

The Guy in the Tie VII: Tough Streets

“Son I grew up on tough street.
End of the street. Last house on the left.”
Joy Brown when asked how she was doing.

I was nine that spring and playing for the Optimists, my Boys Baseball team that finished second to the hated Cosden Oil, a team obviously stacked with coaches sons from the rich kids’ side of town.

At this point grant me a digression as I establish the historical context of the narrative . . . once my rabbit has been chased I shall return to our hero.



Boys Baseball was played in the 4th grade after ones entrance into organized baseball in the 3rd grade called Dr. Pepper league that you played in blue jeans and flannel jerseys on a field without a fence and red wrap-around batting “helmets” covering the ears that made you look like a college wrestler at best. At worst you looked like a Mousketeer. But Boys Baseball was the real deal played in complete cotton uniforms on the legendary Waco Little League complex of four fields at Lions

Park, the Valhalla of organized baseball, with gen-u-ine simulated baseball shoes with spikes made of rubber so’s we would not rip each others flesh with our flashing steel. But mostly, Boys Baseball and Little League (4th – 6th grades) that followed were umpired by paid “men in black” who were not volunteer fathers but highly skilled professionals who made 20 bucks a game. Parents and passer-bys came and went as Lions Park was in the heart of expanding Waco. The three little league fields were all together like a three-ring circus so kids from all schools and ages would roam between them drinking concession stand DP (official Waco drink), eating giant pickles and watching classmates. The games would be replayed in elementary the following days and more important – the Waco paper reported the games! A writer named Hollis Biddle did the write-ups. My point is that it was for no reason that Waco was selected as the state headquarters for Little League.

Little League was divided into Northern, Western (my league), Midwestern, Northwestern, and Southern Leagues. Each had its own elementary schools that fed into it. We all kept up on leaders in home runs, batting average, won/lost records

and strike outs (for pitchers). The column in the paper was the first thing you looked for on the Monday mornings it came out. When the paper hit the porch I was out the door. Where did I stand!? Six weeks. Twelve games. Then “all stars!” Each league would pick 15 kids and two alternates. Then inter-Waco war began. In 1955 a Western League all-star team went to the regional finals to decide who would go to Williamsport for the Little League World Series. They lost in the final game to Monterrey, Mexico on a legendary bad call on William Kirkland – a play at home that is still recounted in Waco through gnashing teeth. Those 12 year olds that year were recounted like martyrs, saints and holy men.

You “tried out” for one of the six Little League teams in your area. Each team had 15 players; five tens, five elevens and five twelve year olds. Which meant only 30 kids from one’s age group were chosen by the six coaches to be able to compete. If you didn’t “make it” you had to go down to the Minor League teams. A step down. They played on lesser kept fields a mile from the complex. Fields without fences. And not for Steakley Chevrolet or Duncan Buick or Rountree Olds or Gibsons or Williams Drug but rather for muffler shops or bail bondsmen. “The minors” was a fate worse than death.

This was Little League, played with Wacoans surrounding the fields standing at the fences, smoking Camel no filters (and these were the women) and speculating on whether a kid had the talent to “go on.” My father was one of those “rail birds.” He loved it. All four of the Nelsons played.

I now return to the narrative of
the career of the nine year old . . .

As the pitcher on opening day of the 1959 season I looked down the long 46 feet (Little League distance from the mound to home plate) between myself and my diminutive catcher Mike Bradsby. My initiation into big time Waco competitive sports was about to begin.

I now digress to another digression subsequent
to my previous digression to which I had previously returned.

I had an arm (hose, gun, cannon, wing, rifle). Those who played sandlot continually on Wenz St. and its environs all could hum because we had learned *HOW* to throw. As the right arm swings backward or reaches backward the knuckles stay upward and the ball is held downward. To “roll” the ball upward makes you throw the ball like a dart or (God forbid) like a girl, sissy-like . . . , “putting” the ball like an eight pound shot put. But when the hand stays on top of the ball, the arm becomes catapult-like when it comes over the top. Boys on Wenz threw like grown men in boys bodies.

Thank you. Digression completed.

As I got ready to deliver my first pitch in the big time, my signature wind-up showed itself, a-la Juan Marichal of the San Francisco Giants – left leg skyward, reared back like a long bow ready and bent to release. The ball flew home with a wicked hiss and cracked the catcher’s mitt like a .22 report. Rail birds swore. Women fainted. The opposing bench came to their feet as one. Tisa Concilio kicked herself. An arm had been unveiled the likes of which Boys Baseball had not previously seen. The truth is, I felt all eyes. For just a moment there on field #1 at Lions Park, I was *somebody*. And I discovered something else: Baseball was the great leveler. The guy from Wenz could play against the rich kids all things equal for six innings.

