

The Passion: You Can Go Home Again

By: Mark Svengold; Photograph: Marc Asnin

Page: [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#)

After more than 30 years away from the game he loves, Mark Svengold laced up his cleats, stepped up to the plate, and struck a blow against the sliders and curveballs of midlife

At 48 there's just no arguing about it.

I am well beyond midlife. Just double the number and you'll see what I mean. I'll let you do it though. I don't count that high. Even so, something like a midlife crisis has been looming for me. Not that I don't love my wife, Martha, our two children, and our slightly panicked but interesting, purposeful, and driven careers, all of which allots me, according to a study, a scant hour or so of free time each day to be alone to think about it all. Many guys, of course, weather this period of life sensibly, without resorting to the destructive affair, the divorce, or enlistment in the Foreign Legion. My older brother, Steve, for instance, bought a motorcycle and drove across the country from Seattle to New York. A friend started running marathons. Another started going on long solo hikes in Alaska's Brooks Range. I found a different answer to this indefinable urge that arrived, as it does, like some vaguely understood migratory call of the wild.

All spring and throughout the summer, I awake at dawn and slip out of bed, where my wife lies sleeping and our children, having sneaked into the bedroom (again), also lie sprawled. I step away from this slumbering scene, the floorboards creaking. Out in the living room, I quietly tape up my bad ankle, bandage the blisters on my hands, don the knee brace, step through the elastic of my jock strap, and insert my cup. When finished with these various preparations, properly suited up, I am a man in uniform, uniquely protected for his walk to the train. To see me is to know my purpose. It isn't a grand one, of course, but a purpose that, nonetheless, for the next three to four hours, will be unassailably, unimpeachably, and entirely my own. On the street, equipment bag slung over my shoulder, the air is cool and calm. I stop at a bodega for Gatorade, a PowerBar, and a pack of bubble gum. On the Metro-North line, it is a straight shot all the way to Connecticut, where the members of my team, the Stamford Phillies, composed of men mostly my age—hedge-fund guys, the owner of a sporting-goods store, a couple of state patrol officers, an FBI agent, among others—in slant light and birdsong, are stepping onto the grass of an outfield still wet with dew. I am happier than I have been in years, because on this Sunday morning, I am released from all care. I am gone. I am off. I am out of there. I am away. I am headed, as by now you may have gathered, for church. The Church of Baseball.

I am not alone. Each weekend I am joined by tens of thousands of men across the country who have, like me, decided to stop watching the game and start playing it.

The Stamford Phillies are part of a national organization called the Men's Senior Baseball League, which has age divisions all the way up to 55 and over. In all, something north of 40,000 men round the bases every summer weekend around the country, for teams with names that hark back to the 19th-

century Beer & Whiskey League: the Fresno Grizzlies, the Rhode Island Salty Dogs, and the Central Coast Brew Crew. The season winds up in October with a mega tournament in Phoenix. You can go as a team or go alone and join one. After my regular season was over last year, I did just that. As the Boston Red Sox prepared to sweep the Colorado Rockies in the World Series, I flew to Arizona for my own World Series and played for the Westchester Mets—chasing down flies on outfields as immaculate as putting greens and facing some of the best (and worst) middle-age pitching in America. It was all part of a season in which I traced my own progress among a bunch of guys held together by the purposeful return to the real risks and difficulties and genuine rewards of a game with wooden bats, pine tar, cleats, and 90 feet between the bags. It was a game that, for me, had been a boyhood passion, long extinguished, but that had now been given, suddenly, wonderfully, new life. In a new season and with an older body, I had joined the fray again after a hiatus of nearly 35 years.

