

WHAT I CAN AND CAN'T REMEMBER:

A SOFTBALL EXAMPLE

As I approach my 80th circumnavigation of the sun, I am aware of more physical changes in myself than any time since puberty. Unfortunately, none of them are good. It is certainly a time for introspection over a wide range of matters. I presume every aging person is confounded by a decline in memory. It turns out that this is really largely a function of how the body works for everyone, not just those that fail to play brain exercise games.

If you are over fifty years of age, you likely find yourself struggling to remember a word now and then. Interestingly, those words typically have something in common. They are almost always nouns – the name of something or someone. As a child I remember my father routinely forgetting the name of objects. Everything became a “thingamajig” or a “whichamacallit”. He did, however, at 85 years of age, still remember the depth of Lake Superior in fathoms. Neither of us knew why that was so. Proper nouns, that is, formal names beginning with a capital letter, are the worst offenders. But as I like to say, I never forget an adverb and, as well as I can remember, that is true. (Did you catch that little bit of foreshadowing there?)

I find that I have wide variance in my capacity to remember. I have a well-above-average ability to remember what I have read or seen on informative, scientific television programs. I am considered “good” at Trivial Pursuit and Jeopardy!. On the other hand, I am well below average at remembering people or events in my life. As I look back on my life in my advancing dotage, I realize I largely can't remember it. This

applies not just to bad times that I must have had that I could have repressed but also to good times that I presume I have had. I certainly live very much in the immediate moment. But most people would expect me (and themselves) to remember moments of personal success. That brings me to this softball story.

About 10-15 years ago, I occasionally played against an outstanding ball player from Pinellas County, Billy Ketchum. Bill was close to my age but is not well-remembered here because at age 65, he retired from his position as a school administrator and, with his wife, retired to their native Tennessee. He has pretty much not been heard from for softball by us since. (BTW, I had to ask another player to remember Billy's last name for me. I wasn't close to getting it.) Perhaps three years ago, Billy returned to the area for social reasons and looked up some of the old gang. He came to a practice at the Woodlawn Hitting Club in St. Pete where he watched and criticized but did not participate. Afterwards, he joined us for breakfast at the El Tenampa Cafe to reminisce.

At the El Tenampa, Billy sat down next to me share his recollection of a memorable play we had participated in together. He said, "Doc, remember the time we we playing against the World Champion Florida Legends and Davey Reed came up to bat with the bases loaded, one out, one run down, bottom of the 7th and the game on the line? For those of you unfamiliar with Davey, he was a mountain of a man. He was one of the most renowned power hitters in the country. He was well over six feet tall and a muscular power lifter who weighed something like 265 pounds without an ounce of fat. He batted left-handed. Pitchers were afraid he would hit the ball over the right field fence. First basemen were afraid he wouldn't get it elevated and kill them. BTW, for the record, I had forgotten Davey's last name also, but looked at my bat to read it. I used a Davey Reed model bat at the time. Many of you probably do still. Now I was

pitching to him.

Billy recounted for me what happened next. He told me Davey hit a one-hop rocket that Billy somehow managed to snag going to his right. Seizing the opportunity, he elected to attempt a game-ending double play. Being a left-handed thrower, Billy was able to fire a throw to the shortstop who tagged second base to force the lead runner. The shortstop then gunned a throw to first base which I had scurried over to cover. (Pitchers still did that in that era.) The throw was in the dirt but, using my skill and experience as a well-trained first baseman, I scooped it out and raised my glove to show the umpire that I wasn't juggling the throw and that the ball was securely at rest in the pocket. The umpire emphatically pumped him out! We had done it! We had won the game and defeated the reigning World Champions! Davey was gobsmacked and dumbfounded. The impossible had just happened.

Billy said to me, "Doc, that has to be one of your fondest memories." My immediate, candid and sincere response? "Billy, I don't ever remember us being teammates."