

Rookie League

SL Who's on First

Diana Friedman

I am standing at first base watching my 6-year old daughter Naomi swing. And miss. And swing. And miss. With each strike (and there will be eight—this is rookie league), it seems the bat rounds home plate all the way into my stomach. When she finally does connect, a small dribble to a boy fielding for the adult pitcher, I begin to bellow: “Run it out! Don’t stop! Run it out!” As team manager and first base coach, this is my official job.

But when the boy’s foot, ball snug in his glove, touches first base a split second before hers, I am certain my face reveals that I have slipped from manager to mother. The umpire, a parent from the other team, comes out from behind home plate and nods gently. I pat Naomi on the back. “Way to hustle, you almost got it,” I tell her, and brace for the flood of tears. But she just nods and trots back to her teammates on the bench, disappointed, but hardly heartbroken. Nothing like me.

If there is such a thing as a 6-year old girl wannabe, I claim that title shamelessly. What I wouldn’t give to be in kindergarten today huddling with friends and teammates in matching tee shirts and hats as we slap high fives to the coach and celebrate pins and trophies at end-of-season ice cream parties.

Nineteen-sixty eight hardly qualifies as the dark ages, but in those last few years before Title IX legislation prohibited gender discrimination in federally funded educational programs, before Little League bowed to lawsuits and public pressure finally allowed girls to play, my organized team sports were limited to weekend pick-up softball and touch football games with my brothers and father in Central Park. My mother had hoped for a girl she could parade in lace and tights; I was otherwise preoccupied pulling dirty tee shirts and jeans out of the hamper and wrestling my brothers on the basement carpet. My father was just as happy to have an extra second baseman or wide receiver. Once she saw I had no plans to trade my sneakers for stockings, my mother became my biggest advocate. Particularly when I tried in first grade to join the all-boy Friday after-school softball game.

“You’re a girl, you can’t play,” my classmates told me as I stood clutching my Ken Harrelsen glove. But I could. I knew. And so did those boys who played with me every day in gym class. My mother, believing a simple resolution at hand, approached the other mothers, many of whom were her close friends.

“It’s not a good idea, she could get hurt,” protested one.

“This is a special thing for boys,” said another. “The girls are so advanced with their small motor skills. Let the boys have their own activities, something they can feel good about.”

So opening day, a muggy Friday afternoon, I stood, my fingers curled around the backstop fence, as I watched my two closest friends, Dennis and Rusty, for whom I had fielded endless grounders, choose up sides. Without me.

I know that the options Naomi and her friends have are partially the legacy of girl athletes of my generation, even though we led the fight without a clue that’s what we were doing. We just wanted to play.

In high school, finally: varsity volleyball, basketball, softball. My freshman year, the standard girls’ skirts and bloomers were tossed and as each season unfolded, we broke the seal on the boxes for our new uniforms—stretchy shorts, three quarter length baseball pants that covered our knees, short sleeve jerseys with black numbers, white for home games, orange for away. We traveled on the bus with the boys’ teams for many of our games. From a distance the difference between the genders was scarcely discernable.

But there were more boys’ teams; their gym and locker room were bigger, cleaner, more accommodating to the larger fan base that attended their games. In our gym basketball was not a contact sport—elbows remained politely tucked in, even under the boards.

My brothers also played varsity sports, openly fantasizing: if only they were a little taller, a little better with the hook shot, more precise with the fast ball, that call from senior management might still be coming in from the Knicks or the Mets.

One afternoon nearing the end of my softball season, I was met by my younger brother as I came home from school.

“Look at this,” he said excitedly, handing me the Sports section of the *New York Times*. I dropped my pack, anticipating an article or photo signaling a new women’s basketball league. Instead, I stared at a short blurb indicating that females were increasing their ranks as ball girls for professional baseball teams.

