

Peanuts Toretta

Peanuts Toretta was a long, lanky kind of boy. He wore glasses and a buzz haircut. His glasses seemed to magnify his dark brown eyes. But when he wore his dark blue baseball cap with the red bill, he felt special. And in the spring and summer of 1962, Peanuts wore his red and blue baseball cap, whenever he was not in school or at mass. That is because his cap was a Crest Hill Boys Club baseball cap. And Peanuts pitched for the Senators in the Crest Hill Boys Club Pony League.

Little Nick's dad coached the Senators along with Jack Fitzsimmon's father. Peanuts did not have a father. He lived with his mom and his many brothers and sisters. At the age of eleven, Peanuts was the oldest of his siblings. He took care of his brothers and sisters when his mother worked. And his mother took care of the children when Peanuts worked. Yes, Peanuts worked when he was eleven. He delivered newspapers in both the mornings and afternoons for two different newspaper companies. And on Saturdays, Peanuts helped out at a store in the shopping center near his home. Peanuts had to work because he did not have a father and his mother was poor.

Because of his family situation, Peanuts had to get around on his own. He did that on his bicycle. He rode his bike to deliver his newspapers, to get to school, to the shopping center to work and to the ball field to play baseball.

Peanuts' mother could not afford a baby-sitter. Because she had to take care of the children when he was away, no one from Peanuts family ever got to see him pitch. And that was a shame because Peanuts was a very, very good baseball pitcher.

How Peanuts came to play with the Senators for Little Nick's dad is kind of a mystery. The Pony League was for boys living in Crest Hill who were 8 to 11 years old. The year before was Little Nick's first year in the league when he was eight. Peanuts did not play baseball that year, at least not for Crest Hill. Though he may

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have played for Holy Trinity in the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) baseball league. At least, that's what Little Nick thought he had heard.

That year, Little Nick's first year playing Pony League baseball, the Senators were a new team to the league. They finished in last place, but the boys had fun playing baseball. Little Nick's dad and Jack Fitzsimmon's father taught the boys how to play the game. And the two coaches made sure every boy on the team got to play in every game. That was the rule. But the next year, some boys, especially all the Senators pitchers, did not come back. Some played for the CYO, some played for the County league, and some did not want to play at all.

This meant the Senators were a very young team without much pitching. Most of their players were nine, some eight, a couple, ten and one eleven. That was Nick's friend Paul Salvarano. Perhaps that is why the Pony League commissioner and president, Mr. Logan and Mr. Jones respectively, the men who governed the league, assigned Peanuts to play for Little Nick's dad and the Senators. So the Senators would have at least two eleven-year olds on the team. If the men who ran the league had known how good a pitcher Peanuts was, they probably would have kept him on their team—the Pirates. Because the Pirates had most of the better ballplayers.

The Pony League played all their games on the two ball fields behind Crest Hill Elementary School. The ball fields sat next to one another, facing in the same direction. The fields were surrounded by woods on three sides. The brick schoolhouse bordered the fourth side (left and center fields) of the closer ball field. Sometimes a batted ball from the back field could pass through left field and reach the first base bench of the front field, or maybe even dribble into the infield.

Both ball diamonds were all dirt. There was some grass in the outfields, but the fields had no fences. Each diamond had a chain-link backstop. A few weeks before the season began in May, the ballplayers and their parents had graded the ball fields. They raked out all the rocks. They built up the pitcher's mounds. And they poured sand on the infields, smoothing them out, nice and level. Everyone had worked hard. They were proud of their accomplishment. In fact, they were so proud, they decided

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to have a parade of all the teams through Crest Hill Heights on opening day. That was the Saturday of the Memorial Day holiday weekend.

This was the summer of 1962. John F. Kennedy was President of the United States. He was the first—the only Roman Catholic President in the nation’s history. Crest Hill was a community with a majority of Roman Catholics, mostly of Italian descent. The folks in Crest Hill Heights believed the President when he had said in his inauguration speech: “Ask not what the country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.” There was an air of optimism in the country. There was an air of optimism in Crest Hill. And this optimism found a place in the town’s civic pride. And that civic pride was placed on display in Crest Hill’s Boys Club baseball parade.

