

# Guest Column: Petal Power: Cherry blossoms fuel memories of spring & youth

By *Stephen Gambescia* *Delco Daily Times* Guest Columnist—21 May 2019



Daffodils are called “the first flowers of spring.” They are bright and refreshing, but in one sense they may be less of a harbinger than a telltale to get us to forget the cold, often harsh, winter. For my siblings and me growing up, the Japanese cherry blossoms sealed the deal that it was spring.

Our mother adored the huge cherry blossom that stood to the side of our home. Its long branches reached to her second-floor bedroom window, and on its other side the branches encroached our neighbor’s yard. At Christmas, the older kids competed to see who could string lights the highest on the thick branches of this majestic tree. As with many of our competitions, it became more interesting with bodily risk. Each capable sibling took his or her best shot at stringing the highest light. When the competition was complete, the tree looked like an octopus ride on the Jersey Shore boardwalk.

Our mother sighed when the pink petals began to fall. But we were energized, for now the fun would begin! We grabbed grocery bags from the pantry and all the brooms, dustpans and make-shift shovels we could find. Given our habits of industry, we swept up all the petals into the bags. We took them to our back yard and lined “the ball field diamond.” There after dinner, we would play half ball, speed ball, mush ball, or kick ball. With our newly lined field, somehow the games seem more legitimate.

We had almost enough children in our family to field two teams, and we could round out the rosters by recruiting any brave neighbors wanting to mix it up with “the big family next door.” Everyone got to play, even the little kids. Spring was here!

First base was a long run to the (statueless) pedestal under a pine tree. The pine cones were an assist for when you were in the field, but a mishap to the base runners. Second base was a short run to a bald spot before a 15-foot by 4-foot wooded structure that supported a mish-mosh of vines we called “The Goddabalze.” The name must be some Italian dialect. We feared going in there after a ball because the older kids said there was quicksand under the thickets.

Third base was a little longer run. We stopped at a bush that never grew. Someone said it was cursed. A low-hanging branch with lots of leaves made it an eerie place to hang. You wanted to get home not only to score a run but to get away from the tree that looked like the talking trees in the Wizard of Oz.

Home plate was a short run from third. This frustrated the fielders, so at times they would suspend the rules and throw the ball of the day at you instead of making the requisite tag for the out. Unless, of course, it was one of the “little kids” running the bases to whom we gave great latitude. Trouble came with those borderline ages in which case we had to have a timeout to decide on what passes, if any, do we give them. But paybacks to the fielders came as you were not allowed to pass a base runner and the little kids served as welcomed base running plugs when the big kids got a good hit.

As with any backyard game, you had to have reasonable ground rules from what was in play and what was out of play; what was interference when a ball came in contact with nature. And if someone fouled the ball back onto the roof of the garage, should it be an automatic out for stalling the game?

Any hit into the ivy was an automatic double if you could not find the ball within three Mississippi’s. Hit into those vines behind second base: double. Any hit or kick over the outfield fence was either a home run or an out, depending on the age of the player, which was variable depending on how motivated you were to fetch a ball when the neighbor’s dog was out. Hit the fence in the air: double. Hit the crossbar on the fence: triple, for what are the odds?

Nobody was allowed to quit. The games lasted until the sight of the first flying bat; the big kids said the bats would lay eggs in our hair. The demise of nature’s beauty brought such joy to us, and each season I see those pink petals on the ground I ask the resident kids on the block to sweep them up and line their backyard ball field.

Spring fever is one malady for which we as kids wanted no cure. The cherry blossoms have dropped their petals. Spring is here again, so let’s go line the ball fields.

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