

Do Your Talking With Your Bat

Baseball & Dads
The lessons we learned



GREG MALACANE

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About the Author

ONE



It's a Beautiful Day for a Ballgame—Let's Play Two

Mangia bene, ridi spesso, ama molto.
("Eat well, laugh often, love much.")

ANGELINE CASH (MY NANA)

Playing baseball is all I ever wanted to do. I wanted to eat, sleep, and drink baseball. Dream baseball. Collect baseball cards, wear my baseball hat, absorb the box scores, watch baseball on TV—but most of all, play the game of baseball.

I would head to "The Field" and play as though my life depended on it. Three-on-three, call your field, two foul balls, and you were out. When there were just two of us, we would hit flies or grounders to each other, practicing the throw to first or doubling a runner off second base. With a fungo bat, I could place pop-ups wherever I wanted to. I could hit a little stone so far that it landed in Lake Erie or smashed Mr. What's His Name's living room window. On rainy days, I was miserable.

When there weren't enough guys to have a game on the diamond, Doug, my best friend from grade school, and I would play against The Field's main backstop. It was perfect, with its wired sections equally placed for singles, doubles, and triples. It was a home run when you hit a pitch between the upper section and the single wire connecting the backstop's three poles. Everywhere else was an out. And when you caught a hit in the air or off the fence, it also was an out.

The two of us would play until the other guys showed up for a real game. Doug's favorite Major League team was the Tigers, and mine, of

course, was the Indians. We announced the lineups and had to change from the right- to the left-handed batter's box depending on who was hitting. Playing against the fence taught me how to choke up and handle a bat, trying to hit the ball where I wanted it to go . . . at least sometimes.

From Wiffle ball to Little League, then Babe Ruth leagues, high school, and town-team competition, baseball was the center of my life in the summer. I played baseball in college, and after graduation, I joined a team wherever I lived. When life got serious, and first base seemed so far away, I put my game on the shelf and treasured the scrapbook memories Mom kept organized for posterity and my grandkids. There was a baseball God I didn't want to disturb. I was grateful to have had the opportunity to play this great game. After cleaning my spikes, oiling my glove one last time, and still wondering who I'd get in a pack of baseball cards, I leaned on the Indians for my baseball fix.

Growing Up

I grew up in western New York, in a town near the Pennsylvania border and close to the shores of Lake Erie. It had its own exit off Highway 90—if you turned right, you went to the other, less worldly Barcelona on the lake, and a left took you into my town, Westfield. Every kid should have the experience I had growing up there. I learned all those life lessons that seem optional today—respect for grown-ups, attending school to learn and be challenged, getting a well-rounded education, going to church on Sundays, and loving my immediate and extended families. My microscope had one lens, and it never let me stray from these principles. I owned up to my mistakes, even if my parents forced me to. I learned the hard way, knowing everything I did, good or bad, reflected on my family and friends.

My dad had followed his older brother, my Uncle Jim, who made his way to my hometown and married one of my two Aunt Graces. Uncle Jim's Grace was from another Italian family in my hometown. They lived in a big house with three apartments, one of which my family occupied before Dad bought a home on the other side of Main Street close to The Field. On the back of the house was a screened-in patio with a TV, several sofas, and an outside pop machine filled with Cokes and 7-UPs. The bottles were stacked on top of one another, and a quarter would move one bottle into the slot,

where you'd pull it out of its metal sleeve. You could pop the cap on the opener next to where you inserted your change. There was always a bowl of quarters nearby.

The upholstery on the main floor where Aunt Grace's parents lived was covered with thick plastic, Italian style, as clean as the day they bought it. I stuck to the plastic even on cold days. Stuck or not, I'd still get scolded for sitting on the furniture. I was supposed to stand up and not say a word, and when I was good, I'd get a biscotti or an Italian Lemon Drop cookie, maybe a chocolate chip cookie, or any cookie with icing that I could easily dunk in a glass of milk. I was always on my best behavior. Cookies have earned a place at the top of my nutritional pyramid.

Dad met Mom at Uncle Jim's wedding. Mom and Aunt Grace grew up together and were long-time school friends, living on opposite sides of the VFW parking lot. That Aunt Grace also knew my other Aunt Grace, my mom's sister.

