

Welcome Back Old Friend...

by Fred Terling Jr.

The summer of days gone by, atop Hospital Hill in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, six boys stood locked in time... This was the greatest summer of my life...



The six boys have gone to new fields, each becoming a man and adopting new lives, but for that one summer in the late 1970's, we were all one with a common purpose and a bond that will remain with me forever.

John Sickles' parents had a small lot on top of hospital hill, which we made into a baseball field. The memories are as thick as the gnats that first laid claim to the diamond of our dreams. Lurch, The Bock brothers (Ron, Brian, and Mark), John, and myself spent several days a week in this makeshift Three Rivers stadium. Here our mouths were filled with the dust cast from the base paths by the searing sun. It tasted great!!! Not as great as the sodas we carted up the hill in our white and red plastic cooler. We pitched, hit, stole bases and fielded, garnished with the signature batting stances of our idols. Every aspect of the game existed on the hill including the announcers that called our games. Statistics were recorded and our improvements charted in each of the vital areas.

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It was a couple of miles down the railroad track to the Bock brother's house, our regular meeting place. The trek down the iron rails and across the deteriorated ties in itself was an adventure. If I was truly lucky on those trips, a ground hornet's nest would be discovered among the rotting ties. A barrage of slag rock from between the ties usually brought the hornets out of their dormant rest from the summer heat. There was nothing like seeing 50-100 hornets rising up, en masse, from the hidden hive. Soon, I would cross the bridge trestle. Its black iron frame streaked with rusty tears from the welded bolts. Up one span, across the top, and down the other side - the only way to cross! Never once considering gravity, nor the rapids of Chartiers Creek from which many a carp were caught on dough ball, I balanced the span. Soon I would be there and the game would get underway.

On the off days, Lurch and I took the paint tube pens to white cotton t-shirts carefully crafting the jerseys of the teams we loved. Of course at that time, Omar Moreno was my god and #18 adorned every Pirate shirt I owned. That was of course before the group caught the local bus into the actual Three River's stadium for an afternoon double header with the San Francisco Giants.

The entire hilltop team arrived at Gate B outside of the ballpark, and we each coughed up \$6.50 for box seats.



Our Backyard Sandlot...

Inside the stadium, pennants, programs, batting gloves and wristbands quickly devoured our paper route money. This was also the day I tasted my first stadium hotdog. Anyone who would like to engage in an open debate as to where to get the best hotdogs can challenge me any day of the week. For here is where dreams are made and futures shaped. Walking down the entrance tunnel to the field boxes was traveling down the birth canal and exploding into the world. I was born that day into the immense size of the actual stadium. The turf was greener than any meadow I had seen, the seats were a brighter yellow than the first daffodils of spring, the sky was luminescent blue and the infield dust tasted better than ours. That day, no one on earth

could have convinced me this wasn't heaven. We wandered to the first base line railing and settled in for batting practice. The Giants were on the field, but that didn't matter. During batting practice, I clicked off a dozen or so shots from the family 126-instant camera. Then something miraculous occurred, although I did not think so at the time. Bill Madlock, golden glove third baseman, walked into the batting cage for the Giants. Following a couple of well placed at bats, we began shouting his nickname, "MAD-DOG, MAD-DOG!!!" Without pause, he dropped his bat, strolled around the backstop and ventured in our direction. As he grew larger in the aperture, I realized he was coming over to the box seat rail from where we

had delivered our enthusiastic chant. "Oh, my god!!! He's coming over," I feverishly thought. With each step he took, my heart beat crescendo and was, I am quite sure to this day, visible through my Omar Moreno jersey. Finally, he was there, right in front of me! The hospital hill team handed him their programs, which he happily autographed. Me...well, I just stood there, swallowing hard, trying to find the same enthusiasm and the voice that was bellowing just minutes prior. My throat was dry and the swallowing became more painful. The team collected up their signed programs, and still I just stood there. What Mr. Madlock taught me that day stays with me to this date. Instead of going back to the dugout, he stepped in front of me, extending his hand. "Omar fan, huh?" or something to that effect, I was completely dazed and breathless. Without losing eye contact, I forced my trembling hand into his open gloved palms. He shook firmly with the same grip he held on a baseball bat. It must have brought me to my senses as the rolled up Sport magazine I held in my opposite hand triggered my memory of the Giants layout within its pages. Frantically, I released his handshake and leafed through the pages to find the magazine spread. Bill Madlock waited patiently

Finally I found the article and handed him the page, which featured a picture of the man standing before me. What followed was possibly the dumbest thing I've said in recent memory, "I brought this for Vida Blue... (pregnant pause) and you too... to sign." He responded with a smile and a signature. Wow! My first real autograph! As my metabolism returned to its normal adolescent rate, he once again shook my hand, smiled, turned, and walked towards the visitor's dugout.

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I finally found my tongue, "Thanks, Bill." I felt justified in my use of the familiar, after all, we did shake hands!

A few minutes later into the batting practice, I noticed Mad-Dog emerge from the dugout. He was pointing our way as two more of the orange uniformed Giants made their way out. Bill Madlock shot us a thumbs up as the other two players made their way towards our seats along the rail. Within seconds, their identities came into focus...Jack Clark and of course, Vida Blue. Mr. Madlock had not only supplied me with my first autograph, but also with that of the one I sought.



Photo by Jerry Reuss

Vida and Jack were just as accommodating to the hilltop six and Vida went so far as to personalized my autograph, "To Freddy, Best Wishes..." The actual game was the anticlimax to the days events. The bus ride home was filled with stories and reflections of all we had encountered on our first solo trip to the ball game. I was exhausted from the emotional roller coaster I had been on all day. The game on the hill top would change forever. I retired my Omar Jersey and changed all of my colors from black and yellow to orange and black. The number remained the same, but the name across the shoulders read "MADLOCK." That is until the following season when fate would take a twist and Bill Madlock was traded to the Pittsburgh Pirates the following year.

Eighteen years later, the hilltop gang, Omar Moreno, Bill Madlock, Vida Blue, and the rest of baseball history remains permanently etched in my soul. They have been with me since that summer and to this day I savor the taste of their dust. With a little luck, my children will be able to make their own dust... and taste the memories of baseball. Welcome back old friend...



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