It was all prompted, months earlier, by a sidewalk conversation with Sidney Hardee, JP Morgan derivatives strategist, fellow parent at my daughter's school, and a former first baseman at Yale. Sidney told me about the Phillies and suggested I try out. That's how I found myself, one fine spring afternoon, at a baseball field behind Stamford High School. In left field, I joined a line of players loosely assembled, as one by one we stepped forward to catch balls being fungoed to us in long, lazy arcs from the pitcher's mound by Kevin Clark, one of the head coaches, who eventually squared up and launched a ball my way. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke describes the path of a ball in midair:

it bends

and pauses up above to show the throng

*a new position. . .
. . .then, as expected, indeed planned,
swiftly, simply, easily, uncurbed
descending back into a first baseman's
outstretched glove*

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Page: [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#)

Okay, I made up that last line. To the best of my knowledge, Rilke never played first base. But he did spend some time, in 1908, when "The Ball" was written (the same year that "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" was composed...by two guys who'd never actually been to a baseball game), watching some sort of ball travel through the air, and he tried to grasp, as I try now to convey, its compelling euclidean path. As the ball hit by Kevin Clark sailed upward, I felt an old, familiar calculus at work, some innate sense in me, a well-honed skill with virtually no practical application in the rest of my adult life, to determine where and how fast I should run to position myself—and wait there, as casually as I could manage—in the green expanse of left field for the rendezvous and the loud, satisfying pop of a ball into a glove.

The other head coach and manager of the Phillies, Albert Cheng, an investment banker, waved me over. "So here's the deal," he said. "We only need 16 players. Right now we have 20. A lot of our guys have been playing many years for the team." They already had two first basemen, both of whom could

hit the ball hard. The point he was building toward was that he didn't really need me. "You can try out today, but I can't guarantee you much playing time." As he spoke, I watched as Kevin launched one beautiful arcing ball after another into left field. In the afternoon sunlight of early May, I felt like a chained-up dog that had caught the rich scent of game on the breeze. After practice, in the parking lot, Albert opened the trunk of his car and handed me a Phillies jersey and a red belt. Then he got into his car. "You gotta get the pants," he said. "The gray pants."

What was it like coming back to the game after so long? Almost dreamlike. Normally, walking again onto the main stage of old childhood adventures involves a degree of spatial compression, everything comically collapsing upon itself, so that the site of epic, expansive playground contests looks impossibly small. But returning to baseball had the opposite effect. In the years since high school, I hadn't actually *stopped* playing ball, but I'd grown accustomed to playing softball in college and graduate school, with softball's much smaller field dimensions. As a result, when I took first base last spring, the infield seemed oceanic, the outfield located in some other county. I could barely make the throw to third. It took me a solid month before I didn't feel as if my arm was going to shatter like glass or fly out of its socket and land, like a downed duck, halfway to the target.

Game Time

While the poetry of arcing balls and the welcome feel of a leather glove had weathered the decades well, I faced a new, unwelcome reality: A simple infield practice was enough to leave me panting for breath. How could this be? I ran five miles a couple of times a week without trouble. For an answer, I turned to Glenn S. Fleisig, PhD, an expert in biomechanics at the American Sports Medicine Institute. There's a difference, he says, between being in shape (able to run five miles, for

instance) and being in what Fleisig calls "functional shape." I was using the same muscles during infield practice as in distance running, but I was using them differently. Covering first calls upon "explosive, fast-twitch muscle fibers," according to Fleisig. "After years of inaction, you've returned to a predominantly fast-twitch anaerobic exercise regimen, which can easily exhaust you or make your muscles sore." While I may have lost a step and initially tired more easily, there was much less to learn on the field. As my arm strengthened, I was again able to bear down with force, the arc of my throws from deep right flattening out, sailing just above the raised arms of the cutoff man and popping smartly into the waiting glove of the shortstop. Playing defense felt like putting on an old shirt.

Hitting was another matter altogether. "If a person from another planet were told what's involved," Porter Johnson, a physics professor at Illinois Institute of Technology once observed, "he would say it's impossible." Johnson was talking about hitting in the big leagues, but still...my learning curve was steep. I found, however, that I'd become a much better student of the art, compared with the days of my youth, when hitting simply meant too much, when a strikeout left me choking, unable to speak. A mountain of pressure made it difficult, I now understand, to take the long view. And batting, like golf, is a test of one's ability to navigate repeated failures with equanimity, to analyze mistakes clinically, to learn, in effect, from each mishap, and thus to improve. By the end of the season, I'd recorded only two official hits, both hard infield shots. I'd beaten the throw on both occasions, so, yes, they were hits, in a technical sense. But I had yet to record my first official, bona fide, uncontested, over-the-heads-of-players line drive. And so, a week prior to my last game with the Phillies, I went to see a batting coach.

