

Play Ball

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I realise I'm in the best place when I'm far away from it.

I'm yards away when I look back and get to watch them all come together near home, no doubt exchanging unserious trash-talk with barely hidden amusement. It is truly an honour and privilege.


The fourth floor of the sports complex is a wide open space made of four sides, a high ceiling, huge windows, and four teams of four different sports: cheer, track and field, football, and softball.

Cheer is always the loudest, either because of their warm-up music or their actual cheering. Track and field is always practising two other sports besides the regular running: javelin and discus throwing. Football's one main piece of equipment always finds its way to other areas. Softball is where I always go.

It was never meant to become so weighty on my shoulders and immovable from my life. But it did, the sneaky thing. Now, it's never leaving and I have to haul a heavy bag almost every day.

But where this is actually supposed to start is in our area, our little slice of the fourth floor.

When one is in the softball team, one must dump their things either on the floor or on the three-level pink bleachers, with very little ceremony and a significant amount of fatigue, whether because of the tiring academics that held court just ten minutes ago or the fact that it's barely 8 AM on a rest day.



Then, one will have an entire menu of actions at one's disposal.

One may change into training clothes in the small bathrooms to our left and right, and gamble with your bladder on whether the doorknob will turn or not.

One may start eating a pre-training snack. (Don't. You and your abdomen will die during warm-up. It's not worth it. Turn back.)

One may lay down on the never swept floor and sleep, while one's teammates lay down beside one and talk.

One may start horsing around with one's teammates, blowing bubbles or shooting Nerf guns that the adorable rookie brought in as that day's plaything.

Whatever one decides, one will always be surrounded by a teammate, coaxing one into joining them in playing games, fiddling with toys, sharing gossip, promoting a student event, or even just eating. This is the thing separating us from the others; the ineffable bond of the softball team. Get used to it, get into it (you might as well while you're there).

A few feet away, Coach calls us over to him. He's a man taller and stronger than all of us, but he's nice and taught us everything we know. Granted, he can be too nice when he needs to be stricter and vice versa, but he also joins in on whatever joke we've decided to repeat for the rest of the day, so it's not that big a deal.

"Team, JV game, next week Monday, the 15th. Just like last year, *kayo*—" Coach looks and gestures at us, the varsity team, occupying majority of the circle— "*sasali kayo para makapaglaro tayo ng totoong game.*"

Cheering is automatic. When you're in a team enough to fill the positions but not enough to fill them twice without repetition, getting any chance to compete, whether it's an actual game or just a tune-up one, is more exciting than a homerun. I crane my neck left and right, glancing at my teammates and letting my smile get wider as I listen to their playfully innocuous banter.

“Hey, *wag mo 'kong i-tag out*, ha?”

“Oh, *ikaw lang i-ta-tag ko*. Watch me.”

“Bunt *kaya ako?*”

“*Wag na!* You can't bunt worth a damn— *'di ka manlang marunong!*”

“*Ikaw rin naman eh!*”


“Guys, *galingan n'yo*, ha! This is your opportunity to show off.” Our captain, Hallie, grins at us. She's a well-built catcher that's both cute and absolutely vicious whenever we fumble the play.

Coach laughs. “*Mamaya na yung teams kapag magba-batting na tayo, pero ngayon*, five laps!”

Groaning is automatic.

Stretching, five laps—we're doing them while trash talking each other. I'm still laughing at their antics when we finish suicides.

When it's time to get started with catching and throwing, I'm waving to the only Sophomore on the team. “Lia, you're with me.”



She nods from where she leans on the threshold to the fire exit, still catching her breath along with a few others while small gusts of wind whip their way through. (We will end up closing the doors later, but only after we've risked another ball to the gaps between the railings, still catching our breaths once it's back in a glove.)

I run over to the equipment and rummage around in our battered red crate for a good ball; one that feels nice on the hand but doesn't slip around in a glove; one that doesn't give if you dig your fingernail in.

Not many of our balls are like that anymore, but I still find one. It's big in my hand but sits well enough in my palm. There's a couple of nicks here and there, some rough patches and a lot of dark areas. Carlos is written on it, a faded permanent marker name. I used to think that was the brand, that whoever owned and left it wanted the brand to be remembered. I've asked Coach, though, and he said Carlos was a pitcher and captain, one of the best that the team ever had. This was hers. It's had a lot of players come and go.


It's the softball team, and I'm part of it.

I toss it up, waiting for my thoughts to finish their own five laps. *The ball is just a ball, not a metaphor.*

I call Lia over and she comes running, somehow always with a lot of energy during drills and seemingly none in between.

Throwing and catching is usually done right in front of our bleachers, spacing according to the large rectangle on the ground. Two long lines and four shorter lines in between them, making three smaller rectangles.

