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Writing About Sports

Essay 1/Draft 2

### The Cage

I remember when I stepped into the cage for the first time. It was a surreal moment I'll never forget--a crossing of boundaries, a forging of a new frontier. The cage had always been intimidating, with its manifold flaps, straps, and traps seemingly mocking me every time I cast a wary eye towards it. The cage had always been for the other people; my place was elsewhere. On that day, though, the fates had looked disapprovingly on me and I found myself up against my inanimate foe. My eyes had been shut tight while I entered and I opened them to see my vision had been updated with a grill of metal bars. Feeling akin to a convict, secure yet imprisoned, I tested out my range of motion and found my new limitations to be more constraining than I had imagined. Beads of sweat began to run down my face and I cringed as they pooled underneath my chin before I wiped them off with a grimace. "Orlowski! Get out here!" The voice of my coach, unwelcoming yet inevitable, confirmed the inescapable reality. I took a deep breath and trotted out to the dirt circle surrounding home plate and assumed my squat as our pitcher prepared for his warm-up tosses. He stretched his arms and attempted to look as professional as a ten year-old can look. Then he toed the rubber, reared back, and let fly with a delivery he hoped looked exactly like one he saw on TV.

The ball seemed to freeze in mid-flight towards the plate as I racked my memory for anything I could use in next half-second beside the instinct my coach claimed and I hoped was programmed into me. Unfortunately, what I found gave me little comfort.

We all tried to emulate someone when we were young. For some of us it was an older brother a few leagues up. For others a favorite MLB player provided inspiration. For me, though, baseball and my father were inseparable. Every morning without fail, if I was pitching later that day, he'd take me out in front of our single-story blue house in suburban southern California and convince me to toss a football around for fifteen minutes. Because, as he explained, "That's what Nolan Ryan used to do every morning before he pitched." And when it came to baseball, there was one thing my father had never, ever done, completely by design. Throughout his years playing ball, he had spent but one game of it as a catcher and had passed on to me his dislike of the position. "The cage," as he called it, "is a horrible place to be," he'd frequently say. If we were watching a game, he'd point out every potential crunching collision at home plate innings before it had a chance of happening and described in detail the pain of taking a ball in the dirt off an exposed shoulder blade. He was baseball for me, and baseball for him was everything but catching.

Yet here I was, my father's son, pressed into duty after both my team's catchers had gone down with fluke injuries in the course of a game, about to receive a warm up pitch in an actual game. As the ball spun closer, I realized its course was bearing straight for the dirt about a foot in front of the plate on my right hand side. "Oh no. No, no, no. This is what I was afraid of. What do I do? How am I supposed to everything? Anything? What am I even doing back here?" Isolated thoughts popped up like islands amidst the sea of doubt in my mind. But—a glimmer of hope appeared. That hope had no right to be there. But I saw it nonetheless and instantly and desperately pursued it. With my eyes closed, I shot my arm across my body and backhanded the pitch off a short hop with a

satisfying *thwack* as the little round white sphere nestled perfectly in the webbing of the catcher's mitt I had borrowed. Instantly, the cage became a home. One pitch undid a lifetime of catching fear; as I threw the ball back, I looked to the stands and saw a smile playing around the corners of my father's mouth. Another pitch, another *thwack*. Pitch and catch. Catcher and pitcher. The rhythm, like a kick drum underscoring the soundtrack of the game, came naturally to me. The game continued and, at its conclusion, though I had flat-out missed a few pitches and bobbled quite a few more, I felt immensely satisfied and proud.

As soon as I got the opportunity, I ran to my father and gave him a hug. From that day onward, my father never talked smack about catching again. As his experiences and childhood had influenced my views about baseball, so mine had now influenced his. My catching career took off and I ended up starting behind the dish for our neighborhood all-star team for the next six years. Though I never had the best arm for throwing out runners, my quickness and agility saved many a run when it came to blocking. Catching became a lifestyle for me--reaction and reflexes became and still are a part of my everyday life as I abstract them to different areas of my life.

As a flag football receiver, the hand-eye coordination I developed while catching has proved invaluable, and I have saved many table tennis points over the years because of my familiarity with tracking a rapidly spinning ball in flight. Musically, I know that the mentality I have while playing an improvisational solo is not terribly different than my mindset when orchestrating an inning through calling fastballs and sliders. It's all about the creativity in finding the perfect pitch.

In my family, catching is now a tradition. Both my brothers are successful

catchers in little league, and even my father has ventured to take a turn behind dish now and then when one of them wants to practice his pitching. The bond of baseball, strengthened by the addition of catching, that links us so tightly together as a family has withstood many tests and trials over the years but has always held; during my college application process, my father and I disagreed on many points and grew apart, culminating in us not speaking to each other for six weeks. As soon as the baseball season started, though, we were able to set aside our pride and look forward together to something bigger than either of us. For America's game is not just about bats and bases, stats and sliders, or even wins and losses—it is about family, friends, courage, heart, and most of all, hope. That hope I had no right to find during my first moments in the cage permeates all of baseball. It sets us free to support, cherish, and love our guys and the game itself when by all reason we should do the exact opposite. My freedom, and ultimately my family's, came through the cage.

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