The police cordoned off the parade route from the end of Main Street to the school. They did this so the boys could march safely in the street without fear of traffic. All the ballplayers and coaches wore their red and blue baseball caps. And the boys all wore their uniform T-shirts. The T-shirts were white with blue lettering on the front. The letters read “Crest Hill Boys Club.”

The league had ten teams. And each team marched together under a banner with the team’s name. Each team had about sixteen players. So with two to three coaches per team, there were close to two hundred boys and coaches marching in the parade. The names of the teams were: the Athletics, Red Sox, Senators, Twins, White Sox, Braves, Cubs, Giants, Pirates, and the Orioles.

Because the opening day game was between the Senators and the Twins, the Senators got to march at the front of the other teams. A car rode before them in front of the parade. A man in the car with a bull horn announced the parade as the caravan travelled down Main Street to the ball fields behind the school. A drum and bugle corps also led the way behind the car. They included drum majorettes— baton twirlers, drummers and buglers. The boys carried their team banners through Crest Hill Heights. Little Nick, Jack Fitzsimmons, Peanuts and the rest of their team proudly carried a banner that read: “SENATORS.”

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The teams arrived at the newly manicured ball fields behind the school amid much fan-fare. Parents and siblings and friends of the players and coaches were there to cheer them on. But there was no one there from Peanuts family to cheer him on.

Little Nick's dad, Mr. Fitzsimmons and the kids on the Senators thought they had something special in Peanuts—like a secret weapon. Because, during their pre-season practices, no one on the Senators had been able to hit Peanuts very well. Little Nick, who was one of the better players, had struck out and managed to hit a couple weak grounders off of him. Nick had tried to bunt on Peanuts, but Peanuts had sprung off the mound quickly to field the bunt and throw Nick out on a close play at first base. And that was about as good as anyone else on the team had hit against Peanuts, even Paul Salvarano. So Little Nick's dad had said he was curious to see how Peanuts would do against the other teams. Well, he found out on opening day—Peanuts blew the Twins away. He no-hit them. Little Nick, his dad and the rest of the Senators knew right then, they would not finish in last place again this year.

The Twins found out what Little Nick and his teammates had learned already. That Peanuts Toretta was one tough guy to hit. Peanuts, a right-handed hurler, had a long-armed, straight-over-the-top, fluid delivery with a high leg kick. And he was tall for his age. When he stood on the mound, he looked like a giant. He had good control, good command of his pitches. That meant he could throw the ball exactly where he wanted to throw it. And Peanuts hid the ball well behind his ear before delivering his pitch. The batter could not pick up his ball easily. That is to say, a batter could not actually see the baseball until the last second when Peanuts released it. And Peanuts threw hard—bee-bees. When Little Nick had faced him, he felt as if the ball was on top of him before he knew it, giving him little time to react.

The Pony League teams were scheduled to play each other twice during the nine week season. Each game was seven innings long, unless the game went into extra innings due to a tie or unless the game was called for darkness before seven innings had been played. Usually, each team played two games a week, with each game about three days apart. For example, in any given week, the Senators might play

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Monday and Thursday evenings, Tuesday and Friday evenings, or on Wednesday evening and Saturday afternoon, depending on that week's schedule. The school ball fields had no lights. All evening games started at six and ended before dark.

Nick's dad pitched Peanuts twice a week, except on Saturdays. Peanuts had to work Saturdays. He had gotten special permission to leave work so he could pitch the Opening Day contest. Although the league had no rules to limit how many innings a player could pitch in a week, Little Nick's dad took special care to keep from wearing out Peanuts' rubber arm. He might start Peanuts as pitcher, but move him to first base when the team got a lead. Or Nick's dad might start one of the other kids like Jack Fitzsimmons or Gerry Mack and bring Peanuts in for relief as needed. But with Peanuts as their ace hurler, the Senators got real good, real fast. The guys behind Peanuts learned how to play solid defense. In fact, they played so well, teams rarely scored on the Senators. And they never beat them, not once during the entire season.

The Senators unbeaten record made the manager and coach of the Pirates very angry. Because, as the Commissioner and President of the League, who were also the Pirates coaches, they thought they had picked the best players for their team the Pirates. When the Senators finished in first place ahead of the Pirates, who finished in second place, the Pirates coaches were mad. They wanted to have a play-off between the top two teams, the Senators and the Pirates, to see which team should be crowned league champion, even though the Senators had won the league, undefeated.

