

Out of Bounds

SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

softball



We were rained out tonight. Frighteningly, I was thrilled for

the showers. I've played organized ball since I was a wee lad of 5. First it was T-ball in a YMCA league in Salina, Kan. Then it was on to the Red Jacket Pump team in third grade in Davenport, Iowa. When I hung up the baseball spikes at 16 — I was bored, despite being a starting outfielder on a great Babe Ruth team and swinging a mean stick — I immediately started playing softball. It's a spring/summer tradition that is getting awfully close to two decades now.

Honestly, I can't ever remember wishing, really pleading and begging for a washout, for the notion goes against the ethos of the game and my own approach to athletics. The question, of course, is why I wanted it this time.

What brings a boy, who still remembers getting K'd at 13 on three straight pitches from a kid (Pat Meares) who went on to a decent Major League career, to demand precipitation on a Tuesday night in April?

Practical reasons, abound, of course. As a teacher, I'm thoroughly exhausted at this time in the school year. There are stacks of high school and college papers to grade, and

IT'S TIME TO TAKE A HEALTHIER APPROACH TO MY FAVORITE

SUMMER PASTIME — NOW THAT I'M OLDER **BY MARK LUCE**

there's never enough time to spend with my family. Also, my left hamstring still gives me trouble.

But no matter how much I tell myself those things, the real reason is much simpler. In our inaugural game of the season the previous week, I took an O-fer at the plate for the night — inexcusable for a longtime leadoff man — and got run around the outfield like a rookie. That game, more than any I've ever played, made me nervous.

I've played every position but pitcher on my long-time team, The Pigs, and I play hard and smart regardless of the score. The individual challenge of playing well, however, seems to be taking a back seat to the camaraderie of the dugout and the laughs over post-game refreshments in the parking lot.

Former pro athletes often grow angry and despondent after they leave the game, their importance diminished along with their physical skills. Obviously, I don't worry about the former, but the latter begins to gnaw at the brain.

I look at our first-baseman, a wily 57-year-old English professor, and wonder how he does it every year.

Mike was an amazing fast-pitch player, and now he toils with guys 30 to 40 years younger without any self-consciousness at all. He's made a pact with himself that he'll be out there as long as he's having fun, doesn't embarrass himself and can still actually move. He understands, though, that any season could be his last.

It's that recognition, perhaps, that I struggle with — that someday I won't play softball anymore. Once you quit just playing on instinct and start wondering whether you still have it, your game is doomed. And the rains won't come when you ask.

Maybe admitting my desire to be rained out is the first step toward a more healthy approach. I need to remember that softball is fun and recognize that when I can't play anymore, I can't play anymore. When that comes — hopefully, later rather than sooner — I will have fond, fun and friendly memories of a game that has served me well for many moons.

Mark Luce is a freelance writer based in Kansas City, Mo., where he leads off for The Pigs, arguably the most academically advanced team in their league.

PHOTODISC

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