

The Boy and the Game

Few see his closet turned office, yet he has chosen the décor with care. Pictures of his wife smile from the desk and filing cabinet, but the focal point of the tiny room is The Shelf. Half a dozen favored books, along with a packet of pictures and a card, have been selected to grace the west wall of his office. Above The Shelf hang the pictures that tie the décor together—the pictures of The Stadium.

As we talked, I could almost see him as a seven-year-old boy shivering in October darkness on the front porch. Frost had long since silenced the last cricket's song, but summer's final chapter had just been written. Moments earlier, Ernie Harwell's radio voice had announced, "And the Tigers are the champions of 1984." Now the boy waited on the porch, listening for something else.

The hum of traffic from I-696—just four houses, a frontage road, and a steep incline away—had ceased. In its place, he could hear the blare of horns and the shrieks of revelers. Though his parents wouldn't let him wander to the freeway fence, he could almost see what Ernie had described. Travelers from out of town shook their heads in disbelief as Detroiters danced on the hoods of their cars, bringing traffic to a halt.

With an 8-4 win over the San Diego Padres, the Detroit Tigers were the second team ever to maintain the position of first place from opening day until the final game of the World Series. This was a moment that would go down in baseball history, but this was also a moment that would go down in the personal history of a second-grade schoolboy.

The relationship, begun that day between a boy and his team, continued after the child's family moved from the Detroit area. It continued as his team fell from greatness, ending year after year with a losing record. It continued because of a voice, rich with the lore of baseball past, that tied the boy to the present.

Attending a tiny school in a small town, the boy had few friends. Though he had younger brothers, he had no one his age to share the passage from boyhood to manhood with. Ernie Harwell helped to fill that void.

As a junior higher, the boy spent his most enjoyable summer and fall days playing catch with his dad and brothers on the front lawn. Before grabbing his glove, he would turn on his radio and open the window of his second-story room. That way, in the midst of his own game of catch, he could hear Ernie's familiar voice calling the Tigers game. That voice was a constant during a tumultuous phase of life.

In fact, the young man marked the turning of the year by Ernie's return to the press box each spring. The broadcaster would quote his famous lines from Song of Solomon.

For lo, the winter is past,
The rain is over and gone;
The flowers appear on the earth;
The time of the singing of birds is come,
And the voice of the turtle is heard
In our land.

With that declaration, the boy knew that months of spending time with the man who was for many years his best friend lay ahead.

Though the boy attended no more than a handful of Tigers games, he listened to almost every WJR Tiger broadcast. Unbeknownst to his parents (or so he thought), he would cover his head and his radio with a pillow and fall asleep listening to Ernie's soothing voice. Sometimes nodding off as early as the second inning, he didn't always know the score come morning. But that was all right. While he was awake, he was at the game. Ernie always said of his perch in Tiger Stadium that he was close enough to see the players sweat and hear them cuss. The colorful pictures this announcer painted allowed a young boy to see and hear the same things as he drifted off to sleep. In the press box with Ernie, he found a place of belonging.

Ernie knew about providing a sense of belonging. In fact, even from the press box he offered that same security to his wife Lulu. He seldom called a game without referring to her or to home in some way. While the announcer's love for baseball was evident whenever he spoke, his entire tone changed when he talked about Lulu. The love that he spoke of her with was intense enough that even a junior high boy caught the difference.

The characteristic of Ernie's life that most impressed the teenage boy was grace— grace in speaking of his wife, grace in referencing players, grace in dealing with fans. But that grace was tested in the early '90s when Tiger management decided to try something new. Wanting to reach a younger audience, the front office decided to usher out their aging announcer at the end of the season.

Tuning the dial to hear Ernie call his last season, the now high school-aged boy joined a host of stunned Tiger fans. As reporter after reporter badgered the broadcaster, the boy waited for him to voice the anger that his fans expressed freely. The waiting was vain. Repeatedly, Ernie redirected conversations to the positive. He ended that year telling his fans that he had lived his life and had no regrets.

My brother has no regrets either. As I stood in his office in the gym of a small private college, I perused his collection of Tiger pictures, cards, and books. Instead of choosing a larger-than-life Michael Jordan or Pete Rose to emulate, my brother has decorated his life with memorabilia of a man of character. Ernie's later return to Tiger baseball allowed my brother a snapshot with the elderly gentleman during the Tigers' final season at the corner of Michigan and Trumbull. While Ernie's face is central to the array covering the office wall, it was Ernie's voice that gave security to a young boy. It was Ernie's life that helped build him into a man.