The Locker Building was next door. Later in life, that building became my Uncle Tony's business location, where he operated a barber shop, bargain outlet, storage facility and practiced men's hairstyles on me. Afterward, I would run home before anyone could see me and wash my hair as quickly as possible. He gave me my first haircut while I sat on my nana's basement steps facing rows of canned tomatoes, cherries, and peaches. He'd wink at my mom, click his clippers and comb, and smile as he gave me free mohawks and brush cuts that would make her cry.

Dad and Uncle Jim grew up in the Pittsburgh area. As kids, they lived in many places, sometimes together and sometimes separated. I don't remember seeing Uncle Jim very much when I was growing up. He stayed in Pittsburgh. I saw my cousins during the summer when they would return to escape the city. We would end up chilling in their grandparents' screened-in patio, hydrating on 7-UPs and Cokes.

The Four Seasons

I grew up with an intimate awareness of the four seasons. Spring was cold and wet, forcing baseball practice indoors in the school gym—no batting practice, but lots of fielding and throwing drills. The weather was good for the acres and acres of grapes surrounding our town and the entire

countryside. Summer was short but beautiful, with barely any need for air conditioning. We could open the windows and feel the evening breeze through the screens. That worked until the annual rumors of Peeping Toms roaming the neighborhoods made it into the newspapers. Dad eventually broke down and bought an air conditioner for the living room window. For those two weeks, we were a close family.

As summer progressed, fresh corn on the cob was a dollar and change for a baker's dozen. Mom sent us to the trucks parked just outside of town to get the biggest and freshest ears, or we headed to the fields to pick our own. When I was older and my mom's sister, Grace, would visit, I'd get two dozen ears to make sure we all had enough to enjoy. Lathered with real butter and salt, there were never any leftovers. That would be our entire dinner. On most summer nights, we would eat on the patio in what we referred to as the Cool house, screened in to avoid the bugs but enjoy the summer evenings.

I played baseball each summer whenever possible. The rest of the time was filled with fast-pitch softball. Our town had two teams in the local league that renewed rivalries each summer. These were good and sometimes intense rivalries. My neighbor became a pretty good pitcher for the other town team. Even though he had never played many sports, he could pump an underarm fastball with a riser, which was tough to get any part of my metal bat on. We had some great matchups—victories for him when he got me out, and for me when I got the metal barrel of the bat on one of those risers. These smalltown summer competitions were meant to be fun, and the winner would never let the other team live it down—softball on Saturday, baseball on Sunday between Mass and pasta, and the losers bought the pitchers of cheap beer.

Our town would be lucky to have good weather before the beginning of May. The lake effect was brutal. When summer finally arrived, it was game on. Box scores, baseball on the radio, the Saturday TV Game of the Week, and every now and then, the Home Run Derby. We studied the sports page, scanning for tidbits of info and small facts that would seem useless to the uninformed. Scores from the West Coast would always be late, and catching up on what had happened was agonizing. Dad rooted for the New York Giants and followed them to Candlestick Park when they relocated to San Francisco and became the San Francisco Giants. We'd buy the Cleveland or Pittsburgh morning newspaper, hoping to get just one more morsel of

information about the Say-Hey Kid, Willie Mac, and, more importantly, Rocky and Daddy Wags. There was no internet back then, and that was a good thing. It kept us talking, wondering, and hoping. Who led the league in home runs and wins, and would the Indians make up the twelve games they always seemed to trail the American League leaders by?

I'd get my dad to play catch with me and my brother, Mark, whenever I could. He started teaching us the game when we were barely old enough to say, "Say Hey, Willie Mays." I could tell Dad loved the game. He taught us before T-ball existed or indoor batting cages were a thing. My brother and I would hit Wiffle balls in the living room, knocking pictures off the wall, and then get yelled at and chased outside. We'd go to the side yard to practice our eye-to-hand contact, swinging from our heels to hit that ball screaming into the air and over the telephone lines. I'd wrap a sticky line of black electrical tape around the center of the ball to practice curveballs and screwballs, making the ball move in and out—and sometimes at my brother's head.

Fall arrived with chilly days, and the smell of raked leaves burning by the side of the street filled the air. Storm windows went up, and I drained the oil from the lawn mower. It also marked the beginning of the high school football season. Our school was not the powerhouse we should have been, but we held our own against the local rivals. Our town was all-in when it came to supporting the team and attending the games under the lights on Friday nights.

Fall was the start of the pressing season for the hundreds of acres of grapes surrounding our town. The farmers would line up with their trucks packed high with crates, ready for the juice to be squeezed from the vine, ready for Welch Foods products.

