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*Thoughtprovoking, Shareable Ideas in Greater
Philadelphia and Beyond*

Fields of Pink



Stephen Gambescia: *Fields of pink*

Stephen Gambescia is author of a book describing what it is like growing up in a large family: "Every child, no matter how many, is special."

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After a colder-than-usual winter in the Philadelphia area, we can truly appreciate the arrival of spring. It seems that the flowers, from the first group of daffodils to the Japanese cherry blossoms, are brighter than ever. The days feel a bit longer and warmer compared with past daylight-saving times.

We had a large cherry blossom tree that stretched over our meandering driveway. Its trunk was thick and hardy, and its octopus-like branches were strong enough to support us as we wrapped C-9 lights around them for Christmas.

The pink pride of this tree lasts less than two weeks. Our mother would sigh when the petals began to fall. But we, the sixteen kids, were joyful because now the fun would begin!

We grabbed grocery bags from the pantry, along with all the brooms, dustpans, and makeshift shovels we could find, to collect the fallen petals. We dragged the bags to the backyard and lined a ball field diamond. There, after dinner, we would decide which ball game to play and choose teams.

Kickball was the most common choice since it could involve more of the younger members of our Baby Boom family. Furthermore, it was easier for the little kids to get an older sibling out; you could beam the runner with the soft ball. Wiffle ball was the favorite among the older kids as it required more skill to pitch and hit. Mush ball was our own home-grown game; it involved a large soft rubber ball, not as big as a basketball, that you hit with a small bat. With our newly lined field, the games somehow felt more legitimate, and we took pride in playing the roles of both grounds crew and players.

Picking teams had several options. The standard schoolyard process involved two captains selecting players until everyone was chosen. To accommodate the range of skills among players, we improvised team selection. Some teams were a few older siblings paired against many younger kids to give an advantage to the younger group in terms of field coverage. To heighten the competitive nature of the game, we often had boys against girls. Given our family split of nine girls and seven boys, the girls usually had an extra player or two, which helped with fielding coverage.

While the backyard was expansive enough to host ball games, we still had to work within the natural confines of the yard. The yard sloped slightly downward toward home plate, which we set up behind the two-car garage.

This served as a reliable backstop. The downside was that a pop-up curving behind the plate would land on the garage roof. No problem; there were several ways to get up there, adding another competitive aspect to the game — who could retrieve the errant ball first and throw it back into play.

First base was a long run to a pedestal underneath a pine tree—good coverage on hot days. Second base was a short run to a bald spot before a 15' by 4' wooden structure that supported a mishmash of flowering vines we called “The Goddabalze.” The name must come from some Italian dialect. We feared going in there after a ball because the older kids warned us that there was quicksand under the thickets.

Running to third base was a treat as it was downhill. Unfortunately, a bush that never grew served as the base. Some claimed it was cursed. A low-hanging branch with lots of leaves made it an eerie place to be. Behind this base were ghoulish trees that reminded us of the ones in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Home plate was just a short dash from third base. This often frustrated the fielders, so at times they would suspend the rules and simply throw the ball at you instead of making the requisite tag for an out — unless of course it was one of the “little kids” running the bases, to whom we granted great latitude. Confusion arose with those borderline ages, requiring a timeout to decide whether the runner was “young enough” to get a pass. Paybacks to the fielders came in the form of the rule that players were not allowed to pass a base runner. Thus, the little kids served as welcome plugs when the older kids made a good hit.

As with any backyard game, reasonable ground rules were critical — what was in play and what was out, as well as what constituted interference when a ball came into contact with nature.

Any hit into the ivy in left field was an automatic double. As any kid knows, ground-covering ivy hides game balls better than pirates can hide treasure, leading both teams to join the search and often pray to St. Anthony. A hit into those vines behind second base also counted as a double. Any hit or kick over

the outfield fence was either a home run or an out, depending on the age of the player. The decision often varied based on how motivated one was to retrieve a ball when the neighbor's dog was out. Hitting the fence in the air: triple.

The games lasted until the sight of the first flying bat; the big kids claimed that bats would lay eggs in our hair. Those who wanted to stay longer and play would run inside to grab a snow hat.

The demise of nature's beauty brought us immense joy, and each season as I see those pink petals on the ground, I suggest to the resident kids on the block to sweep them up and line a backyard ball field.

Spring fever is one malady for which we as kids wanted no cure. Spring is here again, so let's go line some field with fallen pink petals and play ball!

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