I stand on the edge of the first line and Lia's a foot away from the second.



We start with under handing. It stretches your arm and warms up your joints, but it doesn't last very long because soon, Coach is yelling to start overhand. This is where the true fun of throwing and catching begins.


You see, because I'm on the edge and Lia's not, she's the one that's gotta move back and back until the last line, the edge of the larger rectangle. You can't throw that hard but you can't throw that soft. There's a balance; a line to toe. Along with that, you have to target your throw. Look where you want it to go. Then, when you have to catch, it's a game of moving backward or forward. How much do you move? Where's your glove supposed to be? What's the angle of the one-bounce ball? Move closer to the ground or keep still?

If you're not used to catching, you'd be asking all those questions. After a year for me, though, catching is almost second nature; throwing, not so much.

In training, it's easy. The ground is even and stable. You can plant your feet pretty well. There isn't a point on the line. Nobody's really judging you. It doesn't mean much if you miss either catch or throw. It's a non-problem.

In a game, it's worse. I can't speak for the rest of my team, but even after I call out the play, I still forget where to throw. I feel like a jerk for hoping that it'll be over before it gets to me, that someone else is screwing up, that I'm not the reason we just let two batters run home. It's such a big problem that your captain is yelling at you and all you want to do is get off the field.

The thing is that everyone is essentially backing up two people: the pitcher and the catcher. Whatever mistake it is, we're there to make sure it doesn't end with a wider point gap



I'm there for you, cheering you on, covering behind you, until I have to take responsibility. Did I say that's the fun of throwing and catching? I meant that it's the beauty and the beast of throwing and catching.

Lia's all the way to the fourth line.

My arm winds itself automatically, and when the ball is finally released, I feel a twinge right above my elbow. A familiar pain, fixable with a line of muscle tape wrapped around. I've never really known if the placement's right, but it seems to work for my other teammate, so I tell myself it will work. Otherwise... it hurts.

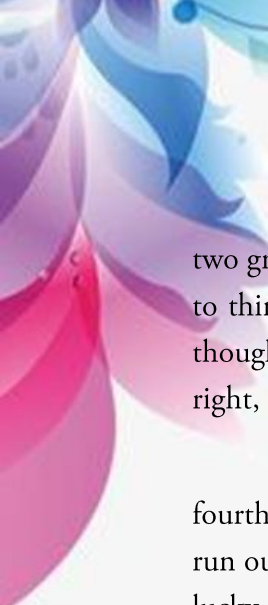
It veers off the left and I've overshot it.

"Sorry!" I yell while she runs to get it, with a smile and a small laugh. It's a non-problem.

I catch it when Lia throws it back, even though it does become a ground ball. Her form isn't all that correct—not that I'd correct her with any information other than "*paabutin mo!*"—but ground balls are easy balls at this point, right?

Fielding. I used to be good at it, back when teenagers two years above me were watching. I'd put extra effort in, not that they would say anything about it.

Now that they're gone, I don't know if I'm good at it anymore. While the other infielders—almost all of which are newer players—receive their grounders like it just gravitates to them and throw it back with seemingly no effort, I'm constantly pushing my thighs and lungs to their limit, raising my leg in time with my throw because I can't even balance without it.



Remember the two long lines and four shorter lines? We're split into two groups, according to our positions in-game. Infield is made up of the first to third basemen, shortstop, catcher, and, you'd think, pitcher. For fielding, though, pitchers go to the outfield group, which has the rest of outfield: left, right, and centre.


Infielders start on the second shorter line, outfielders beyond the fourth, all of us on the further long line. Infielders *have* to start on the side, run out as soon as Coach hits a ball with a bat. Outfielders don't get that very lucky honour. As second base, guess where I get to start.

I get the first ball. It's not the correct form but I get it anyway so it's alright. When I throw it to Hallie, it hits the wall behind her instead of her glove. Someone yells at me to target. Doesn't matter who, I know what to correct before they say it.

Next one, I don't. It passes right under my glove because it's not flat on the ground. I laugh about it but I can feel my head getting hotter and my jaw tightening. Is it the drill or embarrassment? No time to think because Julia, our centre outfielder, covers for me. From her, the ball cuts to me and I throw it back to Hallie. Reset.

The rest of the grounders are mine due to what I can safely say is a sheer stubbornness to stop missing them, with a fifty-fifty ratio of perfect and imperfect targets. My thighs are burning up and my lungs could fall out of my chest but it's outfield's turn now. I have to stay where I am, watch the ball as it flies up and past me, and catch it when Julia throws it back.

I catch two, on account of one being head-level and the other pop-fly. We have to make up for it with two more outfield balls but I'm grinning inside



because hell, I caught two balls meant for outfield, all the better for an actual game. Look at me go, guys! Now stop yelling “target!”.

