For the Love of the Game

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.
"C'mon, Rebe, five more good ones and we'll wrap it up."

Cover Page Footnote
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"C'mon, Rebe, five more good ones and we'll wrap it up."

My father squatted about 45 feet away from me, pounding his fist into the catcher’s glove on his left hand. He was the only one who called me Rebe, which he derived from my given name, Rebecca. Most other people called me Becky or Bek. When I got into trouble, I was Rebecca Lynn. But Dad always called me Rebe, and my mother hated that.

"C'mon, Rebe, fire it in here."

The leather covering of the indoor softball was soft in my palm. I twisted the ball in my right hand, which was sheltered by my gloved left hand. My thumb gripped one row of stitches and my index finger and middle finger cuffed around the ball, gripping the opposite row. There was a slight thudding on the side of my middle finger where the ball finally pushed off each time I sent it hurling the forty feet through the air toward the leather pocket of the catcher’s glove. I rubbed my calloused middle finger against the stitches and tightened my grip. The gymnasium smelled musty, and one of the large fluorescent lights flickered. I focused on my father’s glove. I tried to envision a batter crouched next to him. Aha! Amanda Oliver—my mortal enemy, as far as softball went anyway. I’m gonna hurl it right by her so fast she won’t even be able to see it, I thought. Yeah right, just put it in the glove so we can get out of here. My back is killing me.

All at once, I became a whirlwind of motion. I dipped forward, then back, pulling my glove up to my chest. My right hand, gripping the ball, stayed hidden inside my glove until the last moment to prevent the batter from seeing my grip and knowing what pitch I was going to throw. My right arm dropped back to my side, then emerged from the glove, whirled in a wide circle, and released the ball at my hip. I knew it was a strike from the moment it left the callous on my middle finger. Crack; it struck the catcher’s glove. God, I loved that sound.

"Nice one, Rebe. Give me a few more of those."

Was I “Daddy’s little girl”? Not really—more like “Daddy’s little boy”. It wasn’t that I was really a tomboy, just the least feminine of three daughters. My dad didn’t mind that at all. He got to watch me play field hockey, volleyball, and softball, and had me to watch hockey and baseball with. My older sisters were athletes in high school, too, but I made sports my life and strove to be the best on the field or court. I played with passion. And when watching baseball on TV, instead of sitting and passively watching the game I studies the pitcher, watching his face and his interactions with the catcher, imagining the calculations in his head and seeing the outcome of each pitch he threw. I was an athlete at heart.

My dad loved to watch me play, and also wished for me to excel. He drove me to pitching clinics and private instructors, where he was my catcher, kneeling, usually for two hours, and allowing me to beat the crap out of his catching hand; no amount of padding helped. His fingers swelled up, his hand hurt, his knees popped, his back ached, and he got a few bruises now and then, but he never complained. As a matter of fact, he often volunteered for the torture, suggesting that we go down to the high school gym and “throw a little”. Sometimes, I thought he was insane. But I appreciated it. I never would have succeeded if he hadn’t been there to urge me on. He was my motivation.

My father and I were never very affectionate, and I don’t recall ever exchanging the words “I love you”. He’d give me hugs when I was leaving on a trip or going back to college, but they were usually big, awkward bear hugs coupled with some fatherly words like “be careful” or “have fun”. I guess that’s just how my dad is. He doesn’t show his love with hugs and kisses, but with a catcher’s glove and words of encouragement. When I think of my father, I conjure up an image of a balding man with a graying beard, squatting in his gray sweat pants, his right knee resting on a kneeling pad on hand tucked behind his back. "C'mon, Rebe," he says. Only my dad calls me that. The ball hits his glove with a smack. God, I love that sound.

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