I had found my life ... my purpose ... my reason for living. Sport had become my existential purpose, my philosophy. I was nine but I knew what would be my focus for the next 13 years of my life. Baseball was natural to me. Every team I was on – the Optimists, Rountree Rockets (10-12), Westview Village (13-15), Waco Richfield and Holts Sporting Goods (16-18), all won. Six titles and one State Championship. Twice we went from last to champs in one year. As a matter of fact I was offered a professional contract in high school from the Cincinnati Reds but I turned it down on the spot because it would not lead directly to college. LaVelle had drilled it into us that any true success had to go via college. Football offered that. But baseball gave me my first taste of, well, whatever success and popularity gives you. Here was something that could outlive me. “There goes Tommy Nelson; the best that ever was.” Sports could outlive me.

But it was four years later that a major shift came. I was 13 and all the elementary schools in my part of town emptied into the tributary of Lake Air Junior High. Guys I played against in baseball now became my classmates. My base of acclaim had widened considerably. There was no junior high baseball but there was football! Of course, in Texas, football is darn nigh cultic so junior high school groomed you for high school. We had no youth football in those days. You learned it playing “tackle” on the sandlots and “touch” in the streets. I was always the quarterback. Because God, I believe, providentially put a man in my life to insure it. He was out next door neighbor whose name was Ralph Smith. He worked for a new place in town called Word Records, a Christian music and publishing company. He belonged to an exotic group called Baptists and they went to Highland Baptist about six blocks away. They went every Sunday morning, and on Sunday nights to what they call Training Union. Ralph and his wife Pat never cussed or did any evil and they used to give our family these Bible stories on record albums. I listened to them in fascination and learned them all. Ralph was a little wiry athletic guy who would actually run and throw the football with his son David. When they would throw in the street I would burst out of the house to get in on it because Ralph would boast about me to all in earshot and continually encourage me. He gave me my first nickname – “Stormy Tormy.” I’m sure this old saint prayed for the Nelsons next door. And through him I found that I could throw a football just like a baseball. Plus I had a real touch. I could fire it or float it. So in every sandlot game hence, I was the QB. Thank you Ralph.

That being said, on our first day of football in the 7th grade at Lake Air Junior High, when Coach Barton Rhea said “get in two lines” and called for all to go down ten yards and cut inside, and then made the call, “who thinks they can pass?” – my heart got right in my throat. Every mate of mine from Lake Waco, Wenz Avenue, and Western Little League looked in my direction. I waited while other pretenders to the position flung ducks at the receivers, drawing scorn and the retort of Coach Rhea – “someone else.” The cry continued to mount from my homies in stage whispers, “Tommy, get in there.” Coach Rhea looked in the direction of the whispers and said, “Go ahead.” And with that I made the decision that began the next nine years of my life and shaped me until today and until the grave. The decision that with parents, church and school formed my habits of adulthood – the pursuit of football . . . down the tough streets.

“Ready, hut!”

I dropped back five steps like I had done a thousand times in my backyard imitating Bobby Ply, Don Trull and Ronnie Stanley (Baylor QB legends) . . . a thousand times sending Billy down and around the pecan tree in the backyard, then hitting him on the break.

The 13-year-old receiver made his break and I fired a strike right through his hands, off his sternum, that landed five yards away. The endorphin explosion was more so than my mound debut at nine. All the team marveled. Coach Rhea walked over and said something to Coach Steve Springer.

Receiver after receiver ran his route and I zipped strike after strike. The coach then had the best athlete on the team, Carl Chandler, run a “go” pattern. I laid it up like a butterfly, right in stride. I had found my ticket to why I existed. Football.

Football was essentially different than baseball. Baseball was our national pastime. Football was war. Football was an African youth killing a lion as a rite of manhood. Football was my rite of passage as a male. From that moment my life, like the tide, moved from September till Thanksgiving, to the off-season of training, to Spring training’s competing for the next year’s starting role, to summer’s preparation for September, then to two-a-days in mid-August. School, church, family, social life, breathing, all took a distant second to my total focus on football and the skill of passing. It was a joyful experience.

The Lake Air Leopards were 4 – 2 in my 7th grade year. Four and two in my 8th grade year. Third place finishes. By my 9th grade year we were five and one beating all the Waco teams for the city championship, upsetting University and Tennyson whom we had never beaten, losing only to Temple Lamar. It was heaven—champs! Best in the city!

There was something euphoric about dreaming of something wonderful and focusing all effort, planning and discipline toward that dream – of being *The* leader and exhorting all my mates to supreme effort and *doing* it.

In high school the river grew larger as the tributaries of Lake Air, Tennyson and some transfers from North Junior High all fed into the river of Richfield High School; The Richfield Rams.

