

## **INTRODUCTION: WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK**

For as long as I can remember baseball was my greatest passion. If it had anything to do with baseball I wanted all of it. I was just made to play the game and God gave me the desires of my heart. For 22 years I got to play at every level, sandlot, little league, high school, college and professionally. Then when my sons were born I became a coach at every level that 5 to 17 year olds play, from beginners to high school. I coached my own children and all of their friends. I don't honestly which was more fun, playing or coaching my boys. So for another 22 years I became "coach".

After 44 years of doing something you think you have seen it all. Well, in baseball you see something different every day, every game. I know the game from both sides. From being at the plate with the game on the line, full count and all the pressure on me to hit the game winner to just standing there giving a kid a pep talk before he steps up to the plate in the exact same situation, the game is tough. The great Baltimore Orioles manager, Earl Weaver, once said, "The only thing easy in this game is hustling. The rest is really tough."

However, the toughest role to have and survive the youth sports experience is by far and away that of the parent. Parenting is really tough. As pressures escalate all the way around on all of us it is a wonder we live through it.

So as I searched and wondered what I would be doing to stay in the game as my coaching days came to an end it was revealed to me in a way I never expected.

As I coached third base one night with my 13 year-old Mustangs at bat one of our players hit a hard shot at the third baseman. It took a bad hop and he booted it. This kid happened to be one of my favorite players in the league and reminded me of myself in his love for the game.

Well, his coach just let out this thunderous yell that really scared us both! I looked over at him and said, "Hey come on man, this is a great kid, the ball took a bad hop!" I had never in my 22 years said anything to a coach like that. Well the next time he blocked a ball with his chest and threw it 30 feet over the first baseman's head. He was so tight he couldn't even breathe. The violent confrontation escalated, the coach yanked him out of the game and the rest was just as horrible. I kept looking for his dad, you guessed it, it was his dad.

My heart sank. I felt so bad for both of them, not only for the kid who was being berated for making a mistake, but also for the father who obviously had something going on under the surface that was coming out in his son's direction.

And that's when something clicked inside me, and I knew I had to write this book. I have been given too much and can help parents and coaches relax and enjoy their kids before it is too late. We have to play the game right.

Fortunately, this story has a great ending. The boy actually came and played for me the next year in a tournament. His dad became incredibly remorseful and made everything right with his son. It was great. Hey we parents are humans and kids are unbelievably forgiving!!

There are too many kids getting yelled at for making mistakes and committing errors. How are you going to get better at anything if you don't make mistakes? Especially when you are playing baseball - a really tough game to play perfectly. Ask any All-Star in the majors-guys making millions of dollars and they still make mistakes on the baseball field. During the World Series, even.

And they aren't eight years old.

Kids in the modern game are being harassed and yelled at by both coaches and parents and it's taking a toll. It's no wonder the number of kids taking up the game is dwindling. Parents

and coaches lament that kids are giving up on baseball. Kids don't give up on baseball; they give up the harassment that we've made baseball.

My ex-teammate and good friend Stan Meek is the Director of Scouting for the Florida Marlins. He said this, "If a kid experiences enough of these violent confrontations in his childhood he'll quit. We (MLB, Major League Baseball) will never see him."

If this book saves one kid from this injustice, it was worth it.

I had to write this book on behalf of the kids who have to absorb the accelerating pressures of playing a game and who are continually berated for making errors. One of my little league mothers, who got wind that I was writing this book, told me to "write it to the coaches who make kids quit baseball." Her son who was a good player just walked away from the game at age 11. Ouch.

I had to write this book to encourage parents and coaches to enjoy their kids and protect their childhood.

Your children are only children for a few years-they have plenty of time later in life to be adults; it's up to us to guard their childhood, to make it fun, and to protect that feeling of playing in the sandlot.

We're the Keepers of that feeling. We're the Keepers of the sandlot.

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I played the game of baseball at every level and loved every day of it, but my days as a player came to an end with torn ligaments. I was in my sixth year of pro ball, playing on the Vancouver Canadians AAA team associated with the Milwaukee Brewers and having a great

year. I was hitting .329 at the end of August, looking good, working my way up. But my cleats got hung up on second base during a game and ripped my ankle in a big way.

I received a call from the Brewers brass the next day telling me my time had finally arrived—I was going up to the show for the month of September. There was only one condition: I had to be able to run. I tried for three days to get some speed on that ankle, but it never happened. They put me in a cast for twelve weeks, and my season was over. (Injuries are a great reason to use your college athletic scholarship to get an education.)

