

When it's your turn at bat, attitude means everything

I know this is supposed to be a financial planning column, and I promise to stay more-or-less on the subject next time. But this time, I just feel like telling a story.

Last year I was the manager of my oldest son's baseball team — a position for which I am ill-suited.

A baseball manager for 9-year-olds needs to have the patience of Job. I do not. I have the patience of Mark. Not the Biblical Mark. My 2-year-old son Mark.

Anyway, at the first practice one of the youngest and smallest of the boys surprised me. During batting practice Timmy really smashed several balls and was clearly the best hitter in the bunch. But as the season progressed, he seemed to get down on himself. He was just going through the motions. He never seemed to have his mind on the game, and he never hit the ball like he did in that first practice.

As manager, I operated the pitching machine when we were at bat. I would talk to the batter about his stance or about the pitch location — anything that might help him hit the ball better. In the last game, Timmy struck out in his first two at-bats. On his next turn, Timmy trudged toward the plate, staring at the ground and literally dragging his bat behind him.

Then Timmy did something he



had no business doing. He tried to bunt. Unsuccessfully.

All of a sudden, I was transported via flashback to 1963 when I was a Little Leaguer. I was in the throes of a batting slump — zero-for-seven. Not much of a slump for a big leaguer, but when you're 11, it may as well be zero-for-two million.

Our coach was Lloyd Pitts. He wasn't what you'd call a dynamic coach. Certainly no Billy Martin. But he was very steady. Solid. A good man.

I had lost all my confidence at the plate, and I asked Coach Pitts if I could try to "bunt my way on." With a stern look and reproach in his voice, he ordered me to run to the batter's box and to swing away. "Everyone knows you can hit. Just relax. Watch the ball all the way to the bat and swing level. You'll crush it."

The first two pitches were out of the strike zone. The third pitch was on the inside corner.

I swung hard and crushed a line drive down the third base line. I started running as hard as I

could, and I felt a great sense of relief as I pulled into second for a stand-up double. I don't think I smiled. It would have seemed like I was surprised. But inside I was doing cartwheels. My confidence was back.

Back to 1991. I hadn't thought of Lloyd Pitts in years, yet I felt that he was telling me what to say.

"Timmy! Who told you to bunt?" There was a decided edge in my voice. "Swing away! Remember the first day of practice? You hit it harder than anyone. Just watch it all the way to the plate. Swing level and swing hard. I know you can do it!"

He tapped the plate with his bat. I counted down, "Three, two, one," and dropped the ball into the pitching machine. Timmy swung hard and scorched a line drive past my left ear into center field. I barely had time to duck.

The center fielder caught the ball on the first bounce, holding Timmy to a single. As he rounded first base, amid the parents' cheers, he was almost laughing.

That smile was the high point of my brief coaching career. No last-inning win or championship could ever top that feeling.

Still, there was just a touch of melancholy. Coach Pitts passed away several years ago. What he

did for me was so simple and took so little time, but was so important. Yet I am sure I never thanked him.

Have you ever wondered about communication with the deceased? I know it's comforting for people to talk to their departed loved ones at gravesites. I've often wondered if they hear us. If they hear us, do they hear us all the time, or just when we invoke their names? Is it like one large, cosmic, party line? When I make mistakes, do my late grandfathers look at each other and shrug?

I've never really thought about communication in the other direction. At least not until that Little League flashback. Was Coach Pitts talking to me? The logical side of me says that it was just a flashback. A memory triggered by a stimulus. A chemical reaction in my brain.

Still, I wonder. Is it possible that the departed, and even those who are living but who are temporarily out of sight, communicate with us in ways we don't recognize? Maybe everything we do is a reaction to one of these cosmic communiques. Or maybe I'm just one phone call from being committed.

Regardless, I'll never have a chance to tell Coach Pitts in person how much I appreciate what he did for me. So, just in case, "Thanks, Coach Pitts. You really helped me. Twice."

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