The ball is just a ball, not a metaphor.

When Julia and I finish up, we run left to the long inner line, then towards each other, high-fiving with the backside of our gloves.


All’s said and done when Coach calls, “Water break! *Tapos batting tayo!*”

Today, Coach is pitching and we’re running bases after each hit. First hit, run to first, walk to dugout. Next hit, run to second, walk to dugout. On and on until the last hit where you pretend you hit a homerun.

Batting’s a fun time. I’ve gone from not even a batter in my first year, to second batter this year. The sound of the head of the bat connecting with a ball is one of the best things a person could hear. Knowing someone couldn’t field my grounder rocks this giddy feeling through my nervous system.

Batting’s a good time. I can see clearly where and how I’ve improved, and where and how else I need to improve. Whether I should swing harder, upwards, or stop trying to be like Mora, our pitcher and captain last year, who always hit flying homeruns.

Batting’s an okay time. It’s kind of hard to translate training to game, even more so than throwing and catching. Pitchers have their own styles, the sun is blasting your eyes even though you’ve got a cap *and* helmet on, the ground is a sandy dirt you’re not used to, and the umpires have the tendency to make bad calls.



Batting's a bad time. Hand-eye coordination is a specific, difficult to develop thing. When it's game time, you've got two coaches and your entire team screaming chants and advice at you when you just want them to shut up, yelling "*kung strike, labas, kung ball, iwan*" when they never even clarified what the hell that means.

Batting feels like a whole different ball game. There's such a thing as a strike zone. It encompasses the space from your elbows to your knees when you're in position.


As soon as the ball is released, it's either a ball or a strike. Strikes are within the strike zone (obviously) and balls are outside it.

If it's a ball, you're not meant to swing. You're lucky if it's a ball and you don't swing. You're lucky if you get four balls and you never swung. That means walking to first base. You're slightly less lucky if you get hit by the ball. That's also a walk.

If it's a strike, well... If it's fast, you have to let your bat out quicker. If it's slow, it's harder to tell. You have to hit it hard so it goes far and fast, and if you can do that, you better hope it's in a blind spot the infielders are too slow to get to and outfielders are too far apart for. If you hit it upwards, it better be a homerun, or, again, in a blind spot that'll confuse the players about your pop-fly.

Three strikes and you're out. Two strikes and a third strike dropped or missed by the catcher, and you can run to first. Two fouls and that's two strikes. It's a lot of rules nobody tells you until after the commotion dies down.

None of that matters once you've actually hit it though. You're filled with enough nervous energy that all you care about is batting the ball inwards then running to first base. Here's the thing; the ball is always faster than the



player. Hopefully, the throw isn't strong enough or not targeted perfectly and you make it. Otherwise, you're devastated to be faced with and only with the sight of the first baseman catching the ball before you get past even halfway the distance between home plate and first base.

Fun time.


I have it easier in training. Nerves aren't as bad in training. I'm hell in sneakers when I'm batting in training, hitting Coach's pitches hard and first time. But only because I know his pitches. They're fast and accurate. If I let my bat out as soon as he lets the ball fly, I'm likely to hit it. I know I've got some muscle in me so it'll hit the ground and run pretty far on a smooth ground.

It's the same case with the good pitchers. The strike zone is a fairly big area, so major league pitchers know they can put their ball anywhere in it and *they do*. High school level pitchers, not so much. If they're *that* great, they can pitch over and over, and it'll be a strike, but for the most part, they don't deviate from the invisible line going straight to the catcher's glove. The part that separates them from the rest with good accuracy is the speed and strength. Just like with Coach, you just have to get out before them. That's why I like the good pitchers with fast strikes, and why I hate the bad ones with both balls and strikes.

I'm not worried about batting for the JV v. V game. For the most part, I know all our pitchers and I can bat against them. Instead, I worry about running faster, get faster, *go faster, make it there, don't slip and don't overstep*.

After the last batter, Coach makes us gather around him. Team time.

My team has four of the six JV players. I also have the catcher in my year, the two pitchers and an outfit elder from the year above, and Lia.



The other team has both our captain catcher and co-captain pitcher, another pitcher who's naturally good, two infielder/outfielders from my year, a player that's been on the team since last year, and another who's not so good, plus the other two JVs.

I resign myself to the fact that we're definitely not going to win as we walk back to our area. This is not something I'm upset about. At the very least, I feel it an honour and a privilege to play against your own team, see them put their efforts to good use against you.

The fact of the matter is that the team is split up. Them winning means the team won. Maybe not to the same effect as winning against another team from another school, but a win is a win.

I'm happy to see you hit a homerun! Yes, catch the pop-fly! Fine, tag me out!


Just tag out the other team from the other school. Catch their pop-fly. Hit a homerun against their pitcher, one that makes all the outfielders run far away from their regular positions, one that raises your Runs-Batted-In by four.

