

An Invitation:

It's that time of year again, the time that Veronica and I, along with a large number of our closest friends (Ruby and Pearl foremost among them) look forward to with warmest anticipation. It's not the U.S. Open, although I am a golf nut. It's not Independence Day, although we are as patriotic as the next guy. Well, maybe not the next guy but surely the guy after him. Nope, none of the above.

What we're getting excited about is the Championships of the Stoopball League of America.

You've never heard of Stoopball? Well pour your favorite beverage, find a comfy chair and put yourself in the mindset of a ten year old. I'll tell you all about it. Don't thank me, it's my pleasure.

Stoopball is the purest form of miniature baseball ever invented. It is on the short list of great street games, a list that includes Stickball, Ring-o-Levio, Double Dutch Jump Rope, Scully and Chinese Handball. It is a game that I grew up with while others, not lucky enough to be city kids, have learned to love.

In big cities east of the Mississippi there was no room for baseball as it is drawn up. There's not enough space except in large parks. So what do you do when you want to play baseball? You set up in front of your front stairs (always cement), the stoop. You put a couple or three kids in the field (the sidewalk and street). You throw a rubber ball against the stoop and if it's caught on a fly, you're out. If it goes this far it's a single, that far it's a double, etc. etc. You can play it at home, in a schoolyard, off a curb, wherever.

Every year around the middle of July a couple of hundred people gather in Clinton, WI to attend and play in the Stoopball Championships. Why, you might ask, Clinton, WI? It's because the Commissioner of the League and his wife moved to Clinton in 1989. They came from Detroit with their daughter (who'll sing Puccini for you) and brought the League with them. Folks have been doing this in Detroit and then Clinton every year for almost thirty years now. There are star players in the League who were babies when it began. There are aging veterans who were young parents when we started it. We started it because we remembered a game from our youth that was pure and fun and quick and satisfying. Nine innings of baseball in thirty minutes or less.

When the Commissioner arrived in Clinton the first thing he did on his acre around an old farmhouse was to install three Stoopball fields. This is how he did it. He bought three prefab cement stoops from Farm and Fleet and had them delivered. He told the guy on the truck to drop one against a fence facing a bean field, another snuggled up to the back of the garage and the third in the middle of the yard facing nowhere. He never told the guy what they were for. The man from Farm and Fleet left thinking the Detrouiter was crazy for sure. No argument here. Then he chalked foul lines stretching to nowhere and installed stadium lights because the championship game was to be played under the lights. The concession stand followed and grandstands and the skybox. After the final game each year there are spectacular fireworks.

You know how some people devote their life to their garden or their novel or their pets? Well, our hosts give it up for Stoopball. Over the course of the three-day event they serve hundreds of meals and thousands of drinks. They provide camping and sanitation for dozens of families. More than a hundred games are played leading up to the finals. And there's a little kids' league running simultaneously just to insure the future of the game. From day one it has been mandatory for all of us grown ups to attend and cheer at the kids' championship. You haven't lived until you've seen the faces of these little ones when they each get introduced to the crowd and receive their commemorative medals. Perfect.

So this July 26th, if you're in the mood for something a little different, tool on down to Clinton, WI. It's near Beloit. Just drive along County X until you see the flags and the tents and the cars and the smiles. That'll be Stoopball.

Bring the kids and an appetite. We'll supply the rest.