In one way, it turned out to be a great blessing in disguise. Being hobbled, being unable to play—it blew out the flame for me and, although I went to spring training with the San Francisco Giants the next year, I had lost the desire to prepare and play the game the way I had done in the past. I walked away from my playing career and never looked back, always thankful that I got to play as long as I did.

More importantly, I had fulfillment. I had lived out my dream, and got it out of my system. I have thought many times that this was huge for my kids, because I never had to live vicariously through any of my four wonderful children. I had my time; I got it out of my system. That was a great help later on when I would occasionally see parents who hadn't gotten it out of their system and were driving their kids to do it for them. That only makes it rough for everyone.

After my career as a player was over, I decided to use my experience to coach the teams that my own children were on. I coached my three sons' teams, guiding them and their friends through their little league years. The first set of kids, the first team, I took all the way through high school. The other two sets went with me through eighth grade.

Our sandlot all these years is a big program in Johnson County, Kansas, called 3&2. Nearly 575 teams compete in these fields every year. It is a big sandlot. The directors, coaches,

parents and umpires work diligently year after year to make it great. If you played baseball in Kansas City, 3&2 touched your life.

Jeff Chalk, Executive Director of 3&2, sent me an e-mail with the following statement, which I feel stated clearly how important coaching is. “Since 1951, there have been more than 60,000 players who have played on more than 5000 teams at Johnson County 3&2; literally tens of thousands. There have been several who have had some level of success going on to play at the collegiate or minor league level, but none have ever reached the major leagues. However, our community is full of former 3&2 league players who have achieved significant success in many other fields of endeavor, including, if not most importantly, coaches of their own sons.”

I became a coach to protect my boys—I'd heard too many stories about bad coaches and out-of-control parents.

It really wasn't that bad.

I can't say this enough. Most of the coaches and parents I have come in contact with over my 22 years of coaching have been great. Most coaches have a great heart and coach for the right reasons. They love the game and they love their kids.

Sure there are some who have fear problems, some that have worry problems, some that have ego problems, some that have problems none of us know about. *We all* have problems; some of us just handle them better than others.

And there are a lot of us who have problems with relaxing and enjoying the ride. But the ride is too short—trust me. After 22 years, I can say: this ride goes *fast*.

Honestly, I really didn't even understand this until my last eight years, especially the last two as the reality sank in: this was it. Soon Will, my youngest son, would be in the ninth grade, and my coaching days would be over. It was maybe the worst feeling I have ever had.

I finally had a complete view of the big picture. And it only took 22 years to get there.

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My dear friend Ned Yost has had a successful career as a manager in the majors, and I asked him what he thought I should talk about in this book. His thoughts: “Ultimately, it doesn’t matter at which level we coach, because the principles are the same at all levels.”

1. Teach your players to have fun.
2. Teach them how to deal with failure as well as success.
3. Teach them how to compete.
4. Teach them to respect this great game.
5. Teach them to play fearlessly.
6. “But most of all, Keepers, teach them how to play the game to the best of *your* ability (remember: nobody knows all there is to know about this game). Just teach them what *you* know, do it in a positive, loving, fun way, and they will remember you for the rest of their lives.”

I’m going to level with you: the odds of your kid playing in the big leagues are long, long, long. We’ll go into this later, but there are far more hopeful players than there are available slots in the majors. And yet every MLB team has a pile of scouts looking for players who can give them the winning edge, and trust me: if someone out there has the ability to play on a major league baseball team, they will find him. You don’t have to do a thing.

But the odds are significantly higher that your child can learn how to play the game with his friends, learn the basics pretty well, and grow up to be an adult that contribute in a great way to society.

But they'll only get there if their coaches and parents approach the game with a Keeper mentality.

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One of my favorite success stories is a kid I coached named Mike Hughes. Mike loved baseball more than life itself, and gave more effort than most of the kids I ever coached. This kid just never quit, and though he didn't get many hits, he always gave me his best.

This past spring, Mike graduated with honors from the Harvard School of Medicine after doing his undergraduate work at Stanford. His mom said to me, “Bill, you taught Mike to play hard and never to give up, and I think that really helped him with the long hard years of medical school.”

When he was on my team, I knew Mike probably wouldn't play in the big leagues, and would never get to “the Show,” as we called it. But I also knew that Mike had a big-league attitude, and I knew that if his parents, teachers, and I approached him with a “Keeper” mentality, he would take that attitude on to school and great success. Who knows—Mike may discover a cure that saves my life one of these days.