Not until many years later, when I was a graduate student in upstate New York, did I begin to understand how I had buried all this sorrow. Late one afternoon as the sun was dropping behind the hillside across the gorge, I noticed a soccer field across the street from my bus stop. From where I stood, I could just make out the red and white blur of the players racing up and down the field. I had never played, soccer not being introduced to girls until I was finishing high school. But waiting for the bus I found myself compelled to cross the street. And from closer up, I saw the majesty of

the game for the first time: flawless passes placed with zen-like accuracy, powerful sliding and diving, an almost collective ego which seemed to power both teams forward to the goal. And then I noticed something else: all the players had pony-tails. I was late for dinner that night and most Tuesday and Fridays thereafter, often sneaking out from my lab to catch the games. Every time one of the players tackled an opponent or dove for the ball and emerged splattered with mud, I would twinge—not for them, but for how much I wanted to be on that field, playing a game in which I had never touched the ball, barely knew the rules.

I could not possibly have known that some of these women would later share a field with the women of the powerhouse U.S. women's soccer team of the late 1990s, the same team that would bring the world the indelible image of Brandi Chastain circling her shirt wildly over her head, that same team that would ratchet up the legitimacy of women's sports 20 notches in 20 seconds. But at 28, as I watched these women not even a decade younger than me, these women with quads bulging shamelessly from under their shorts, these women who showed no fear about crashing into one another, these women who threw themselves into the game like their lives depended on it, I felt the door to my buried psyche blow open. It was immaterial, I realized, whether my brothers or I, my teammates or I, had ever been good enough to be professional athletes. What had mattered was who had had permission to dream.

Naomi, my first child, was born a few years later into this brave new world of women's sports, a reality I never could have imagined, even in those moments when my mother would sit me on her lap, whispering "soon, soon," in response to my asking once again when girls would be allowed into Little League. Yet, while Naomi was drawing her first breaths, more than two million girls were enrolled in soccer leagues, women's softball was now an Olympic sport, and basketball, sweaty, pushy, elbows-out, in-your-face basketball, was the most popular women's sport in high school and college.

The day we came home from the hospital I clutched Naomi's tiny curled body against my chest, letting my mind wander gleefully. Her first pair of shoes were going to be cleats. She would be just like me in a picture my parents have of me at age 2 where I am lugging a bat across my shoulder, except Naomi wouldn't be in a pink dress, she'd be in her team uniform.

Of course the plans we conjure up for our children and the blueprints they unfold for themselves seldom travel parallel tracks. Naomi was physical—neither my husband nor I can recall her sitting still for more than a minute between the ages of one and four. She was also competitive, constantly arguing with her best friend who was first, fastest, best.

Yet. If I threw her a ball, she looked the other way. If I handed her a bat she'd whack the couch. As Naomi approached the age of team eligibility, my excitement seemed to rise in direct proportion to her lack of enthusiasm. The more I suggested, the more she resisted, until I backed off. I consoled myself: if there were a candidate ripe to mutate into a stage mom forcing her child to accomplish all that had been missed, I was staring at her in the mirror. My pushing her into team sports would only result in disaster: Take one stubborn daughter, an over-interested and frustrated mother, throw them in a pot and watch it explode.

Eventually, urged on by my husband who is from Spain, a promise of junk food snacks at half time, and peer pressure from her gaggle of 5-year-old friends, all of whom played in our city's pee wee league, Naomi did sign up for soccer. From time to time, when she wasn't squatting in the field contemplating blades of grass, she chased the ball. But soccer mornings had been punctuated with shouts of, "I hate soccer. I'm not going." It was, to say the least, far from an auspicious beginning.

My mother, a freelance writer, tried to sell an article, "My Daughter, Jackie Robinson," about my fighting to play in that Friday afternoon game. The story climbed its way up past all the senior female editors at a woman's magazine, until it landed on the desk of the editor-in-chief, a man, who read it, liked it, and then dismissed it: "Who would want to read about girls and sports?"

But on the field, my mother had not stopped even when her friends challenged her: "Are you doing this for Diana, or for you?"

The more they resisted, the angrier my mother got, smoking out the women huddled in the school lobby, pointedly asking them if they would be saying the same things if I were black. And still, they refused to yield. "What if she's not serious? What if other girls wanted to play? Why are you making such a fuss?"

When I called one of those mothers recently, she denied her involvement. "I had a girl too," she said. "It wasn't me. It was the mothers of the boys."