Little Nick's dad and Mr. Fitzsimmons agreed to a best of three game play-off. The games were set for a Friday, Saturday and a Monday. This meant the Pirates would not have to face Peanuts in the second game, because Little Nick's dad would not pitch Peanuts two days in a row and because they knew Peanuts worked Saturdays. The Pirates figured even if Peanuts beat them the first game, they could win the second contest. They hoped Peanuts would be tired for the final game.

Peanuts beat them in the first game all right. But the Senators won without Peanuts in the second game on Saturday. Because the Senators won the first two play-off games, there was no need to play a third game. The Senators won the league and,

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now, the play-offs—undefeated. Now the Pirates coaches were really angry. So they came up with another idea.

They said that Peanuts gave the Senators an unfair advantage. They suggested that an all-star team be formed by picking the eighteen best kids off the other nine teams in the league. And then this team of “All-Stars” should play one game against the Senators to see who was better. Nick’s dad and Mr. Fitzsimmons agreed. The game was set for the next Saturday, to give the “All-Stars” a chance to practice together as a team. The game would be played, not behind Crest Hill School, but down at the County Park’s recreation field. This field was really a softball field. As such, it had no pitcher’s mound. Without a mound, the pitchers, including Peanuts, would have less of a natural advantage. The lack of a mound would favor the batters.

The big day arrived—the second Saturday in August. Peanuts received permission to skip work so he could pitch. The All-Stars (several of whom were Pirates, because they had the best players) sat on the first base bench under the shade of the trees. The Senators sat on the third-base side in the hot, humid August sun. Because the Senators were Pony League Champs, they were the home team and batted last.

Peanuts showed up on his bike, as always, even though the county field was a good ways from his home. And, as always, no one from his family was there to watch him. Everyone knew, kids and parents alike, what this game was really about. It was not just about some team finally defeating the Senators and Little Nick’s dad. It was about some team finally beating Peanuts. Peanuts knew that. But Peanuts was a humble kid. For all his victories, all the shut-outs and no-hitters he had tossed, Peanuts was just one of the guys. He never took on airs or considered himself special, above his teammates. And his teammates, Little Nick, Jack Fitzsimmons, Gerry Mack, Paul and Phil Salvarano and the rest of the guys, loved him for that. They played very hard, fundamentally sound baseball behind him. Peanuts’ teammates would do anything to help him win. And they did. After all, they hadn’t lost yet, even though there had been a few close games—real nail-biters.

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Peanuts was a quiet kid. He didn't yak it up much like some of the other kids, like Little Nick for instance. He smiled when he or a teammate did well, and after a victory. But when he was on the mound, Peanuts was all business. He had supreme concentration and superior focus. And this day of the "All-Star" game was no different. In fact, Peanuts had a quiet but more determined air than ever when he took the mound for the first pitch.

Inning after inning, Peanuts mowed down the "All-Stars." But he and his Senators' teammates found the sledding equally tough at the plate in their home half of each inning. The "All-Stars" manager, the Commissioner and manger of the Pirates Mr. Logan, was throwing the best pitchers in the league at the Senators, putting a fresh arm on the mound every couple of innings on this hot, humid August day. But Peanuts went the distance. In the bottom of the fifth, the score was tied at one apiece. The All-Stars lone run had been unearned, courtesy, eventually, of Little Nick's muff at second base. In the bottom of the fifth inning, the Senators rallied.

Paul Salvarano, batting in the clean-up spot, stepped to the plate for the Senators with a runner in scoring position and less than two outs. Paul was the Senators' catcher and their best hitter. Big Mike Kryzer was pitching for the All-Stars. He was a Pirate. Big Mike threw as hard as Peanuts, maybe harder, but he didn't have Peanuts' command of pitches. Big Mike was wild. He nailed Paul with a fast ball right on the point of his left elbow. Little Nick was on deck when Kryzer hit Paul.

Nick watched Paul's elbow balloon up, quickly swelling as big as a baseball. Paul was a tough kid, a year and half older than Nick, and much respected by his teammates. Yet, the pain overcame Paul and he cried out because of it. Paul never played another game of organized baseball after that plunking. Nick was scared.

