

Down With Yoga, Up With Baseball

Not long ago, a former boss suggested I take up yoga to reduce stress. Soon thereafter, an old friend noted the positive effects that yoga had had on him. Then someone at church praised yogic meditation and breathing exercises.

I don't doubt the usefulness of Eastern meditation. Yet my gut reaction to this craze might best be characterized by the [skeptical squint](#) from Cobra Kai's Johnny Lawrence when he's forced to rent out his "good old-fashioned American" karate dojo to a yoga class. Is there no venerable American tradition of managing stress? Were we all suffering from hypertension before the Beatles visited the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi? Contra America's "Namaste craze," I'd submit that throwing a baseball is one of those great American stress-reducing traditions that we should all revisit.

My discovery of baseball's meditative qualities happened while living in Thailand, one of the epicenters of Buddhism. It wasn't the droves of Westerners in their [comical baggy elephant pants](#) flocking to Thai temples on some spiritual quest that elicited my impulse to find a commensurate contemplative activity. My wife and I found a Catholic parish in the heart of Bangkok that, although not exactly our preferred liturgical flavor, was able to meet our spiritual needs. Rather, the daily grind of living and working in a foreign country nursed a longing for the distant America I loved. I missed the cuisine, the seasons, the landscapes, the culture. And I missed baseball.

I longed to read about baseball in the morning newspaper, talk about it with friends, and go to the ballgames. But I also longed for the texture of the ball, its arc as it glided through the air, the hard snap it made when finding its home

in a leather glove. I remembered the baseball of my youth, on vast green spaces surrounded by trees, perhaps because everything in Bangkok was so crowded and short of open spaces. It was all a bit odd, since I hadn't played competitive baseball since I was 12 and played only one season of rec softball while in college. I had turned to other athletic activities, at a far more competitive level, for many years since the glory days of little league. All the same, baseball is what I craved and what I requested when friends hosted cookouts for my family as we returned to the States each summer for vacation.

I think my friends thought my baseball demand a bit strange, given that most of them hadn't thrown a ball in years. Yet there we stood, with our old, faded gloves, borrowed or inherited from our fathers, in a fenced-in backyard in Virginia. We lobbed those balls beginning at 30 feet, then 40, then 50. We threw grounders. We lofted up simulated pop-flies. It went on for more than an hour. Wives and girlfriends watched amusedly. Then I think my friends grew tired of it. Not me. I was like a pet dog who had been kept inside for too long, running and throwing all over that grass. When it was over, as I congratulated my ragged band of brothers, I eagerly exclaimed, "Wasn't that great?!?" Though a bit perplexed, they had to agree.

Ever since, I've often brought a couple of gloves and a ball to outdoor social gatherings I attend—picnics, barbecues, on the beach. One can throw a baseball just about anywhere, and all you need is another willing participant. Few accessories are required—no yoga pants, no air conditioning, no mat. Just a ball, two gloves, and God's earth. Playing catch can be done in solemn quietude or with friendly banter. Whatever the circumstances, I've always found it cultivates a contemplative mentality, perhaps, similarly to yoga, because there is a rhythmic exercise of mind and body. Throw and catch, throw and catch. Extend the arm, move right; extend the arm, move left.

Whistle of the ball, crack of the glove. There's [even scientific evidence](#) that throwing a baseball has psychological benefits.

The sport is an ancient American tradition. 2019 marks the 150th anniversary of [professional baseball](#). Before that first professional team (the Cincinnati Red Stockings), the game was beloved during our greatest national crisis, [the Civil War](#). It is a sport many males (one used to be able to say *most* males) were intimately familiar with. Millions of American men have memories of throwing baseballs with their fathers, their brothers, their friends. Many of Americans' most hallowed memories are tied to playing catch—a theme [memorialized well by Hollywood](#). Tossing a baseball is a cultural act of anamnesis, spiritually uniting us to our forefathers in an act of [civic liturgy](#).

Moreover, *pace* eastern forms of meditation, which seek to unite a person with his inner consciousness or even a void nothingness, playing catch points analogically to Christianity's understanding of man's relationship to God. Americans have typically learned how to throw a ball from their *fathers*—this is the emotional appeal of scenes from *The Natural* and [Field of Dreams](#). In such scenes, dads and sons, long separated, play simple games of catch, and renew intimate familial bonds. The act of throwing and catching, something rooted in the relationship between children and their fathers, points us, however inchoately, towards man's mystical union with God the Father. Recently I visited a friend who had been under a lot of stress. I brought my gloves and a baseball. He was tired, worn out from the many pressures of life. I pushed him out the door to a nearby public park. We played catch for maybe 30 minutes. With each throw, we stretched our arms and our bodies, as well as our intellects, focusing our attention on the rhythm of the motions, or simply letting our minds wander. When it was over, he admitted that he was surprised at how good it felt. Baseball, of course, can't reduce every

stress. Neither can yoga. Nor is baseball always enough. Yet next time someone starts singing the praises of yoga and Eastern meditation, tell him to forget the “Namaste” and come throw a baseball. If it was good enough for our forefathers, it’s good enough for us.

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