Concord grapes were plentiful, and most of those grapes were harvested. You could smell the fragrance of freshly pressed grapes for miles. Over the years, other varieties have been grown, and many wineries have sprung up. Weekend tastings are common during the summer, keeping tourists stocked with the bounty from the vines.

Farms dotted the landscape. I had many opportunities to get out in the fresh air for a good day of sweaty work in the hay fields or grape vineyards. My friends and I would crisscross those fields, stacking hay bales on flatbed trucks until they reached the tipping point. Then we'd unload the stacks,

pyramiding them to reach the highest barn rafters, interlocking the bales to keep them from caving in. It was hard, physical work, but so satisfying.

I did my share of working in the vineyards with many of those same friends. We picked the grapes by hand before the mechanical pickers automated the process. After the harvest, I learned to trim the vines to encourage the best growth as fall turned into winter. We would pull away the trimmed vine brush and line the rows between the vines to be mulched for the next season's growth. We'd wash down sandwiches, cookies, and maybe a fried pie with Mountain Dew at lunch. There was no calorie counting or trading Mom's cookies. Then we'd meet up to share a twelve-pack after a shower.

Winter was a bone-chilling slap in the face. The sting didn't leave for months. The wind tunneled through all my jackets, sweaters, gloves, and other layers of clothing. The sun left for Florida, Texas, or California, while we hunkered down to hibernate and count the days, waiting not so patiently for its return.

Nothing is prettier than a beautiful snowfall, soft white flakes that fell quietly, constantly, covering everything. When there was no wind, you could hear the gentle settling, knowing someone like me would have to get to work, shoveling sidewalks and driveways and chiseling away at two-inch-thick ice. Schools stayed open when they should have been closed. I swung our worn-out shovel like a baseball bat, loosening up and keeping warm while moving mountains of wet snow so we could walk on the sidewalk next to our house and hopefully get the car to start.

For real, I walked a mile to school in the snow. The roads were sometimes covered in white, sometimes just sloppy slush, which froze my toes and made my boots twice as heavy. Okay, it did build the character you don't like to hear people brag about.

When I expected a ride to school, Dad would say, "Gregory, get your boots on, grab your coat, scarf, gloves, boots, earmuffs, hat, hand warmers, and anything else to stay warm, and let's go, or you will be late." We would walk together to the end of our street and part ways. He would go left and head to his office building in town, and I would go right in the direction of Vine City Dairy, the cemetery, the hospital, and finally, to the school. On the way, I'd see the town coming alive with streams of kids walking, school buses, and semis blowing snow in our faces as they motored by. School was

canceled only when the snowplows couldn't clear the roads, and that rarely happened. After school, many of us would wait for those semis to come by and pelt them with snowballs. We'd scatter when a driver chose to skid to a stop, jump out of his cab, and chase us. They'd get pummeled with snowballs, too, which, of course, made them really mad.

Surrounded by Family

My maternal grandparents immigrated through Ellis Island in the early 1900s. My mom's family was second-generation Italian, born to my grandmother, whom I knew well, and my grandpa, whom I never knew. He was a shoemaker and played the mandolin; I knew from photographs that he was short, tough-looking, with a mustache as dark as the thick bristles on a horsehair paintbrush.

Several of his friends and his sons played musical instruments, including the guitar, mandolin, bass, and organ. If I was lucky, I could listen to the Tarantella jam sessions. Mom loved to sing along, as did all my aunts. It was even better with the homemade plum, cherry, or grape vino (wine) that gave us all hangovers and stomachaches.

Every place I needed to get to in our hometown was within walking distance. Nana lived by herself on the other side of the main street. It was an easy walk from our house to hers. When she wasn't sitting in her easy chair looking out the window, she was watching the soap operas on TV, pulling weeds in her garden, or stirring something delicious on the kitchen stove.

After Sunday Mass, my family would join uncles, aunts, and cousins at Nana's house. The dining-room table would be extended for the adults, while a card table and folding chairs would be set up for the kids. That big Italian food fest was as close to heaven as I knew as a little kid. I would volunteer to taste the sauce and make sure the pasta was al dente. The water stains on the ceiling were reminders that the linguini was ready.

In the summer, Nana kept a pitcher of iced tea in the refrigerator, sweetened to perfection with sugar and lemon. It was our Italian Gatorade.