Nick's dad inserted a base runner for Paul, while the moms gave Paul first aid. They applied ice to calm the swelling. The All-Stars catcher Mike Darko tossed Paul's bat over at Nick's feet in the on-deck circle. The kid lifted his mask, looked hard at Nick and said, "You're next, kid." Little Nick gulped. The umpire cried, "Play ball!" With two runners on base, Nick stepped to the plate.

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Kryzer was a huge kid. He dwarfed most of the other players. He was an imposing presence on the rubber, even if there was no mound. Little Nick was one of the smallest players in the league, very likely the smallest. Nick shrugged off Darko's threat when he stepped into the batter's box, but that wasn't easy to do. When he faced Kryzer, the big kid was still a little wild. Nick got ahead in the count. Then Nick's dad, coaching down in the third base coach's box, gave Nick the bunt sign. Nick dropped a perfectly placed bunt for a hit down the third base line. The runner from second base scored when Kryzer fielded the ball to throw to first. Nick beat Kryzer's throw to the bag. He had atoned for his earlier error. Then Gerry Mack batted in Nick and the runner ahead of him. When the inning ended, the Senators led the All-Stars 4 to 1. That was all the cushion Peanuts needed.

Gerry Mack moved from the outfield to catch in place of the injured Paul Salvarano, while Peanuts finished off the All-Stars in the sixth. The Senators rose to the occasion by playing errorless ball behind their ace hurler the rest of the game. When Peanuts struck out the last batter to end the ballgame, the Senators won 4 to 1 to remain undefeated and undisputed Crest Hill Boys Club Pony League Champs.

Both squads gathered behind the first base bench under the shade of the trees to sip soft drinks and attend the post-game awards ceremony. Mr. Logan, the Commissioner (coach of the losing All-Stars) handed out trophies to the triumphant Senators. Then he announced the award for the Most Valuable Player (MVP) of the game. He gave the huge MVP trophy to his son Danny Logan. The Commissioner's choice stunned the crowd of players and parents into a harsh, disbelieving silence.

Nick's Dad, his face angry to the point of turning red, stepped forward to the Commissioner, who was handing the big MVP trophy to his son. Nick's Dad spoke loudly for all to hear.

"This is a travesty," he said. "Peanuts, step over here please." Peanuts emerged from the throng to stand beside Nick's dad, who faced the Commissioner. Nick's dad put his arm around the shoulders of the fatherless boy. Nick's dad said, "This boy pitched his heart out, out there today. He pitched the whole game against your All-

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Stars and your multiple pitchers, giving up just one run against the best this league has to offer. He beat you all year. He beat you in the play-offs. And he beat you here again today. There's no doubt in anyone's mind, who the most valuable player is and it's this boy right here—Peanuts Toretta.” He hugged Peanuts closer to him.

Peanuts looked down at the ground. Nobody said anything. But the Commissioner would not change his mind. He would not take the MVP trophy from his son and award it to the more-deserving Peanuts.

Nick's dad said to Peanuts, again loud enough for all to here. “Son, you were the best player on the field all year and you proved that again today. You beat the best they could throw at you. There is nothing anyone can ever do to take that away from you. Don't ever forget that.”

Peanuts took a deep sigh, looked up at Nick's dad, nodded and smiled. Still his shoulders slumped a bit. His teammates came forward to congratulate him. They patted him on the shoulders, back and head, assuring him that he was the best. When they finished congratulating him, Peanuts got on his bike and rode home.

Later, Little Nick's Dad went to visit Peanuts' mom to tell her what happened. Nick never saw Peanuts after that. They went to separate schools. Peanuts was too old to play in the Pony League again. And he didn't play the next year in the Boys Club's older intramural league or on the Club's 12 and under County league team either. Maybe his family duties kept him from playing ball? Nick never knew what became of Peanuts. But one thing Nick knew, as did everyone else associated with the Crest Hill Boys Club Pony League in 1962—Peanuts Toretta was one heck of a pitcher. He was without a doubt the best player in the league. Nick's dad was right. Some things you earn, no one can ever take away from you, no matter what they do.

Moral of the story: Let no one steal away your joy.

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