I found Rod Stephan, MSBL Hall of Fame inductee, two-time

MSBL batting champion, at his office, AMAPro Sports, a baseball-equipment retailer on Long Island. Stephan, a big man with linebacker shoulders, graying sideburns, and a goatee, took me into his batting cage, placed a ball on the batting tee, and told me to swing. "You're swinging with your arms," he said. I looked at him blankly. He reminded me that power comes from the lower body, the midsection and the legs. He aligned the knuckles of each hand and told me to relax my grip. He showed me that my hands should be the first things to cross the strike zone. This increases the speed and power at the business end of the bat. His batting tee forced me to swing down slightly in order to hit the ball. It is this slight downward motion, Stephan explained, that makes balls carry instead of bite into the dirt of the infield. In a kind of Copernican revolution, Stephan gave me a glimpse of what it means to be hitterish—of how inside and outside pitches are powerful points of leverage that can work in favor of the batter. "I don't care about curves or off-speed versus fastball," the hitting champion said. "All I care about is what zone the ball is in—inside, middle, or outside. That's all I need to know." I hoped it would be enough for me too.

My last game with the Phillies was a good day and—this is baseball, after all—a bad day. I made a couple of good saves at first base, one that helped send us into extra innings, but in thinking about everything Stephan had taught me, I thought my way into an 0-for-4 performance at the plate. Before anyone could have anticipated, the morning had stretched into early afternoon. The Fairfield Marlins rallied for the winning run, and then, as we picked up our gear, the cell phones started ringing, with wives, fiancées, and girlfriends inquiring as to our whereabouts. Nobody was particularly interested in hurrying this part of the day along. We stood in the parking lot, drinking beer in our socks and talking over the game and the season in clipped phrases that sounded vaguely like Yogi Berra

aphorisms. "We were the best last-place team in the league," someone said. "We had great hitters, but no hitting," someone else offered.

Page: 1 2 3 4

One thought took the sting out of going 0 for 4: My season wasn't over yet. I still had a shot at getting my hit. Indeed, all of golden October stretched before me in anticipation of the Men's Senior Baseball League World Series. In the weeks to come, I would change colors—socks, cap, and jersey—from Phillies red to Westchester Mets blue. And in the last week of October, I would get on a plane, as hundreds of other guys were doing—from South Dakota and Baton Rouge, from Fresno and Omaha, from Toronto and Moosejaw, and as far away as Australia—and go to Phoenix, that is to say, to the baseball mecca of greater Phoenix. This is a place where the fields are as green and lovingly groomed as Japanese gardens, where the dugouts are clean and the outfields are the size of New England townships, where the hot dogs are free and the beer runs out of spigots—and where I was guaranteed to play at least five games. One of these games would be played under the lights in Tempe Diablo Stadium, winter home of the Arizona Diamondbacks and the place where, more to the point at hand, Mr. Bat and I had an appointment at the plate with Mr. Ball.

The Show

It was the practice before game day, and Bruce Bendish, a trial lawyer who is also the manager, captain, and catcher for the Westchester Mets, was driving the van. Bruce had starting pitchers on his mind. The first game of the tournament would be preceded, it almost went without saying, by the first *night* prior to the game. Like an historical panorama in which the outcome of the battle is set in motion by the weather from the day before,

the starting pitcher would be determined by how many beers he polished off before falling into bed that night. Sitting next to Bruce in the front seat of the van—with his head slumped forward as if studying a map, or sleeping—was Vince Foscaldi, a round-shouldered gentleman in his seventies who looked like Don Zimmer in sunglasses and sweatpants and whom everyone called Vinny, or, alternately, Pot Roast. His playing years were long behind him, but he never missed a trip to the MSBL World Series, where he assiduously kept score, shuffled lineups, coached first base, and regaled the team with malapropisms that were collected and traded as the stuff of legend. Once, when Bruce had hired a sports therapist for the team, Vinny was asked if he wanted a rubdown. "No thanks," he said. "I'm injury-prone-free."

