loaded. The hitter hits a home run.”
- Reporter, “OK...What’s a bases loaded?...Never mind.”
- Harvey did not press the issue.

Through the Eyes of a Child

I’m joking about not knowing “bases loaded” and other terms. But I am not joking that I was not a baseball fan and dreaded going to games. That is, until this evening. Harvey offered a fine perspective, “Just think of yourself as a child. What would you think as you walked into this stadium? Seeing the lights? Hearing the noise? Watching the crowd?”

Harvey was on target. The ambience was cool, so were the views, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. View from our seats.

I settled down and in no time at all, I was caught up in the game and the fantastic skills of the players: Their foot speed in the outfield to catch a fly. Their hand-to-eye coordination in hitting a ball traveling 90 miles as hour. Their reflexes in fielding a ground ball. Their ability to throw the ball in an almost straight line from third to first. It was fun to watch. I was very impressed. And I loved the hot dogs.

The Jewish (People) Invented Baseball

Harvey is Jewish. And one of his endearing traits is his self-deprecating jokes about his religion and culture. He also is open to discussion about Jewish-related controversies, such as

Zionism and Palestine. A couple years ago, I asked Harvey if saying, “He’s a Jew,” was derogatory. Most everyone shies away from this term, and say “He’s Jewish.” This statement never made sense to me because “Jewish” is an adjective. I’m pushing my knowledge of adjectives, but I think they are not supposed to stand alone. For example, “He’s a Jewish person,” seems to be the proper grammar. But I suppose, “He’s Jewish,” is a convenient handle.

Anyway, Harvey said one could say, “He’s a Jew,” as a perfectly acceptable statement. He said it was the context in which the declaration is uttered that might make it derogatory. Thank you, Harvey... . Funny, but I still feel uneasy saying, “He’s a Jew.” Maybe it’s because of my knowing how this phrase has been used in the past.

Anyway, back to frivolity. Harvey counseled me during the game that there were a lot of Jews playing professional baseball. He mentioned several names that I had never heard of. He also talked about how many Jews were all-star baseball players and how many Jews were in the Hall of Fame.

On a roll, Harvey said there were more Jews playing professional baseball than any other type of people. I think he was jerking my chain, but I decided to respond, “Harvey, I’ve been watching the scoreboard and the names of the players. Look, there’s ‘Chavez.’ There’s ‘Lopez.’ There’s ‘Padilla, Martinez, Cruz, Carrasco, Blanco, Halama.’ Not exactly Jewish names. I’d wager those guys are Catholic and from the Dominican Republic.”

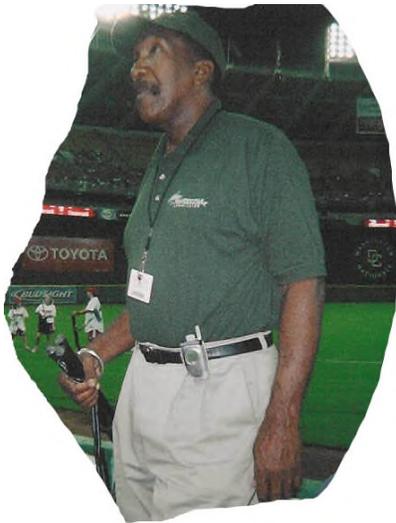
- Harvey, “Yes, but schooled at the Synagogue Republica!”
- Reporter, “Ha! Good one, Harvey. Say, any information on the Southern Baptist population in the ranks of the professional baseball players? I’m a Southern Baptist.”
- Harvey, “Really? No, I don’t follow the Southern Baptist baseball players.”

Other Exciting Events

Harvey informed me we were safe from foul balls. His statement was in response to my question about this subject after the following event took place:

- A foul ball was hit into the upper stands almost directly above us.
- The ball inflicted serious damage on someone who, like me, assumed there was no action in the game. The beaned victim was probably asleep or doing crossword puzzles, but not checking out the actual action.
- The crowd went semi-wild, but they also exhibited a modicum of restraint. After all, it wasn’t a hockey crowd.
- My friends informed me this was a very exciting event because foul balls did not ordinarily cause injuries.
- Our seats were so close to the home plate that a foul ball that might come our way would come rather quickly. I began to pay more attention to the game.

