

Opinion

Who misses baseball? Those of us who spent summers kicking dirt | Opinion

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Willie Mays of the San Francisco Giants connects for his 600th home run on Sept. 23, 1969, in San Diego. AP

By Express-Times guest columnist

By Carl Golden

Normally, by this time of year, I'll have watched six weeks of Major League Baseball, identified the pennant contenders and looked forward to a warm summer witnessing America's game.

Today the stadiums stand silent and empty, the grass a brilliant green, the infield dirt smooth and flawless. And sadly, it seems, all will remain untrammelled indefinitely, denied their rightful April-to-October place in American life by a deadly virus.

There is hope for an abbreviated season, perhaps starting in July, with a limited number or no fans in the seats. Those desperately struggling to salvage the season have my respect, but this is not a game meant to be played in eerie silence.

For me, growing up in Easton in the 1950s meant playing baseball all day, every day from the end of school in early June to late August.

Mays walked in his first at bat, stole second, stole third and scored on a sacrifice fly. Giants 1, Phils nothing — without a hit.

His brilliance over a 22-year career, including two years with the hapless New York Mets, was undeniable.

He is remembered, though, for one afternoon — Sept. 29, 1954 at the Polo Grounds in New York — the opening game of the World Series versus the Cleveland Indians.

In the eighth inning, Indians first baseman Vic Wertz drove a towering fly ball into the farthest reaches of dead center field. Mays, his back to the infield, sprinted full tilt toward the outfield wall, reached at the last minute and made an over-the-shoulder catch. The image of that moment has been reproduced millions of times and preserved on film. For 66 years it has simply been referred to as "The Catch."

I kept a newspaper clipping of that photo for years until it yellowed beyond recognition and crumbled into newsprint dust.

A few years ago I received a package from my son who was living in San Francisco. It contained a baseball jersey with "GIANTS" emblazoned across the chest, the number "24" in mid-back and "MAYS" across the shoulders.

It was my "Field of Dreams" moment.

I wear it occasionally, but each time I hold it up on its hanger, I see not a baseball jersey, but a young athlete whose sheer exuberance and breathtaking talent captured and enthralled an era.

I also see a rag-tag group of kids on a dusty field in Easton in the heat of summer, engaged in what someone once called “a little boys game played by grown men.”

The prospect of its disappearance, even for one year, is interminably sad.

Carl Golden, born and raised in Easton, is a senior contributing analyst with the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Stockton University. He lives in Burlington, N.J.

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