I won the job as starter on the sophomore B-team. In the first four games we were 4 – 0 and I had thrown eight touchdowns. But the varsity QB, Bobby MacDowell, broke his collarbone and I got called up to the varsity to play back up if the 2nd team QB got hurt. I stayed there the rest of the year, never playing in a game but practicing with the big boys.

I started all three years of high school as the varsity shortstop. I was honorable mention, then second team all district, then first team all district. We won the district two years and tied for it with Temple my senior year. Starting every game for three years was a tremendous thrill. But my heart was football. Baseball was just fun and keen competition. I also played for the best coach of my life – my baseball coach Ed Knipper.

My junior year in football I broke my wrist in my first start against Sherman and missed the year. I trained the off-season with a vengeance because, as I understood, any scholarship was riding on my senior year. I felt I had been robbed twice.

Before the year started our coach for nine years at Richfield retired, and a legend became our head. John Vasek of the catholic power Waco Reicher came to Richfield as head. He had already won a state title. We called him “Papa V” and I became like his son. Before the year he said, “You’re my boy.” He drew the best out of me. He was hard. We were unbeaten going into our seventh game with undefeated Temple and Paul Tyson Stadium in Waco was packed. That night I ran into a paradigm shift. His name was Brad Dusek of Temple. Three years later he was on the cover of Texas football. He started three years for Temple and won the district three times. He was All-State and chose A & M out of a million scholarship offers. His father was he head coach of Temple. He started in basketball, as a catcher in baseball, and won the quarter and high jump in track. The best natural athlete I’ve ever seen to this day. He was 6’2”, 195, and could fly. I could not compete with him. He was literally out of my league and everyone else’s. He QB’d at Temple, played fullback at A & M and linebacker for the Washington Redskins. He beat the bajabbers out of us; 44 – 14. I scored in the last minute on a quarterback keeper and Dusek speared me in the ribs when I crossed the goal line. The ball went one way, my shoes another, two fillings another, my lungs still another. I got up to see if I was naked.

I faced a hard fact. There was another level to this game. There was just a chance that no matter how I worked, lifted weights, practiced and drilled, I just *possibly* might NOT have the tools to go on. I stuffed this unfathomable idea deep down and

went on. I got my scholarship from a place known for jazz, basketball and partying named North Texas State in a place named Denton.

But those years from the Dr. Pepper League through high school and into college football – 13 years as an athlete – shaped me and were the most providential of years. It sounds haughty but I must say it: that I had a distinct edge over most of my peers. It has been said that in the absence of the American father throughout the 20th century that unless a boy has been an athlete, a soldier, or a farmer, he has not learned the tools of life. Interesting that in 2 Timothy 2:4-6 Paul mentions the same three as standards.

- I learned to envision a dream, then plan, then initiate, then to discipline myself – to sacrifice day by day and persevere through pain, injury, and adversity to pursue excellence.
- I learned to say no to my body, to fear and discouragement.
– To buffet my body and make it my slave.
- I learned to honor the rules ... the code of conduct.
- I learned to be a team man responsible to all for my faithfulness.
- I learned to perform to my very best and to maintain poise no matter the score.
- I learned to get up when continually driven down and broken hearted.
- I learned how to do disciplined acts with no immediate recompense.
- I learned to submit unquestioning to a coach, my authority.
- I learned to make a total commitment to excellence.
- I learned how to lose and fail on the path but to continue to get up and finish the race. It's called perseverance.

Years later I would face the long race of marriage, fatherhood and being part of a church plant – the hardest thing I've ever done. I would face pain, disappointment, loss and failure but always had to get up, listen to The Coach and press on. I did because I learned as a youth to finish and never quit until the clock ran out.

I'll tell you something pretty arrogant but I'll just be honest. Whenever I go to speak anywhere – fraternities, churches, The Pentagon, to a seminary, to the House of Representatives, to whomever – and when they ask as to how I want to be introduced, I say . . .

- I've pastored since '77 at one church.
- and helped to start the church with Mel Sumrall.
- I've been married since '74 to one woman . . . and we love each other.
- I've raised two sons who are in Law Enforcement.
- I graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary and,
- received a Bachelor's from UNT.



JOINS EAGLES — Richfield High School quarterback Tommy Nelson has signed a football letter of intent to attend North Texas State next fall on a football scholarship. Nelson is 6-1, 180 and was the quarterback on coach John Vasek's first Richfield team this year that posted a 5-3-2 record. Nelson is also a three-year letter winner in baseball at Richfield.

But I also say “tell them I played four years as a scholarship athlete in Division I college football.” Less than 300 boys in Texas every year get scholarships to Division I college football. Far less than 300 finish and graduate. I did. After I speak – no matter where – some fellow will come up, take my hand, hold onto it, look me in the eye, smile and say “I played, too.” We share a moment. We did something few do.

We were athletes. We grew up hard.

I was 18 and I was about to walk into a threshing machine.