

# Old-school punch ball



*"Time it was and what a time it was, it was ... A time of innocence."*

– "Bookends," by Simon and Garfunkel (1968)

I did a guest column for the local paper recently describing the sort-of baseball games we made up and played endlessly in yards and streets back in the day. The Old Geezers liked it.

We had a street game called "running bases." Two kids would be at separate bases – usually garbage can lids – and tossed a ball back and forth while two other kids would try to get from one base to the other without being tagged. Tagged out, the kid that got him replaced him as a runner. Back and forth, back and forth. The game was over when one of us had to go to piano lessons.

In "punch ball" we used a rubber ball the size of a tennis ball. It was standard baseball rules modified for a small yard. The "batter" would bounce the ball in front of him then hit it with his closed fist. We fielded bare-handed. It was a foul ball if it went into the ivy patch past first base.

We had "left-handed full swing." Righties, we hit the ball out of our hand full swing lefty, imagining we were going for the short porch at Yankee Stadium. One of the strongest hitters was a girl, Mary Beth. We marveled how well she hit lefty until we found out that, like being a girl, she was born that way.

These games had their own ground rules that we made up as we played along. In punch ball, it wasn't a homer but an automatic out if you hit it over the fence into the neighbor's yard. Mainly because it was so much work to go and get it

back. There was no sliding in running bases. This, too, was for a practical reason: to protect our dungarees.

It seems a season can't begin these days without our losing an old ballplayer. A recent example: Rusty Staub died on opening day this year. It was Holy Thursday. He would have been 74 on Easter Sunday. They had his funeral Mass at Immaculate Conception church in New Orleans.

Rusty played for 23 seasons in the majors, including with my New York Mets, where he was a favorite to the entire New York community.

He was a good one. Staub was the first player in baseball history to have 500 hits with each of four different teams. Along with only the legendary Ty Cobb, Staub hit a major-league home run before his 20th birthday and after his 40th. A six-time All-Star, when he played for the Montreal Expos they called him "Le Grand Orange" for his shock of red hair.

Rusty Staub was also popular for what really matters. In a profile in Catholic News Service it was noted that New Orleans-born Staub was a solid man of faith, what we call a Catholic gentleman.

New York's Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan warmly lauded Staub "as a great philanthropist who did so much to support Catholic Charities, Catholic schools and our Catholic food pantries.

"Whenever we were together," Cardinal Dolan said, "he would say, 'Tell me what you need, Cardinal,' and he would always come through.'"

I know it is silly – and a friend and Catholic editor calls it my "goofy baseball thing" – but I've always believed baseball is essentially a Catholic sport. Players like Rusty Staub make my point. He lived out the Faith. On and off the field.

Things were different back when we were inventing baseball

games. That was old school. And Rusty Staub was old school, if old school can also mean decency and caring.

“Let the little children come to me” (Mt 19:14). I’m convinced the good Lord took pleasure watching us play those summer games long ago. We had our innocence.

And what a time it was.

*Robert P. Lockwood writes from Indiana.*