



Keeping Score

A baseball tradition passed from father to son offers memories beyond the game.

by CARL FINCKE | photography by KEITH LANPHER

Guess you can blame it on Dad. It's his fault, isn't it, that this scorebook collection keeps growing; that I have an occasional nightmare about being at a baseball game without one; that I've dragged them halfway around the world?

Thanks, Dad.

As habits go, it's pretty harmless. In fact, it's one I don't expect to shake. But when folks ask why I do it — keep score at every major league game — I usually shrug my shoulders. I wasn't sure why; never really thought about it.

Then, for the first time, I went back through them — 33 years' worth, all 10 books, 267 games.

Now I know why.

It started in the '60s in cozy Crosley Field, watching the Cincinnati Reds. We lived just north of the city and took in a few games a year. Dad would keep score, and on occasion sent me down to get him a beer and brat. I swear I remember them selling beer to me, a kid, knowing it was for Dad. Simpler times.

Scoring, essentially a form of shorthand, can be simple or complex. Each scorekeeper develops their own symbols for tracking the game. There's a generally accepted core language, with countless dialects.

Dad's scoring style was basic — GO for a ground out, FO for a fly out. I've long since graduated to the "advanced" system, an indecipherable code to outsid-

ers: Each position has a number, K represents a strikeout, and countless slashes and dots clutter the page.

For us, the 10-cent scorecard was as essential to the game experience as the hot dog and peanuts. What I would give to go over Dad's old cards again. I can still see them in my mind, but I can't find them. I've turned the house inside out.

In particular, I wish I had the one from a 1967 game that haunted Dad forever. After a second rain delay, he insisted on leaving in the eighth inning with the Reds down 1-0 — even though St. Louis Cardinals rookie Dick Hughes had a no-hitter going.

On the way home, as his 12-year-old pouted in the back seat, Dad turned on the radio. Of course, the game resumed. The Reds scored twice to take the lead, and in the ninth pulled off a triple play — 6-4-3-2, for those of you scoring at home — with Tim McCarver thrown out at the plate to end the game.

After that, Dad sat through basketball blowouts, football mud bowls and countless extra innings. He might on rare occasions ask, "You ready to go?" But if I said, "Not yet," that was the end of it. Poor Dad — and poor me. To this day, I've never seen a triple play in person.

That game stands on its own. It's indelible and needs no assist from a camera or newspaper clip, or a scorebook.

But the books can take you back in time, filling in details otherwise lost. Precious moments shared with friends and family. Sights, tastes, sounds, encounters with stars. The covers and backs of my scorebooks have a dozen autographs from players, managers and old-timers, like Boog Powell and Moose Skowron.

Baseball is an acquired taste. The game can be appreciated, and hated, on many levels. Through a narrow lens, it's viewed as slow and tedious, leaning too heavily on numbers, stats and analytics. But a true fan of the sport doesn't worry about converting others to the faith. If the game bores you, fine. I like the history, the nos-

talgia. The "deliberate" pace is part of its charm, allowing for conversation — and score keeping.

The baseball scorebook is unique. Other sports and events have nothing like it. If you want a memento from a football or basketball game, or a Broadway play or concert, the best you can probably do is a ticket stub, playbill or program.

At first, my books were just a play-by-play of the game. Maybe a few notes about the weather, seat location, ticket price, attendance, length of game. Before long, they morphed into journals of the entire experience: details of the road trip, winners of the pierogi race, beer counts, eatery recommendations from locals, chants in the stands, rundowns of glutinous days at Oktoberfest, movie stars singing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," a Cuban smoked after a big win. For some reason, I'm especially fond of a pizza stain on one page.

I have one book from a 1987 double-header in Cincy. The lone note from that second game says simply: "Lost luggage! Airport parking lot!" Now remember, this was long ago, during younger and wilder days — an episode I'm not especially proud of.

After wrapping up a four-game series between the Braves and Reds, we were cutting it close getting to the airport and having a devil of a time finding the entrance to the rental car return. We zipped past it twice, banging over speed bumps, and finally said the heck with it and went into the lot the wrong way, slowly sliding under the wooden arm that is supposed to keep you out.

We parked, discovered the trunk ajar and our bags missing. We quickly retraced our steps, thinking maybe they bounced out going over the speed bumps. No sign of them, so we raced to catch our plane.

Four days later, we got a call from the Cincinnati police: "We've found a piece of luggage belonging to you. We'll send it back — but we can't return the marijuana."

