

From Chapter 1. Desert Baseball:

A Field of Our Own

Eventually we got a field with a backstop, and the youngest kid had the opportunity to play right field and even bat occasionally. The savior of the neighborhood was Clarence Parmenter's father. He was a heavy equipment operator for a construction company, and he arranged to bulldoze the desert off the vacant lot across the street from my house. This removed the cactus and mesquite but left ridges, ruts, and rocks. We leveled and smoothed the field with rakes as best we could, and the summer rains smoothed it more. Then the sun baked the mud into hard adobe¹. It was like playing on concrete with a light sprinkling of sand and dust on top. Ground balls accelerated on the second bounce to the amazement and chagrin of infielders and pitchers.

Our field had eccentricities. For example, bulldozing left piles of brush and cactus around the perimeter of the playing field, and these became homes for various desert fauna, such as quail, scorpions, lizards, ground squirrels, rabbits, and especially, rattlesnakes. When a ball rolled into one of these piles, an outfielder found a long stick and gingerly teased the ball out, so it was safely beyond the reach of fangs. Then he picked it up and pegged it to the infield. Meanwhile, the pitcher's ERA was accumulating, "Ker-ching, Ker-ching". Think how snake piles in the outfield might add excitement to major league baseball today. They could also make golf, soccer, and modern dance more interesting.

Another characteristic of dirt fields was fine dust that collected wherever there was a lot of activity, such as the batter's box and the pitcher's "mound". Whenever we played with an unscuffed ball, dust made the ball slippery. Soon we figured out how to throw a dry spitball by applying dust to the two pitching fingers (index and middle). Many years later I saw pitchers throwing dry spitters in the majors, but they filled their pockets with talc rather than use dust from the mound.

Home plate on our field was a battered hubcap; first and second bases were old oily rags. But third base was completely different. It was a discarded mattress, and it didn't even have any springs sticking out of it! No one in his or her right mind slid into a base (imagine sliding on a surface of 30 grit sandpaper), but third was different. We didn't slide into third; rather we slid on it with a loud thud and an echoing series of bounces. In fact, it was so much fun that base runners slid even when they didn't need to. Triples were more common than home runs because some players couldn't get past sliding over and over again on third.

¹ A sun or oven-baked clay brick used as a building material in desert regions.