Flattened paper bags were always lying on top of the freezer, ready to soak up the oil from fried chicken, breaded melanzane (eggplant), cardoons (burdocks), or an excellent resting place for cuccidati (Sicilian fig cookies)

or melt-in-your-mouth chocolate chip cookies with a smooth topping of white or chocolate icing. Nana also baked bread all the time. She would hold a warm loaf to her chest like a baby and cut big, generous slices from the bottom of the loaf.

Our Italian family came from humble beginnings. Our family members have filled many important roles in life, raising families that have spread across the country. We have populated small towns and large cities in both warm and cold climates. As our families have grown, it's led to a mixture of cultures and religions. We love our country yet we aren't afraid to challenge right and wrong. We are free to do so, some of us more vocally than others. I can't forget that I was raised by men and women who overcame hardship, experienced discrimination, prayed for a brighter future, and shared their love with all of us. I've accepted their gift gratefully, and I am stronger for it. They created a path, and I followed it.

Many of my uncles were veterans. Only one of them, Uncle Bill, shared stories with us later in life. He was a bombardier in World War II, was shot down over Germany, and spent the rest of the war in a prison camp. He told us about his dutiful attempts to escape. Later in life, he attended his unit's reunions, sharing the memories he and his brothers had lived together.

For a time, we lived in the Netherlands, and Uncle Bill and Aunt Grace visited us. We took several weekend trips, including to the American Veterans' Cemetery near Maastricht. It was an emotional moment for everyone. I watched him walk alone among the manicured rows of crosses. He walked with his hands behind his back, taking his time. I could feel his heart. His distant look followed his memories of a time that had been put in a box.

My other uncles were good men. Serving our country is just that they did, and they provided the gift of freedom by their example. That translated into family dinners, birthday celebrations, reunions, and an abundance of love. Their legacy is the reassurance of my roots and who I am today. They were always there when I needed them. I remember their framed portraits, caps cocked to one side—handsome, young men who did what they had to do. They pushed me to do good.

My paternal grandmother passed away shortly after my dad was born. She died from the stress of life, too many kids, and not having a whole lot of anything else. I knew most of my Dad's three brothers and two sisters,

but not all of them. One day, when I was a little kid, we visited an uncle and aunt and their family who lived in a small town a short drive away. This brother of my dad had been sent to live with another family early in life, and Dad never knew him. All of Dad's siblings were thrown into life and had to make the best of it. None of them had it easy.

My dad's father, Grandpap Joe, was an immigrant who barely spoke English. When he visited us, he would sleep on the rollout sofa in my brother's bedroom. Those visits came like clockwork before the start of the grape-picking season. He loved our town and staying with us, even though we had to put up with his beer breath after a trip to Calarco's and bristly mustache hugs and kisses. He loved Mom's cooking, and she enjoyed taking care of him. He was from Austria and worked as a coal miner when his family lived in Pennsylvania. He would migrate from Florida, stopping in Pittsburgh to visit relatives, drink with his friends, and play Bocce ball while he chewed on the stogie shoved into the side of his mouth. He came to make extra money for whatever he did in the Sunshine State.

Grandpap would babysit my brother and me when Mom and Dad had a night out. He would send us to bed early and threatened to spank us if we weren't quiet. I never really understood what he said, but it was a mouthful of words that made my eyes water. He snored like the air being let out of a balloon; it was a loud, fluttering sound. The neighbors could have heard him if the windows were open. He would leave his glass eye staring at us from the bathroom sink next to his teeth, soaking in a cup I used to drink water from.

I'm not sure how Dad and Grandpap communicated. There seemed to be a father-son loyalty, or maybe it was a loving obligation. Dad and his siblings were always there for Grandpap, though. Writing letters never happened, and phone calls were expensive. Dad somehow seemed to know about him, where he was, and when he'd be coming north.

He lived in Florida, and that's about all I knew. I have this image of an overworked man with too many kids and not enough of anything, including money—a tough life. He couldn't afford all those kids. Often, the children found themselves in and out of foster care and generally on their own.

There is so much more to this story. Dad would give us glimpses of his life from time to time. He would tell stories of how his brothers and sisters would put nets in the trees around their home to snag pigeons and other

birds to eat. Or how Grandpap would stand in front of the stove with an apron on, making a big pot of polenta the Italian way. A kettle of sauce would cook slowly next to it with those unfortunate, featherless birds caught in the net. When he would visit us, I remember him at the stove stirring polenta slowly until it was thick enough to flip the pot over and let the polenta form on one of Mom's fancy dishes. He would use a piece of string to cut big slices for all of us. I can't say it was my favorite dinner, but Mom would make her sauce with meatballs, not birds, and we would choke it down with a fake smile.

