

## CHAPTER ONE: THE SANDLOT AND ITS KEEPERS

The Sandlot is one of those mystical, magical places in childhood, a place where dreams begin and boys learn the art of working together to accomplish a single goal: to *have fun!* I don't know about you, but when I was a kid, the Sandlot was the perfect place to slip away for many hours, sometimes from dawn 'til dusk. I would disappear with a few friends for the day, and before we knew it, the sun was going down.

We spent time together figuring out the game of baseball on our own, by trial and error, playing as long as we could, until the point where we knew if we stretched the time any further, our mom wouldn't allow us to go the next day. Since that would be sheer torture, we all would head home and start the next day right where we left off.

The summers seemed endless back then, and when we “disappeared” for the day, it meant something so much more innocent than it does now. Today the word “disappear” means an Amber Alert; times have certainly changed.

That's the feeling that we Keepers need to bring back. The safety net of “disappearing,” if only for an hour-long practice, is still an important thing to our kids today. But we need to bring that Sandlot feeling back to the game, that safety net. It's up to us, Keepers, to make sure our kids participate in an environment where they can grow, learn, play, and just have fun with their friends. Keepers of the Sandlot are the types of coaches that encourage, protect, teach, engage, and build character into their players; players who will someday become the men and women who lead the following generations.

Keepers must always keep the end goal in mind. Time moves so quickly, and your players are in your care for so little of it. You must use that time wisely and in the best interests

of your players. Whether you like it or not, you are a role model, and the way you react to situations will affect the way *they* react.

Being a Keeper is a heavy load.

But it is totally worth it.

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The closest thing I ever got to the Sandlot at the “next” level came during my senior year in college at the University of Oklahoma. We were involved in the dogfight of our college baseball careers as we battled to get back to the College World Series for the fourth year in a row. The previous three years, we'd come away empty-handed, and this year I wanted to win that national title more than anything in the whole world.

But before we could even get the chance, we had to defeat the University of Tulsa and win our NCAA Midwest Regional in Norman, Oklahoma.

I quote now from *The Oklahoma City Times*, May 27th, 1975:

HEADLINE: “OU Takes Title With 'Sandlot' Win.”

“It reminded you of one of those old sandlot tournaments Monday as Oklahoma and Tulsa battled their way to game No. 7 of the NCAA Midwest Regional in Haskell Park. OU had downed the Hurricane, 2-1 in Monday's first game to even the tournament, and the winner of the next game would gain that coveted trip to Omaha and the College World Series”

Seven games, three days, everybody pitches, back-and-forth, fever-pitched, endless baseball.

The Sandlot – All day long baseball ... everybody in.

*Out of pitching...a game like this gets you pumped up...finally found a stopper; when he's on he can be tough...hasn't had a hit in fourteen at-bats; singled up the middle to drive in the go-ahead run...never pitched a kid the next day after throwing nine innings; taking a chance on hurting his arm...picture-book slide...tagged out...record-setting relief pitching...everybody in ...*

*The mark of a good bunch...faced the minimum through four...out of obscurity, a hero...all guts...unfamiliar pressurized situation...jeers from the opposing bench...mentally tough...a dogfight...endless baseball...*

*Just as the movies have depicted..our place...where we learned to play the game...just us...friends...anyone can fill a spot and keep it going...no qualifications; nothing required to play...everyone welcome...*

*A sacred place in our hearts...no adults...no old men yelling...focused and fair...heat...sweat...where we could be kids...where each of us hits the walk-off home-run...to win Game 7...*

*Each of us a hero in our hearts...*

Do you have a Sandlot in your past? Take a big, deep breath now and remember that time. Go ahead. I'll wait for you.

Let's reclaim that feeling for our kids.

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In the Sandlot, we all imagined hitting that game-winning walk-off home run, the one that wins the World Series for our team. In game six of the 1993 World Series, Joe Carter of the Toronto Blue Jays hit the *real* walk-off, championship-winning home run, and it is packed with

Sandlot joy. If you have ever seen this fantastic moment in baseball history, it is punctuated by Joe's leaping, ecstatic, joy-packed trip around the bases in what is only the second Series-ending home run in baseball history.

If you're fortunate enough to see a photo or video of this great moment in baseball history, take a look at Joe's face. That expression screams, "Sandlot joy!" Every kid has hit that home run in his dreams a thousand times, and every time their imaginary face looks exactly like that. It is absolutely totally kid.