So, I square my shoulders and puff up "against" Reese, one of the pitchers in my year.

"*O, ano? Ano?* What'chu got?" I laugh out with fake intimidation, still laughing when she does it right back.

Quickly, cooldown is over and we're cleaning ourselves up.

"Bye! *Ingat!*" I yell behind me, feeling a smile form at the chorus of byes I hear as I walk towards the elevator. Fourth floor of the sports complex, no way am I taking the stairs.



Nobody else is in the elevator so I get time to contemplate, to remember the first. JV v. V, circa March 2023. That one was something else—my first year of softball was something else.

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Tryouts for Varsity were in the beginning of the year, but I missed it. My mother and sister contracted something and brought it home for me, like a terrible present. I decided a week later that it wasn't that big of a deal, that I didn't really care about Varsity, but the whole forgive and forget never made sense to me, so to this day they're banned from our games.

When I got back to school and attended training (for the very first time, mind you), Coach defaulted me into Varsity.

I wished for time to stop and the world to slow down so I could consider my options. Yes, I wanted to try out for the team, but that was because I had a very excitable acquaintance—now best friend in the team—who texted me. Yes, I wanted to try out for the team, but I didn't expect to pass.

No, time didn't stop and the world didn't slow down. Instead, I nodded jerkily and stuttered out a “sure”, eyes wide and mouth probably gaping like a fish. Do I know what everyone else who was actually, truly, genuinely Varsity was thinking or even reacted like? Could I tell if they wanted me there? Absolutely not, I practically blacked out when Coach started talking to me.

Can I even do this? Do I deserve a Varsity position? Am I good enough to play this sport?



It ended up going okay. The undergrads were a pretty cool couple of people and the graduates were... less than fine, equaling an incredibly mediocre experience.

And then came the day of my first JV game, as a part of Varsity. There was one issue; JV only had two members, which totaled to nowhere near enough for two full teams. Coach's solution? Invite the old guard, former players.

They were so awesome.


They dumped their stuff not on the bleachers they once had, but on the floor an entire washroom away. They didn't get much time to practise, but were somehow still on our level.

Their pitcher? Carlos.

The only other time I was that nervous was when I had to give a speech in a language I wasn't familiar with, when I had to perform in front of the entire school. The thing is that they were the ones doing this before me. They know what I'm supposed to be doing, what my form should look like, how fast I should be, etc.

I didn't hit a single pitch. This thing that's bright and kind of big and not even going that fast; I couldn't hit it. A swing and a miss. I hadn't learnt yet that not believing in yourself makes you a bad player and we were coming off a couple of actual game losses in a row. To say I was not in the right headspace to aim the heavy end of the bat would be an understatement.

Thankfully, I got to walk and steal a couple bases. I put effort into that to make up for the fact my batting had crapped the bed. Still didn't feel enough.



I don't remember winning or losing; you'd think for such an important game, I'd remember the feeling of winning against those that were so good and are still so good, or losing with the satisfaction of having played against them at all.

What I do remember is huddling up with everyone—both former and current. Hands in, face down or away, and yell, “Softball... team!”

Yeah, we have no official name. To this day, we don't have one.

But we're still a team. A team now pitted against each other once more.

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It's the day of my very second JV game so I go through the motions of the stretching, the five laps, the catching and throwing, the fielding, the batting. Go get the ball that went too far and no one's willing to get while Coach calls everyone over to start the game.

I realise I'm in the best place when I'm far away from it.


Cover your bases.

I'm smiling to myself when I hear them yell their playful threats and predictions. I pick up the ball, the nicks and dark areas, the slightly too big for my hand.

The ball is maybe more than just a ball, maybe a metaphor.

Step up to the plate.

I wind up my arm and feel that twinge. Feel the heart start to race and the palms start to sweat. All the better for gripping the ball, maybe. Feel the



smile start to widen and the laugh reach its way out of a pit of anxiety Feel the bundle of nerves the size of my strike zone.

Let me show you that I can do what I want you to do. Let me show you I can make good plays against another team from another school. I can hit a homerun. I can catch a pop-fly. I'm just as good as you, damn it, you'll see. I'm on this team for a reason, I wasn't just let in.

It ain't over 'til it's over. I can do this.

“Hey!” I yell. With the ready form of a ball about to be thrown, almost all gloves go up, ready to catch.

The ball flies, making the distance. Someone catches it. Something that physically weighs so little yet emotionally weighs tons is so easily put back into the crate of other weighty balls.

We line up on either side of the tape forming a home plate shape on the ground, high-fiving as we walk past each other with an obligatory “good luck”.

“Play ball!” Coach yells out.

Catch it, throw it, field it, bat it. Get the ball and prove yourself.