



*Dad at age 31, the year he managed
a team in a youth league in St. Anne, Illinois*

Billy Ball

By Brian Riley

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“You guys play baseball like old people s%*#w — sloppy and slow.” That’s how my dad told me he began his stint as baseball manager one year when I was too young to play on his team, attempting to motivate a bunch of teenaged boys who needed to have a fire lit under them in order to be motivated to win. He asked his assistant coach, a minister, to stay home that day, so he could implement his strategy.

His ploy succeeded, because the team went on to win the local championship that year. Dad made me the team’s scorekeeper, showing me how to make the fancy notations on the scoring sheets, and I got to sit on the bench with the players and watch the exciting plays. I knew the signals and could tell when Dad was signaling his players to do a double steal, or steal home base, or whatever other trick play he had up his sleeve. It was exciting stuff, especially for a 10-year-old like myself who participated in the game on the playground as if it were a religion and revered pro baseball players as being secular gods.

I didn't realize it at the time, but Dad was emulating baseball's bad-boy, pro baseball manager Billy Martin, and was teaching his players [the style of baseball that came to be known as "Billy Ball."](#) Part of the secret of Billy Ball is to get your players pissed off at someone, whether an umpire or an opposing team or player, so that they will be motivated to dig deep within themselves and find that magic stuff needed to win the game.

Years later when my dad was in the hospital dying of lung cancer, I tracked down a few of the guys and got them to write him touching letters. Dad had only weeks left to live, and I was able to spend most of those remaining days right at his side, catching up on the time we lost together when I was a child due to the consequences of his alcoholism.

I actually owe [my existence](#) to the game of baseball. When Dad was a kid (and coincidentally went by the nickname "Billy") he played first base in Little League and his team made it to the regional playoffs. The story became exaggerated over the years. He used to claim that his team nearly made it to the Little League World Series, but after he died I asked for help from a reference librarian who dug up the old newspapers and found out that they only played one game in the regional tournament — and lost.

Dad explained how the coach had taken him out of that game and didn't let him play, even though he had played first base all season and had helped the team to make it to where they were. He didn't hit home runs, but he got on base a lot, ran the bases well, and scored runs. In Dad's place that day the coach put in a taller player named Bobby Joe. Because of this experience he began to hold a grudge against Bobby Joe. A few years later my dad had been dating my mom only a short while when he saw her dancing with Bobby Joe at a classmate's house. That was the fateful event [that later](#) made my existence possible, since he decided after that to ask my mom to "go steady" with him.

Fast-forward 36 years... As the cancer metastasized to his brain, Dad became a danger to himself and could have accidentally burned the house down while lighting a cigarette. Once he almost knocked a whole stack of porcelain dishes from the cabinet onto the floor. So he ended up in the hospital for most of his last six weeks as a protective measure. Even with only half his wits about him, he would try to concoct schemes to find a way to come home, in one instance by finding someone to drive him who would accept money he took from his girlfriend's stash of rare coins as compensation.

After he died I got a small part of his ashes and used to joke with my girlfriend at the time that all I had was "Dad's foot." I was lucky that she thought it was a friendly foot and not a scary one, because the only place I could find to keep the urn was in the living room closet.

I think Dad would have liked that — even in death he was ruffling people's feathers and challenging the status quo.

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[CLICK HERE](#) to read a letter written to my dad from one of his former players.

See also: [The Art of Baseball](#) by Brian Riley

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