

ARTICLE

Baseball Fantasy Camp Makes Me A Better Lawyer

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Bad baseball played in slow motion — that's how Whitey Herzog, a former MLB manager and Baseball Hall of Fame inductee, described play at St. Louis Cardinals fantasy camp every year.

But what else would you expect? Fantasy camp involves former major league players, acting as managers, drafting about 100 people of varying age, athleticism and baseball experience. Each team includes a former MLB player, and the teams compete for championship rings over a long weekend.

Our fans — the friends and family members we subject to our unique spin on the great American pastime — see it all: routine plays made to look spectacular, Little League home runs, and catchers (that's me) falling face-first into the dirt chasing a pop-up behind home plate (fortunately, I only injured my pride).

For those of us on the field, however, the experience is unlike any other — it's Disney World for a Cardinals fan. Over a half-dozen camp experiences, I have played with and been coached by some of my all-time favorite Cardinals players, including Hall of Famers, World Series champions and MVPs, Gold Glove award winners, and All-Stars.

My fellow campers are equally accomplished in their own fields. I have made lifetime friends, won two championship rings and, in 2023, was honored with induction into the Cardinals Fantasy Camp

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Hall of Fame.

My friends and I recently discussed how fantasy camp has affected us off the field. As an attorney, this article is my opportunity to share my own reflections on that topic. So ... play ball!

The Importance of Preparation

I walked into my first camp without doing any training. I thought that, because I was still relatively young, in decent shape and moderately athletic, I could just coast through the weekend soaking in the atmosphere. What a terrible idea that turned out to be.

To be sure, there are things about baseball for which you cannot effectively prepare. One former Cardinals pitcher told us about a teammate who would get ready for spring training by putting on his cleats to walk to his mailbox.

Swinging a bat and crouching to catch will work muscles you didn't know you had, and you will be sore no matter how much you exercise. But baseball is hard, and I was not ready at all, even for the things I could control like taking batting practice or fielding ground balls, before heading down to Florida.

The result? I did not put a ball in play until the final game. And I learned that the saying "the ball will find you" is no joke. Some campers live out their fantasy of playing multiple positions on a major league field. I lived the nightmare of making an error at every position I played.

I should have known better. I wouldn't write a motion without an outline, argue an appeal without moot sessions, or give a presentation without rehearsal. So why was I naive enough to believe I could succeed on the field without practice?

Far from souring me on fantasy camp, my mistake drove me to improve for each successive camp. It also reinforced two points that I apply in my practice.

First, preparation is essential. If you do not prepare, you decrease your likelihood of success.

Second, have the humility to learn from your mistakes. The game humbles everybody, but the best players internalize the lesson to help them do better the next time. Baseball is a game of adjustments, and so is the practice of law.

Action Over Inaction

No kid dreams of a World Series-winning walk when playing in the backyard or on the playground. Yet, stepping into the batter's box for the first time in a long time — or, for some campers, for the first time ever — knowing that you have less than a second to pick the ball up out of the pitcher's hand, decide whether to swing and then swing (let alone make contact) is daunting.

I've seen many new campers freeze up in their first at bats, and hope for ball four or a hit-by-pitch. I'm guilty of it myself. Worse, once you get into that mentality, it's difficult to break out of it.

On the other hand, good things can happen when you put the ball in play. Indeed, hitting the ball is the only thing you control as the batter, and you can only hit the ball if you swing your bat. Particularly at fantasy camp, you have no idea what is going to happen once you hit the ball — that's what the former major league players mean when they tell us that a swinging bat is a dangerous bat.

Similarly, I have observed that proactive lawyers have the most success.

Do not wait for work to come to you. Instead, reach out to your contacts and colleagues, see what they need, and explore how you can help them and their clients.

Find an area of the law that interests you, then work to build your expertise and reputation by speaking and writing about that topic whenever you can.

Recognize that the strongest arguments are more often those that explain why your client should prevail, rather than those that merely take potshots at why your adversary should lose.

Sure, you'll make your share of outs, both on the field and in your practice. But wouldn't you rather go down swinging than looking?

No "I" in Team

At my most recent camp, former Cardinals catcher and manager Mike Matheny shared his views on building a team, saying that he looks for people who go about their business in a way that makes everyone else want to keep showing up.

He emphasized the value of selflessness — players who embody this quality lift each other up and look for ways to help them achieve something special. Conversely, a player who only wants the spotlight makes everyone else miserable.

In my experience, Matheny's philosophy transcends baseball. In fact, it matches precisely how I have tried to lead teams throughout my career, both in the military and in private practice, as well as how I have tried to behave as a teammate.

How do you do this? Learn your colleagues' strengths and weaknesses, then put them in positions that allow them to showcase their strengths and stretch beyond their comfort zones, and to grow out of their weaknesses.

Take an interest in them as people, not just as co-workers. Check on their well-being and see if there is anything you can do to help them. Praise them publicly, but deliver constructive feedback in private. If you invest in your people, and they know that you have their back, they will walk through fire with you.

I've loved playing with every one of my camp teammates, but the most enjoyable teams, and the teammates with whom I remain closest, are those who lived up to these principles.

We look out for each other both on and off the field, and together we've learned that the most satisfying wins are the hard-earned ones, and the most galvanizing losses are the well-fought ones. I was thrilled to watch five teammates from one past team take home various awards at my last camp, including one who received the Bruce Sutter Award in recognition of his character.

Ultimately, the extent of your success and the magnitude of your enjoyment is driven at least as much by whom you share it with as what you do. So, no matter what you do, be the type of player who Matheny wants on his club.

Hitting the Reset Button

Last, but certainly not least, I use baseball to clear my mind.

Fantasy camp is an immersive experience. For five days, we live the lives of professional baseball players, rather than the lives of whoever we are in the real world.

We enter the clubhouse on day one to find our lockers laid out the same way our childhood idols' were, including with full major league uniforms that have our names and numbers. The moment we put on our jerseys for the first time, we become lifetime members of the Cardinals family.

And then we go play baseball. We don't think about our emails or worry about checking off the next item on our to-do list. We just enjoy the game and the camaraderie that grows out of the environment the camp staff cultivates for us.

I've called it recovery and rejuvenation, but former Cardinals pitcher and current radio broadcaster Rick Horton says it better: Fantasy camp is good for the soul.

The worst day on the ball field may or may not be better than the best day at work. I've certainly had litigation wins that were as exciting as anything I've done on the field.

But our profession is often stressful, and we need outlets that allow us to periodically refresh before tackling the day-to-day challenges of the practice of law. Mine just happens to be a game.

Conclusion

With six camps under my belt, I've learned time and again that I didn't make the wrong career choice. But I've also learned that baseball lessons are life lessons, and I'm a better lawyer for my time at St. Louis Cardinals fantasy camp.

It's a privilege to put on that uniform and share the field with professionals and campers alike, and I plan to keep doing so for as long as I am physically able.