"Uh ... I don't know how that got in there," stammers the "one" of us.



"We've found a piece of luggage belonging to you. We'll send it back – but we can't return the marijuana."

Turns out someone had popped our trunk while we were parked near the stadium. The bag was found in a vacant lot, unopened. Perhaps the cops had surprised the vandals, because when the police shipped the bag back, at their expense, right on top inside was \$200 cash one of us had paid another for room and tickets.

I have lived in Virginia Beach for more than 40 years now, so a major league game is at least 200 miles away. I've done numerous one-day hauls to D.C., Baltimore, even Philly. More often, the games are the focus of a long weekend trip or worked into a holiday. And the scorebooks become something of a travelogue, a diary.

The books are such a thing with me that I made precious space for one in my lone backpack on a recent adventure to China and Russia – because I planned to hit games in L.A. on the way over and Minneapolis on the way back. Other books have vacationed in Cuba, Canada, Colombia. They have even been through the Panama Canal.

The scorebooks say I've been to 41 Major League stadiums with almost 60

different companions. Many have spelled me on the book, including my wife, while I made a beer run or took a bathroom break. More than once, they didn't want to give it back. At a Chicago White Sox game, a player's girlfriend even kept my book for a while.

The playoff games at Nationals Park in Washington, D.C., last October were my most exciting sports experiences. Until then, scoring Matt Cain's perfect game for the Giants in 2012 topped the list. I'm still a Reds fan, but I've adopted the Nats as my surrogate team – a lot closer, and right now, a lot better. I make no apologies.

The 4-3 wildcard win over the Brewers – featuring a two-out, three-run rally in the 8th – was a classic. The atmosphere before, during and after was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. Pure pandemonium as the Nats advanced in postseason play for the first time. Those scorebook pages are smothered in exclamation points and capital letters.

But that game comes in second next to the Game 4 win – and NLCS sweep – over the Cardinals that sent the Nats to the World Series. Of course, I'll never forget the scene when Michael Taylor caught the last

out, and popcorn and beer rained down on us – after all, I do have a cell-phone video.

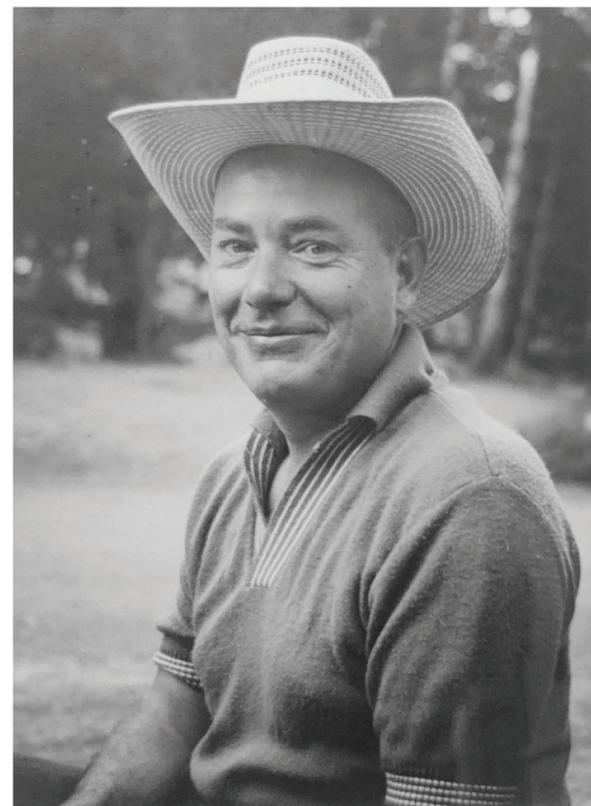
But years from now, will I remember that I arrived at the Fairgrounds Bullpen four hours before the game? That there were almost 2,700 standing-room-only fans? That the Nats batted around in the first? That Teddy won the Presidents' race? That Gerardo "Baby Shark" Parra got a pinch-hit single in the sixth – the Nats' only hit after the second inning?

I will – thanks to scorebook No. 10. And, thanks to Dad.

If scorebooks could talk ...
Notes and observations from 30-plus years of keeping score:

7-27-87, Montreal: Expos' usherettes sporting tuxedo blouses, white stockings and high heels.

4-28-91, Cincy: Reds' reliever Rob Dibble, frustrated after giving up a 9th-inning run vs Cubs, throws ball into the upper deck, hitting woman right in front of us. I offer \$10 for the ball. Denied.



