

April 8

No Game Scheduled

Revenge of the Wart

My neighborhood growing up in the 60s was not dramatically unlike that featured in the movie *The Sandlot*, arguably the greatest movie of all time. The ratio of boys to girls was a statistical anomaly, and we guys reveled in it. We played a pick-up game almost every afternoon from June through August. Almost every character in the movie had a counterpart in our neighborhood. For example, my brother bore an uncanny resemblance to Squints, a fact which his kids love to remind him of today.

Although we were blessed by the fact that we lived next to a city park, the ball field we chose was remarkably similar in dimensions and quality to that on the movie. Nothing special to an outsider, but it was our home field.

Unlike the behemoth dog in *The Sandlot*, our crew had to deal with, “The Wart.” This was the park patrol officer who monitored the park, so-named because of numerous growths on his face. From the time we were old enough to go to the park alone, it seemed like everything we thought was fun somehow drew the disdain of this man. Anytime we were pushing the limits of acceptable behavior, such as standing on the back of a bench swing or hitting balls directly into the backstop, someone would invariably yell, “Here comes the Wart!” just to see how fast everyone could scatter. Over time, anyone associated with park patrol or maintenance came to be known as a Wart.

Like our Sandlot counterparts, we were always hard up for baseballs. Balls purchased at K-Mart may have looked pristine – and we made

every effort to avoid letting them hit the grass during warm-ups – but one solid hit during a game and they would go hopelessly lopsided.

The solution was to scavenge foul balls from Dubuque Packers' games at Petrakis Park. The Packers were the Class A affiliate for the Houston Astros. While the older, more athletic kids could snag a ball or two each week, some of the slower, smaller guys might go an entire summer without claiming one. Needless to say, donating one's first ball to the daily game that had been personally preyed from the tough streets outside Petrakis Park was a proud moment for any young man. It said that he had arrived. It was the equivalent of a new husband putting meat on the table.

My buddy Muck was a late bloomer. It was August before entering 7th grade before he proudly displayed the ball we would be using. There was much debate about the authenticity of the whole event, but the baseball clearly said, "Official Midwest League" and Stoltz vouched that he personally witnessed the magic.

Less than 10 minutes later, in the top of the first inning, Heath hit a screaming line drive to center field which seemed to roll forever...right under the lawn mower being driven by the Wart. Some claimed he swerved to hit it. Everyone knew he smiled.