Another mother of three sons, who is still a good family friend, was more forthcoming. "It seems so impossible to understand now," she told me, "but back then the idea of a girl on boys ball team? It simply wasn't in our lexicon."

She paused then, almost as if to apologize, before adding: "Your mother—she was the conscience of that group."

The spring Naomi turned 6 she arrived home from kindergarten one warm March day and threw a form on my lap. "Sign me up," she announced.

"This is baseball," I said. I wasn't sure she understood what she was signing up for.

“I know,” she responded, throwing me that look that 6-year olds reserve for their idiotic parents. “I want to do it. Lowell’s playing.” Lowell was a friend of hers from school with whom every interaction turned into a major competition.

For a fleeting moment I thought perhaps we should discuss it; she’d never even thrown a baseball. But that thought was quickly erased as I realized she might change her mind, so I grabbed a pen and filled out the form.

And then, a few weeks after she’d registered, another surprise: a message on my voicemail informing me that I should be at the managers’ meeting Sunday night for the team drafts.

“There must be a mistake,” I said to the rookie league commissioner when I called back. “I signed up to bring snack.” As required, I had agreed to help the team since Naomi was only six.

“No,” he replied. “There’s no mistake. And we’re short managers, so I can’t accept no for an answer.” Apparently I had checked the wrong box.

“Wait a minute,” I started. “You don’t understand.”

But he cut me off. “Really. I can’t take no. It’s not that hard. Do you play?”

“Well, I used to,” I said.

“All right, then. You know the rules. The other parents will help you out.”

“That’s not the problem,” I began, but he was already dictating directions to his house.

During soccer games the coaches’ children were easily recognizable—they stood in the middle of the field melting down, unable to stand their fathers paying so much attention to other children. “Where’s my water! Daddy, I need you NOW!” I could think of little more that would make Naomi hate the game than to have me unavailable, as well as barking instructions to her.

“You mean you’ll be in charge, like EVERY game? In charge of all of us?” Naomi asked after I hung up the phone.

I nodded, expecting a fit. But she ran and got her glove.

“Let’s go practice. Now!”

Still in a bit of a stupor, I followed her to the backyard where we set up some bases using an old Frisbee for home plate. She ran to the disc and jumped on top looking at me eagerly. I moved behind her, silently edged her feet back, lifted the bat of her shoulder, and wrapped my arms around her to frame a batting stance.

I threw the first pitch and my mouth opened all on its own. “Keep your eye on the ball, don’t look at me.” When she connected on the third try, sending the ball behind the magnolia tree, my anxiety ratcheted down a notch. Maybe, I thought, maybe we can do this.

When the season began I told my mother about how gut-wrenching it was to watch Naomi bat. My mother laughed. “Now you know how I felt.”

“How do you mean?”

“Don’t you remember what finally happened? In first grade?”

The other mothers, tired of being hounded by mine, reached a compromise. They would allow me to play if the boys would agree. My classmates, convinced by my friend Dennis, decided after brief debate that I was not in fact technically a girl, but a tomboy, and therefore eligible. The next Friday afternoon I headed to the field with the boys for team selection. After everyone was picked and headed off to start the game I stood by the pitcher’s mound, waiting.

“Hey, what about her?”

“Who?”

“Diana.”

“You take her.”

“No, you take her. We have too many.”

I stood there until finally someone motioned that I should play left field. Far, far, left field. Eyed through my lens, I viewed this as nothing more than normal first grade behavior. Surveyed through the infinitely more complex prism of motherhood, I imagine now how my own mother must have felt, her heart inured by defense, yet each setback a chisel, chipping away a little piece.

I didn’t come up to bat until the last inning. With two outs and the bases loaded, my team trailed by one. The first pitch came and I swung and missed. On the next pitch I swung and missed again. My mother sat alone at the end of the bleachers chewing her nails.

Baseball is not for the faint of heart, I say to her as we recount this story.

No, she replies, especially if you’re a mother.

The night before Naomi’s first practice, I called a friend who had coached sports for years.

“What do I do? What kind of persona should I take on? Fierce? Friendly?”