When the teams changed positions---I’m sure there is a baseball term to describe this event--- several security men stepped onto the field. As well, ushers came down to the railing and stood guard, as seen in Figure 4. I asked Harvey about this practice, and he offered that they were there to make certain no one jumped out of the stands onto the field.



OK, but it seemed to me a deranged fan might be more inclined to jump onto the field during the game, and not during a recess. There were no guards posted during the inaction. I asked Harvey, “Why during the time-out and not during the game?”

Harvey, “I honestly don’t know. Ask me a baseball question or a Jewish question.”

Figure 4. Ushers and T-shirt cannon shooters.

We left the discussion at that. I assumed the ushers and guards were another initiative from the Department of Homeland Security to make our society safer---at least between innings.

Also, look closely at this picture. To the left are three girls on the field behind the usher. They were on the field to shoot Washington Nationals T-shirts into the crowd. Yep, a T-shirt cannon. And hoping for a free T-shirt, the crowd went wild. Is America great or what!

Those girls shooting the T-shirts out of the cannon were fine looking. Harvey and I thought it would not be a bad idea to substitute the girls for the T shirts. But this change in the cannon’s ammunition would have required a much larger cannon barrel, and, of course, there would be the potential problem of a clumsy fan not catching the oncoming girl. Like baseballs, the parabola of a falling female can be tricky. Just ask the fan who was beamed with that foul ball.

Back to Form

The excitement of the first three innings tapered off into hardball torpor. Let’s use the box score of the nine innings to make my point.

Nationals	010 000 000	1
Phillies	105 100 000	7

My soccer friends tell me it’s the defense that makes the soccer game exiting: Kicking the ball across the field and back across the field, then backwards in the field, then across the field once again. A timeless game with a 0-0 final score. Often climaxed by a free kick into a goal that is guarded by players whose priorities about the game of soccer and the game of life are visibly evident from their hands covering their privates in order to assure that they themselves may continue to experience their own (post game) climaxes. To hell with the final soccer score! There’s more at stake here.

Anyway, Harvey told me it was the defense that made the game of baseball interesting. As examples, why the three outfielders positioned themselves differently in the outfield for different hitters; why the shortstop positioned himself toward home plate, and of utmost importance, why the catcher positioned himself behind home plate. Good information for a baseball Luddite.

A Story to Tell

It was time to go home. As we were walking to our respective autos or subway trains, my friends asked me if I were going to write a report on this evening? “Of course!” I said, “That’s what reporters do: Report.”

Jim asked me to make sure I spelled his name with two “ls.” I responded that the name “Jim” had no “ls,” but being the astute reporter, I also picked up that he was referring to his last name of Bolini. Rich had no requests for the story. He was eager to head back home, and I lost him in the crowd at the Metro station. Harvey had one request. He asked me to make sure it was clear Harvey Borkin, “Can still hit a curve.”

Reporter, “Certainly, Harvey. Be glad to. What’s a curve?”

The Metro Mystique

As I said, I lost my friends in the crowd as I made my way into the Metro station to await the Blue Line back to the airport. During my wait, I noticed two Orange Line trains departed, but no Blue Line trains. I asked a Metro attendant, “Why two Orange trains, and no Blues?”

I suspect he was happy to field a question beyond the usual queries about suspicious backpacks. He smiled and replied, “Because we know more people are traveling on the Orange Line than the Blue Line.”

- Reporter, who had to get to the bottom of this investigation, “OK, but how do you know?”
- Metro Attendant, “See that guy behind you on the raised kiosk. He knows.”
- Reporter, “How does he know?”
- Metro Attendant, “He just knows,” as the Blue Line train pulled into the station.

Accepting the idea that there is more to baseball---and the Metro---than meets the eye, this is Your on the Street Reporter signing-off, and thinking about attending (someday) the fourth baseball game in his life.