The woman, a school teacher from Columbus, later sued Dibble.

8-9-91, Chicago: After game vs. the Mets, we bump into Cubs announcer Harry Caray in bowels of Wrigley Field. He agrees to give me his autograph, but when I fumble my pen he says, "Ah, the hell with ya!" Yes, he had been drinking. Then again, so had I.

7-12-97, Boston: Great timing for my first game in the cathedral of Fenway Park: Red Sox legend Roger Clemens' first time back since signing with Toronto. The fans boo him mercilessly. Then he strikes out 16 in 8 innings, including the last 4 batters on just 13 pitches. Gets a standing "O" when he heads to the dugout, and the fans boo again when Blue Jays manager Cito Gaston won't let him come out for the 9th.

6-2-98, Baltimore: A classic: Ken Griffey Jr. homers in the top of the 10th to give Seattle an 8-7 lead, and Rafael Palmeiro belts a 2-run walk-off in the bottom to win it for the O's, 9-8. That's why you don't leave early, Dad.

7-15-99, NY: Scoreboard message notes JFK Jr. is in attendance at Braves-Yankees game.

7-17-99, NY: Scoreboard message asks for a moment of silence and to keep JFK Jr. in your prayers; the plane he was flying crashed into the Atlantic yesterday.

8-26-01, Pittsburgh: Well after the game, we find ourselves in the hotel elevator with Houston outfielder Moises Alou. He asks if the pizza in our box is lobster. Lobster?!? "Everything tastes like lobster after 2 a.m." The next day, during warmups, we yell, "Lobster!" at him, and he nods a brief acknowledgment.

6-11-03, Chicago: Sitting behind home in players' family section. Dion, girlfriend of White Sox pitcher Jon Garland, keeps my book while I make a beer run. Mother of Chicago pitcher Mark Buehrle, sitting right behind me, is livid that her son might get tagged with the loss tonight. He's taken out after a monster blast by Giants' Barry Bonds, having given up 8 runs in 4½ innings. "Does Mark get the loss even though he didn't go 5 innings? That's not fair! He has to go 5 to get a win!"

7-13-10, Anaheim: All-Star game. Scalp a \$185 ticket outside for \$120 and a Rocky Patel cigar. A moment of silence before the game for George Steinbrenner; "The Boss" died this morning.

6-17-11, Washington: Worst first-pitch ever, by Wizards NBA star John Wall. Bounces it halfway to home plate.

9-21-12, Cincy: Fellow 3 seats down from me takes a Joey Votto line-drive foul square on the nose. Blood everywhere. Had to have a crew come mop up the section. And whose jersey is he wearing? Reds No. 19 – Votto.

7-15-17, Baltimore: I have discovered the best deal in baseball: bacon on a stick at Camden Yards (only \$5). Dipped in maple syrup. Unbeatable – unlike the O's.

10-1-19, Washington: Wildcard game. Electric atmosphere. Guy beside me, a Nats season-ticket holder, has a Brewers jersey on – and a Nats T-shirt underneath (grew up in Milwaukee). ■

The Language of Scoring

- Positions:**
- 1 — Pitcher
 - 2 — Catcher
 - 3 — First baseman
 - 4 — Second baseman
 - 5 — Third baseman
 - 6 — Shortstop
 - 7 — Leftfielder
 - 8 — Centerfielder
 - 9 — Rightfielder
 - DH — Designated hitter

- Examples:**
- Ground out, short to first: 6-3
 - Double play, second to short to first: 4-6-3
 - Fly out to center: 8
 - Error on the shortstop: E-6

- Other symbols:**
- K* — Strikeout
 - BB — Base on balls (a walk)
 - 1B — Single
 - 2B — Double
 - 3B — Triple
 - HR — Home run
 - SB — Stolen base
 - S — Sacrifice
 - E — Error
 - WP — Wild pitch
 - PB — Passed ball
 - HBP — Hit by pitch
 - DP — Double play
 - WW** — Wasn't watching

* — Why K for a strikeout? As the story goes, an Englishman named Henry Chadwick, credited with creating the early scoring system, felt he needed the "S" for sacrifice, so he thought K, a prominent letter in "strikeout," would work. And a backwards K means struck out looking (without swinging).

** — For "wasn't watching," Hall of Fame Yankees shortstop and broadcaster Phil Rizzuto is credited with coining this, to show that, well, you weren't watching what happened.

