

# opening day

I should have been in Shakespeare class. Instead, I was parked in the sun in between my dear friends Mike and Paul. We swigged beer, gorged down hot dogs and cracked peanuts that afternoon in the Kaufman Stadium bleachers.

My beloved and soon-to-be-really-bad Royals were battling the Oakland Athletics that April afternoon. Despite all-around superman George Brett in the lineup, the home team took it on the chin, 6-1.

While I would have preferred the win, it was the participation in opening day — granted, a home opener — that gave the day more magic than just another trip to the ballpark. From the slight chill in the air, the sea of blue jerseys and seeing Kaufman Stadium full of 39,428 folks, everything screamed community and fun.

There might be no better first day in all of sports. In 15 cities around the country, stadiums take in streams of fans who still believe there's a hope — no matter how remote — that in six months and 161 games their teams will be in the playoffs.

As a Royals fan, of course, that playoff drought has lasted almost 23 years now, with little relief in sight. However, that has never kept me from the ballpark; unfortunately, being a teacher makes it a little harder to play



hookey on opening day. As a kindred spirit, though, I always turn a blind eye toward the inevitable student absences on that afternoon.

There's nothing quite so distinctly American than the implicit promise of a first day. Nothing's gone wrong yet. The lines are still crisp, the field's manicured, the uniforms pressed, the bats not broken and the goat's horns not yet given. Of course, all of these things will be marred in the process of a season, but on that singular day, hope springs seemingly eternal.

It sprang eternal for Teddy Baseball Williams, the best hitter ever. He not only got a hit in every single opening day game, but batted a whopping .449 on first days.

It sprang eternal for Bob Feller, a man I once had the pleasure of meeting in Cooperstown, who twirled a no-hitter on opening day in 1940.

It sprang eternal for Hammerin' Hank, who tied Babe Ruth's home

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OF A NEW DAY LIKE THE  
BEGINNING OF A SEASON

BY MARK LUCE

run record on opening day in 1974. And, even more impressively, Aaron did it on the first pitch he saw.

But nothing speaks more to me than the correcting of baseball's biggest sin — the institutional racism that stained the game for its first 70 years. On the afternoon of April 15, 1947, Jackie Robinson took the field for the Brooklyn Dodgers, and to me, simultaneously moved civil rights to the forefront of American consciousness.

Now, of course, the game has been rocked with the fallout from the steroid era, as the two most dominant players of the last 15 years — Roger Clemens and Barry Bonds — take on new reputations as fallen heroes. While those off-the-field exploits taste bitter, baseball will survive. And on opening day, that implicit promise will return — even for a Royals fan.

*Mark Luce lives in Kansas City, Mo., where he still hasn't met George Brett.*

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