Let the record show that I'm not suggesting the Westchester Mets do a lot of drinking—no more, say, than the hundreds of other middle-age guys in baseball uniforms released in the desert for a week from all forms of responsibility and recognizance. Though there was that evening, years ago, when Bruce received an off-season call from a real-estate agent in Scottsdale about a condominium that Bruce apparently purchased at some point in the evening of a Mets postgame victory. That Bruce *could not actually recall* buying a condominium did not prevent him from seeing the inherent wisdom of the move, however it had come about. Indeed, the team members formed the IPF (Injury Prone Free) Corporation, pooled their money, and happily made the condominium their October home. It is spacious and comfortable, with a big kitchen, a loft, a hot tub, and a veranda (with baseball-shaped concrete steps) overlooking a driving range and, at night, glittering Greater Phoenix/Scottsdale.

Now, about that appointment with Mr. Ball.

But first, cue the orchestra— *ba-boom!* Then we need a shot of a big-league stadium glowing at night, from a distance, then a long walk up the steps and through a portal, cameras swiveling into position. Then there's the sweeping, gratifying geometries of a ball field under big lights too bright to look at directly. The movie score rises as the Westchester Mets, in blue, gray, and orange, take the field, some of them stopping for a moment to stand with stupid smiles on their faces and stare up at the bleachers, the rest stepping across the chalk of the foul line. Now cut to the chiseled profile of Bruce ("The Fossil") Bendish, a 61-year-old catcher who can still rear back and throw out a base runner at second, surveying his players as they stretch out on the field or toss balls back and forth. "This," he says finally, "is where the tournament starts."

So what if the seats were empty, except for my niece, Natalie, and her husband, Monte, and my older brother, Steve, who had driven down from Seattle to sit behind home plate with a video camera and record the show? And so what if that's mostly what I meant when I said "cameras swiveling into position"? If you haven't played in competition in a major-league stadium at night, then I'm here to report that there is something seriously missing from your life.

At the end of the sixth inning, it was Sacramento 7, Mets 0. Then our bats woke up, Sacramento started committing the errors instead of us, and by the bottom of the eighth, the Mets were ahead by a run. With two outs and men on second and third, I came up to the plate. I took the first strike and then swung on the next pitch, my hands leading the bat through the strike zone, the ball soaring over the head of the shortstop. Two runs were scored. The game ended with the Westchester Mets winning, 10-7.

It was one highlight among many in a tournament in which I often found myself thinking—between innings, say, during the hustle to hit the field or to grab a helmet and a bat—that, in truth, there was no distant beach, no poolside cabana, no other place in the world I'd rather be, really, than with these wildly amusing, riotously profane guys from Westchester. I loved the challenge of testing myself in competition and the old feeling of being part of a team, a rarity for a writer who is alone at his desk most days. "The togetherness in baseball," Billy Martin once called it. But playing hardball also offers an all-encompassing suspension from the regular routine of family, which still makes small incursions, now and then, from unexpected places. "This is my life," said Rob Sachs, a thoughtful right-handed reliever for the Stamford Phillies, earlier in the season. "I dig into my baseball bag, and I find diapers and wipes."

Page: 1 2 3 4

But maybe baseball offers that rarest of things these days: an open-ended sense of time spent among a group of guys temporarily suspended from care, engaged in being merely playful. The play in, on, and around the game is nearly as much fun as the game itself. I love the sublime malarkey and joyous banter of baseball chatter, suffused with full-on male vulgarity that often slides merrily into non sequitur. Indeed, baseball's answer to the daily grind seems to offer many occasions for marvelous nonsense, of men happily returned to their bodies. Once, during an intramural practice in Greenwich, a shortstop turning a double play in the last light of a summer evening shouted "Sweet!" then added what I'll leave you with here, a baseball version of a Zen koan: "Like a sock on a chicken!" Above us, a blue moon rose up in the sky, like a baseball.