Joe and I go way back; he's from Oklahoma City and used to watch me play at OU. His baseball coaches at Wichita State University were my coaches and best friends while at OU. The man makes me feel old and young at the same time.

I asked Joe about that home run as I wrote this book. "Joe," I asked, "when did you hit your *first* World Series-ending home run?" Secretly, I hoped he'd say that he hit it in the Sandlot.

Joe laughed, "Well, actually Bill, I hit it in my father's gas station when I was a kid." I just started squealing as he told the story, as he went back in time to his Sandlot. Where was your sandlot? Remember when...

Joe's father had a filling station in Oklahoma City, and Joe worked there often as a young boy. "As soon as the cars would clear out and I had a moment, I would get my rubber bands out, and the game would come down to me," he said. "As the announcer, I would first set the scene, bottom of the ninth, game seven, and who else would you want coming to the plate than Joe Carter?" Joe laughed again and flashed that famous smile as he continued to go back in his head and recount the moment.

"I would pull the rubber band tight as it would go and let her fly, then announce the game: 'Joe swings, there it goes, a mighty fly ball... it could be... it may be...' And then I'd watch

where the rubber band landed. If it landed on the roof, it was the game winner, and I got to be the hero. 'The ball goes back... and... It's out of here, *we win it all!*' And I would jump around the service station, touching all the bases in my mind, and just take in the moment where I got to be the hero.”

Joe got serious for a minute. “Every kid wants to be a hero. Every kid needs to be a hero.”

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Ultimately, we all leave the Sandlot and head out to face the giants. Hopefully, though, we get the *privilege* of returning to the Sandlot with our own children. I chose the word “privilege” on purpose, because it is just that. It is not a right—it is a gift. We have no right to inject *our* agendas on our children's Sandlot. The Sandlot should be classified with “protected” status.

Kids need to be heroes, but so do Keepers. Because heroes protect the Sandlot.

Joe Carter's rubber-band dream became a reality in front of all our eyes in the 1993 World Series, and when he told me that he “got to be the hero” as a kid, it reminded me of all the times I would set up the game in my own backyard so I could be the hero. Or the times in our Sandlot when my friends and I would announce our own games and argue over who got to be the hero.

We all want to be the hero when we are little, and Keepers set it up so everyone gets to be the hero.

Without a doubt, my favorite moment every year I coached was at our end-of-the-year party. We'd gather everyone on the team, the moms would fix a huge dinner, the dads would all sit around, and we'd watch season highlights that our cameraman John Stout had worked hours to put together. It was so much fun, just sitting there, recounting the year that had gone by so quickly.

*"I had a great time playing baseball for you."*

- Chase  
Mustangs P/OF

After the highlights, the evening would wind down, and we'd let each boy tell us what their favorite moment was. "When were *you* the hero?" I would say. "Make it about you."

Without fail every one of these kids would start by telling about a moment that *someone* else had that meant the most to them. They really did not want to talk about themselves. We would do our best to make them feel like heroes, and because they felt that way, they were secure enough to focus on their *teammates'* achievements.

Then I got to reinforce for them that moment, remembering it along with them, and adding some other special moments that I had of them. To a boy, for twenty-two years, they *each* had a moment where *they* came through and helped us win.

Moments like these:

"I will always remember the time I was pitching at Nationals. It was real hot. You came to the mound, wiped my face with a cold towel and gave me a bloody nose. It was bizarre. I finished the game and we won." —Chase

"My favorite memory was against the Mill Valley Indians. We were down 2-0 and John and Will were on base and I hit a triple and knocked them in, and we had the game tied, and I got the team motivated." —Carter

“My most famous story with the Mustangs is when I could only open one of my eyes, and I had to pitch with sunglasses on. Ever since then, you and the other players have called me 'Ol' One Eye.' Thanks for making me tough, and a better player.” —David

There is something in each of us that makes us want to be the hero. We want to do good things. If we are allowed to try and fail, without getting harassed into oblivion and supported as we learn, we will be ready to answer the call.

My team philosophy was always this: someday it will come down to you, and you need to be ready. Our team will only be great if *everyone* is ready at all times.

We see this in the real world every day, in men and women who respond to the ever-increasing problems in the world. They are the ones who grew up *ready* to sacrifice and put others ahead of themselves.

Keepers are entrusted with preparing the heroes of the next generation. That means that if you are a parent, or a coach, or a teacher who is in the fight, *you are a hero*.

You are a Keeper.