This is not easy stuff—just *being a parent* can bring out the best and worst in all of us, and we all have our ugly moments. It's easy to sit in the stands and say, “I just don't understand why all of these parents and coaches are so crazy!” And then things get nuts at home and we

suddenly understand how that same feeling can show up on the baseball field. We get crazy sometimes, because we are afraid. We want our kids to be successful and happy.

The fact is we are human. Fortunately for us, our kids love us humans, and are very forgiving when we get a little stupid (especially if we apologize every now and then). I talk to a lot of dads who are carrying some significant baggage, have control issues, worry too much about what the future holds, and are sometimes just kind of grumpy.

But if we can drop the baggage, let the kids have some control back, quit worrying, and be nice, we'd *all* enjoy the game more.

Remember when you were a kid and played the game in the proverbial sandlot? When you used whatever you could find for bases and sometimes substituted a tennis ball and a broomstick because they were available? You just played the game because you were having fun with your friends, not because you were working on your fundamentals or working on your curve ball.

As a Keeper, I had the awesome opportunity to *re-enter* that Sandlot period, to experience baseball as a kid again. To play with my sons and their friends. What a privilege.

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I played college ball at the University of Oklahoma for Coach Enos Semore, a member of College Coaches Hall of Fame. I asked him what wisdom I should pass on in this book, and he said, “Billy, if you can get these parents and coaches to understand the huge responsibility they have and the *impact* they have on a young man (good or bad) with everything they say or do, you will have done a great thing.”

Let's take a look at that:

“Good or bad.”

“Everything you say or do.”

Kids are watching, whether we want them to or not. They're learning, whether we think we're teaching them or not. They are being molded into the adults they will become, whether we're intentional or not.

Being a Keeper isn't easy; none of this is easy.

Heck, baseball isn't easy. It's a game that's built on failure, honestly. Hitting a baseball is the hardest thing to do in all of sports—it's been documented!

Just for fun, we can go to USA Today's great series on the Hardest Thing To Do In Sports, written by Gary Mihoces and published March 2, 2003. Hitting a 90+ mile per hour fast ball is the hardest. “In his book, *The Physics of Baseball*, retired Yale University Physician Robert Adair writes that the moment of contact when a bat strikes a ball lasts just 1/1,000 of a second.” Obviously, this skill takes years to develop.

Players like Ted Williams and Barry Bonds are absolutely extraordinary athletes and can do things that other people can't. “What is remarkable about them is not their muscles or anything like that. It's their brain,” Mihoces states.

“Consider that a fast ball thrown at 95-100 mph reaches home plate in about 0.4 seconds.” Adair notes that “it takes 0.15 seconds for humans to voluntarily blink their eyes in response to visual signals. When a big-league fastball is on the way, you must do far more than blink. You must swing the bat to precisely the right spot at precisely the right time.” Then there are curve balls.

The sandlot is where we hold up the ball and start the journey. Once you blink, your kid is grown.

Simply put, a player in the majors that hits .300 is considered a master at the plate, but even that level of success means that he is failing 70% of the time.

So on top of teaching kids this very difficult game, you also have to protect the friendships within the team, keep the parents in the loop *and* manage your parents, all the while guarding the feelings of the whole community. It's a huge responsibility and task. It can be done. It's big picture coaching.

But the most important thing is to make sure the game stays *fun* and the kids learn to play the game. I turn once again to my dear friend and ex-teammate (and major-league manager), Ned Yost:

“Billy, player development doesn't start at my level. It starts at five or six years of age, where you teach a kid to develop his natural abilities and to play fearlessly. If you yell at him all the time, he will draw back and never reach his potential. Tell your parents to not blow it by yelling.

“You get this short period of time to burn your memory into their brains. They will carry these lessons and memories you gave them for the rest of their lives. Don't mess it up.”

Think about your goals for your children. What do you want them to live with? What do you want their memories of childhood baseball games to be like? Do you want them to remember your red face yelling at them for being human? Or do you want them to remember having fun with their friends, realizing only in hindsight the lessons they were learning along the way?

Do you want them to remember organized disaster or Sandlot joy?

Let's figure it out together.

Everybody get loose.

Play some catch.

Relax.

Stretch out.

Take a lap.

Choose up teams – everybody in!

The Sandlot is calling our names.

We are its Keepers.

Play ball.