

If you can't win, losing is next best thing

I got to play local sports reporter last week because Steve LeBlanc was on holidays.

It's a bit of a slow time at the moment because we're between sports.

Hockey is finished for another year, baseball is just barely getting starting up and it's not a heavy time for high school sports. The Merchants are close to announcing a new head coach, but as of this writing, that hadn't been finalized.

In other words, it gives me the opportunity to blabber on about whatever I feel like.

For some reason that got me thinking about losers and losing.

I have no idea why, except my daughter is trying out again for her high school softball team, which lost every single game last year.

Worse than that, she played on a rep team out of town that lost every single game.

Even worse than that, I was the coach.

Mind you, the whole team except for two players were all at the youngest of the age level, so they will be much better this year. Plus, we lost about six games by one run.

In one game, we only had seven players, so we had to forfeit. We played an exhibition contest anyway, and hammered them something like 24-3. Figures.

It wasn't much of a rep team anyway, considering everybody who tried out made it so that we would have enough players.

One girl in particular was not very experienced or athletically inclined. But she was a gamer and worked hard in practice.

Her fielding improved tremendously throughout the year, but we got to the last game of the season and she still hadn't got a hit.

Before the game, I took her aside and pitched some balls to her. "Today, for sure you're going to get a hit," I said to her.

"That's what you said to me the last seven games," she complained.

"This time, I really mean it," I replied.

Her first two times up she struck out. Then she was left with likely one final appearance at the plate.

I called time when she stepped into the batter's box and walked down the line from third base to speak to her.

"You're going to do it now, right?"

She shrugged. "That's not good enough," I said. "You have to



Out in left field

with MURRAY TOWNSEND

believe you're going to get a hit."

The first pitch — strike one.

The second pitch — strike two.

The third pitch — she absolutely smacked it.

It was a line drive way over the shortstop's head and into left field.

I forgot all about the runners coming around third and made sure she landed safely at first base.

When she got there and the ball was dead, she jumped up and down with her arms in the air.

Kind of made all the losing worthwhile for a moment.

Just between you and me, I never minded losing when I played. And I played on a lot of bad teams.

When I was minor midget age, I played up a year on a midget team in the MTHL.

We lost almost every game, but had a lot of fun doing it. Something about losers bonding, I think.

As soon as the coach finished yelling at us after every game, and left the room, we'd laugh and make jokes. Nobody was ever in a hurry to leave.

But the next year, I stayed on the team and the minor midgets moved up.

We won almost every game, including the MTHL championship. It wasn't nearly as much fun, though.

There was a lot of pressure and if we even cracked a smile after a loss we were up in the stands for the next game.

I also played on a men's hockey team that lost every game for six years straight.

We had a couple former pros and some former Junior A hockey

players, so we should have been decent.

Not one person in that dressing room minded, though, because we had such a great time.

Then one year, we decided to go in a tournament, at the top level of men's hockey in Toronto.

We sort of decided as a group that we would play for keeps, since there was money that went to the winning team.

It was amazing.

All of a sudden we started winning. We romped through the round robin, even beating teams from our own league that we had never come close to before.

The goaltender, who had never met a puck that couldn't get by him before, all of a sudden was playing as if he was Dominik Hasek's tutor.

But, as we prepared for the semi-finals and then the championship game, you could see the change in the guys.

There were few jokes, tempers were short, and you could feel the pressure in the dressing room.

It wasn't nearly as much fun.

We lost a heartbreaker in overtime in the finals.

Then we spent the next three years losing every game and talking about how we could probably win if we played like we did in that tournament again.

I played on some brutal ball teams, too, especially in my early twenties.

The Beaches in Toronto was the greatest place to play fastball because it was such a perfect setting, tucked in among the park land near the boardwalk, with huge trees all around.

On a summer evening you would get the breeze off the lake, the stands would fill up with passersby and we got our names announced on the loudspeaker when we came up to bat, which I thought was more than cool.

It was pretty serious ball, though, and I was probably the only player on the team who didn't care that we lost every game for three years straight. That ballpark was heaven as far as I was concerned.

I'm not sure the point I'm trying to make with these stories. It would be kind of ridiculous to advocate losing, but in my experience losing was a lot of fun.

Let's just say that if you can't win, losing is the next best thing.

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