My Aunt Lucy became the matriarch of the family. She was a beautiful gift to us. I'm not sure how old she was when Dad's mother died, but she kept the brothers and sisters together despite the challenges they endured. Dad loved all of them, even the brothers he never seemed to get along with later in life.

After Dad finished high school, he worked on the railroad before marrying my mom and settling into a career at Welch Foods, earning his way up the ladder. He knew the value of working hard and keeping a family together under the harshest circumstances, and he instilled that in me. Whenever we went to birthday parties, holiday dinners, or just visited friends or relatives, we went as a family—even when Mom forced him to go. Sometimes, it is more of an obligation or duty for the right reasons. Dad always seemed to do the right thing. He wanted us to know who we were without explaining it to us all the time.

By the time I was born in 1953, Dad had settled into life in our small town, the outcast "Austrian" welcomed into my mom's big Italian family, even though he had trouble adjusting to all the hugging, teasing, and cheek-pinching that came along with it.

Most of our relatives weren't interested in sports, at least not like we were. They had a hard time understanding why Dad always left parties or get-togethers early to watch or listen to a game. It was his escape; small talk was never his thing until later in life when he hung out with his other senior citizen friends. Either way, Mom would get mad and send me home to check on him, and there he would be, sound asleep on the living room carpet, listening to a ball game on the radio. The crackling static made the game barely audible, but I always knew the score. I would lie down next to him, careful not to disturb his snoring, listening as best I could.

When springtime came, it was time to oil my baseball glove and get the handles of my favorite bats taped and ready for play. The cracked bats from the season before would sit in the corner of the garage, waiting to get back in action. A couple of small nails with some sturdy electrical tape, and a few solid whacks on the garage floor, and they were as good as new.

Spring was also the time for other Italian seasonal traditions. Dad would wake me up early on Saturday morning to go with him and Nana to hunt for cardoons and for magnasia (a green plant like rapini). After loading the car with the right tools, we'd pick up Nana, who always was waiting patiently with a big smile. She would look at me and nod her head, knowing I didn't want to go but letting me know that this was a character-building experience. Back then, I didn't even know or care what that meant. Then off we'd go to the edge of town to find the hidden-away places close to creeks and near the vineyards that were home to these delicacies. If we didn't get to them first, the other Italians would get the best plants. Nana wouldn't stand for that. For some reason, cardoon plants loved to grow away from the usual places that were easy to find. They hid between the other weeds and bushes. You had to bend over, pick the bush just right, dig deep to find the root, and cut the plant just below the stalk. Nana would wrinkle her nose and frown at me when I would pull too hard and tear off the stems. Then she'd say something under her breath in Italian. All that bending over—I think that's when my back problems started.

Magnasia grew in the grape orchards. You had to get them before they flowered and got tough and too bitter to eat. They were so good when picked at the right time. Nana knew when they were ready. She liked to cook them in olive oil and stir in some eggs to make a frittata. She would place a piece between two slices of fresh bread, a bit of Miracle Whip, and maybe some of her hot pepper spread, and say *mangiare, mangiare* (eat, eat).

Mom would be back home waiting for us to bring the cardoons and magnasia. Pots of water were on the stove, simmering in anticipation and ready to boil. Homemade breadcrumbs were seasoned and fresh. Boil, dip, bread, fry, and savor. We breaded and fried everything. The burdocks were delicious, hot out of the fryer and resting on those paper bags that soaked up the excess olive oil. I couldn't wait and would grab a crispy strand, hold it high, and let it drop slowly into my mouth, curling up around my tongue. We bagged or shared what we didn't eat with the neighbors and put the rest

of those delicious goodies in the freezer, next to the homemade ravioli, Uncle Carl's sausage, and the Italian cookies, which we never ran out of. When oil and breadcrumbs were left, we'd empty the refrigerator produce drawers and fry carrots and peppers until they were crispy.

I was blessed to have grown up in my hometown. I made lifelong friends, and I still see some of my classmates at the summer Ox Roast or periodic reunions, and these have taken on new meaning as some of us don't return to Westfield very often. I'm sure age does it to you, but it's fun to stay in touch and be reminded of our school years. None of us knew where we were going in life when we were called out of class to meet with the guidance counselor. Some of us had more direction than others, but we all had the unique experience of growing up where we did.

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