

How the Minnesota Twins Made the Spin of the Ball, and the World, Make Sense

Featured, Sports — By [Dr. Dean Nelson](#) on October 9, 2009 at 12:00 pm



Watching 54,000 people inflate the Metrodome with their cheering Tuesday while their Minnesota Twins won a one-game playoff in the bottom of the 12th inning, made me consider several things about baseball. Most of them involved memories.

I remember going to games at the old Metropolitan Stadium in Bloomington, when the Twins used to play outdoors, and snowplows had to remove the snow from the outfield warning track before the game could begin. The Twins are moving back outside next season after more than 20 years of the

indoor experiment with regulated weather. I grew up watching guys like Harmon Killebrew, Bob Allison, Zoilo Versalles, Cesar Tovar, Tony Oliva, Earl Battey and Jim Kaat. I met a couple of them through Little League events. I remember sitting in the right field bleachers as a kid, next to my Sunday School teacher, and as Jimmy Hall stepped into the batter's box my teacher said, "He's going to hit a home run right here." That's exactly what Jimmy Hall did on the next pitch, right to my teacher who stood and caught it with his bare hands. I paid much closer attention in Sunday School after that.

I remember watching Jim Bouton pitch for the Yankees against the Twins, and he threw so hard that his hat always fell off. Then when Bouton wrote the book *Ball Four*, I read it as if it were the Dead Sea Scrolls. Decades later my mom met him and got him to call me on my 40th birthday. I didn't really believe it was him for a while. But it was. I've since brought him out to San Diego and interviewed him for our Writer's Symposium. Cool guy. Great book. My parents claim that the only book I read in all of high school was *Ball Four*. Not true. I'm sure there was another one, too.

There is something about baseball that is different from other sports. The great sportswriter George Plimpton said that the essence of baseball (other than trying to hit one round object with another round object) was that it was a series of one-on-one incidents, where one player tries to induce another to make a mistake. A pitcher tries to get a batter to swing at a pitch outside the strike zone. A batter tries to get a pitcher to leave the pitch over the plate. If the ball is hit, then it's a very brief issue between the batter and the fielder, one hoping the other makes a slight mistake — either in judgment or practice. I interviewed Plimpton, too, and you can see that interview on my website www.deannelson.net under the INTERVIEWS tab. Oh yeah — *that's* the other book I read in high school. Plimpton's book *Paper Lion* was brilliant. It was about his time as a participant/journalist in the Detroit Lions football training camp. It inspired me years later to do the same thing with my college alma mater for a magazine 10 years after I graduated, and practice with their intercollegiate football team as they prepared for their homecoming

game. I got to hold the ball on an extra point attempt. Ball sailed right through my hands, and I got crushed. All that practice.... I was a Paper Pioneer.

When the Minnesota Twins went to the World Series in 1987 against the St. Louis Cardinals, I had moved to San Diego, but my parents still lived in Minneapolis, and my dad got tickets for the opening game. I had just won a local journalism prize that had some money attached to it, and my dad said, "If you're crazy enough to fly out here the game, you can have my tickets." I found a flight that went from San Diego to Kansas City to Chicago to Minneapolis on Saturday morning, and took my five-month-old son with me. Other than my mashing his head into the luggage rack on the first leg of the flight, it went okay. We got to Minneapolis, I handed baby Blake off to my parents at the airport, and my brother and I went to the game. Dan Gladden hit a grand slam home run into the seats right below us, and won the game. Next morning, Blake and I flew from Minneapolis to Chicago to Kansas City to San Diego. Did I mention that this was also a year for Halley's Comet?

A couple of years ago, my brothers and I asked my mom what she wanted to do for her 80th birthday. She said she wanted all of us to go to Cooperstown to the Baseball Hall of Fame. So we rented a house outside Cooperstown for a few days and had a happy birthday. At every exhibit, I heard grandparents and parents telling sons and daughters and grandchildren about seeing the events that prompted those cleats to be in that glass case, or that bat to be on display. It wasn't just baseball memorabilia in that Hall — the objects re-ignited people's histories. I even saw my dad get worked up at the Mel Ott display. "I hated Mel Ott," he said. I've never heard my dad talk like that in my entire life. "He always got the hit that beat the Cubs." Back away from the case... easy now. Uncurl your fists.

I played baseball when I was a little kid, then in high school, then in college. I was on my college's first baseball team. We lost every game. I write about that team in my new book, *God Hides in Plain Sight*. I think I was the only guy on the team to get ejected from a game by my own coach!

So when I see the Twins win, in such an unpredictable way as they did yesterday, I cheer for them, drink from my Twins coffee mug, and have great hope for the future. Not this year, of course — they'll lose to the Yankees. But mostly I am grateful to them for a wonderful past