I was referring to how comfortable some of the soccer fathers seemed in their skin as they raced around with the children. Inside, I was worrying about how I was going to lead Naomi and her peers through something I’d ached for so badly myself.

“Just be yourself and shower them with praise,” responded my friend warmly. “Accentuate the positive.”

Which, I immediately discovered, required some creative thinking. Naomi and her teammates arrived at the first practice clueless when or where to throw the ball.

“Let’s run the bases,” I said, watching them charge confidently off to first, turn the corner, and head straight across the pitcher’s mound to third. It didn’t take long for the other parents to agree that if we could teach them how an out was made, get them running the base path correctly, and help them have fun, we’d consider ourselves successful.

By the time the season started the children were so excited that positive reinforcement spilled out effortlessly. With high hopes we dubbed the team “Green Magic.” Every time someone made it to first base we had a rousing cheer. Each run scored warranted high fives from the whole team.

I stayed close to the kids, running the bases with them before every game, positioning each batter at the plate, showing them over and over how to dig their toes in, until by the middle of the season the kids began to absorb the mechanics of the game in that osmotic fashion they use to slurp up information. There was Riley, a lanky boy who often couldn’t remember where to throw the ball, fielding a grounder near the pitcher’s mound and galloping home to tag the runner. Zeke, the only lefty on the team finally remembering on his own which side of the plate to stand on. And Naomi, in the last game of the season, lowering her glove for a ground ball and upon finding it there, throwing it to the first baseman, who caught it and got the runner out. I stood with my mouth open, and after clapping vociferously, turned away from the players and the parents and pulled my hat down over my eyes to hide my tears.

At the end of season Naomi asked me how long I would coach.

“Maybe until you’re 18,” I joked. And then more seriously: “I had a great time. What about you?”

She was quiet, but I knew from the way she had followed my every instruction without a peep or protest, the way she charged out of bed Saturday mornings to get dressed in her uniform, the way she had loaded the balls and bats into the car without being asked.

And truthfully, I wasn’t joking either. I’d been arm twisted into the job, but after watching her learn the mechanics of the game and dissect the rules of baseball, it was clear that my stage mom demons were not nearly as fierce as I’d imagined. One season of watching her enjoy herself on the field and I knew I honestly didn’t care whether she played team sports her whole life or not, whether she became a professional athlete. I just wanted her to have what most parents want—the opportunity to play and believe that that anything is possible, such as the afternoon she came home from a game and said, “Mom, I hope someday I can be the Mia Hamm of baseball.”

And, for me, there was this: each time I turned a kid's shoulders at the plate, each time I reminded them to bend their knees, each time I lifted their rear elbow to level their swing, I found my own sadness surfacing, hovering for just a moment, but then quietly dissipating, like the dust in the base path swirling up and away into the outfield.

Naomi likes my first grade baseball story and I like telling it to her, although every time I say, "They used to think girls couldn't do that," I worry what she hears.

What if I say it so many times she starts to believe girls really can't do things?

But now that she understands baseball she wants to hear the story again.

"So what happened after you had two strikes?"

"I fouled off."

"And then what?"

"I fouled off."

"Again?"

"Again. That's baseball."

If this is a bedtime story she's usually half way to sleep by now. But she strains to hear the end.

"How many foul balls?"

"Six."

"And then were you out?" She is laboring her way through the rules. Her league had an eight-strike rule.

"Nope. I hit it."

"A big hit?"

"Nope. A dribble to the short stop."

"And he caught it?"

"Nope. It went right between his legs."

She is quiet, calculating the runs, the outs, the bases.

"So your team won?"

"Yep." I kiss her goodnight and turn out the light. "We won."

Diana Friedman's work has appeared in many journals and magazines, including *Flyway: Journal of Writing and Environment*, *Whole Earth Review*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Newsweek*, *Bethesda Magazine*, *Ithaca Women's Anthology*, and *Legendary*. She has just completed her first novel, a contemporary story of desire, dislocation, and U2 infatuation, set in Washington D.C. and Dublin. She lives outside of Washington D.C. with her family. Visit her at www.dianafriedmanwriter.com.