

“Dear Ernie”

I know two guys in Chicago who grew up in the fifties and sixties. We'll call them Mikey and Pete. The Mikita twins are Cub fans who lived and died with perfectly dreadful teams and one genius ballplayer.

The year is 1958 and we are in the working class neighborhood known as Berwyn. In 1958 school is a place that you walk to, where you sit up straight and always get called on, especially when you don't know the answer. School is something that takes you away from baseball.

You have a gang that you pal around with. You play ball every daylight minute away from school. You are as tough as you think you are. And you're terrified of girls. Baseball cards come five at a time packed with a pink slab of bubble gum. There are no annual sets, no pre-sorted collections and no EBay. You collect your cards one at a time and the Mickey Mantles, Willie Mays and Stan Musials are almost impossible to come by.

In Berwyn, in 1958, Ernie Banks is all those ballplayers rolled into one. For Mikey and Pete there is one player who stands above all of them. Ernie Banks. When you flipped baseball cards to win more baseball cards you would never risk your Ernie. Your Ernie was your treasure. You could probably get all the Pirates, Phillies and Reds for your one Ernie. You took it out maybe once a week to carefully show it to your awestruck gang.

Billy Presko was a tag-along in the gang that Mikey and Pete put together. Billy is just barely in the club. He's the youngest, slowest and most gullible of the crew. But he's your cousin, so he's in. The thing about Billy is that he's got an Ernie Banks card. He figures he's got a chance to move up in the order a little bit by bringing it to school and showing it off. Everybody wants an Ernie and no one else has one. Oh brother.

When Billy came back from lunch, you guessed it, the card was gone. I don't mean as a joke gone. I don't mean it'll turn up at three o'clock gone. I mean stolen, gone. The poor guy was crushed. Not only had his one chance at coolness crumbled but he was a bigger chump than ever. A fool.

After he moped for a couple of days he announced to the boys that he had come up with a plan to get another Ernie Banks baseball card.

They were sitting in Mikey and Pete's kitchen as Billy read to them a letter he was sending to Ernie.

"Dear Ernie,

The other day my baseball card of you was stolen. I like it very much. I like you very much. I wish I could get another.

Sincerely Yours,  
Billy Presko"

The room went up for grabs. Every one of the guys took a verbal shot at Billy. It was brutal. "Billy, that's the stupidest thing ever." "Yeah, right, Ernie Banks is gonna' give you another card." "Do you think those guys read mail from stupid kids?" "When are you gonna' wise-up Billy?"

He left the kitchen about as red faced as a boy could be. He did, however, mail his letter.

Nine days later Billy received a large manila envelope with a return address that included the words CHICAGO CUBS NATIONAL LEAGUE BASEBALL TEAM. The envelope contained an Ernie Banks baseball card, a signed 8x10 photo of Ernie and a letter from Ernie saying he was sorry to hear about Billy's troubles and he hoped this would help make it better.

Astounding! The gang was dumbstruck. That little goofball actually got all that great stuff from Ernie just by writing a letter.

The next day, in Mikey and Pete's kitchen the gang sat down around the table. Each of the six boys had a clean piece of writing paper and his best fountain pen. Six hands began to write the words that Mikey was dictating to them.

Dear Ernie,  
Thanks a lot for helping Billy Presko. I too have lost....