

Our Oregon 'Field of Dreams'

OK. The pandemic sucks, and not just for the reason of a legitimately insidious virus causing a massive loss of life and economic carnage.

We are weary and fatigued with COVID-19 as it stretches into its seventh month. For certain, the year 2020 has enough memes to make it a standalone chapter in our lives. Everyday life has been shelved as we shelter in place. It has brought into the light the loss of things we frankly took for granted.

The jarring ring of classroom bells have been silenced. Baseball and softball fields full of dreams are empty. We don't hear the audible POP of a good fastball in a catcher's mitt. The smell of cut grass and a dirt infield are just memories for now. There are no seventh inning stretches to organ music, paying homage to the man who made it a ritual of a summer day, legendary Cubs announcer Harry Caray.

Yep. I hate this virus.

Our connections with baseball

When I sat down to write this column, I wanted to talk about the many ways Oregon agriculture intersects with the community through sports. Our grass seed has a significant presence in almost every community throughout the world. Baseball, football and soccer — all embrace natural grass as the serving tray of lifelong memories.

But it doesn't end there. Oregon food producers provide their bounty to snack shacks resentfully staffed by parents trying to catch a glimpse of their son or daughter on the field, as well as the pricier snack bars at major league ballparks.

It takes between 140 and 240 pounds of Kentucky bluegrass seed to grow in a sports field for football, soccer or baseball. I say Kentucky bluegrass, but Oregon farmers produce it. It is used all over the world. Our growers only need to plant a little under 1 pound of seed in order to produce enough seed for even the largest of these facilities.

Reporter Sierra Dawn McClain explored many of these connections in an article for the *Capital Press*, a newspaper covering West Coast agriculture that is based

in Salem, Oregon.

"According to industry data, the leather from one cow hide yields 12 baseball gloves or 144 baseballs," she wrote. "A standard baseball, according to manufacturers, also contains a cork or rubber core wrapped with 450 feet of wool yarn, often from domestic sheep producers."

And there's more. "According to the Popcorn Institute, about 30% of all popcorn is eaten at stadiums and similar venues," McClain reported. "The closure of baseball stadiums was a huge change for producers. The nation's No. 1 baseball bat manufacturer, Louisville Slugger, said that about 40,000 domestic trees are used to make bats for a typical baseball season, of which 48% are ash and 52% maple." God, I love that.

Throwing the first pitch

The Salem-Keizer Volcanoes are a minor league baseball team in Keizer, Oregon. They are a Short-Season Class A team in the Northwest League and have been an affiliate of the San Francisco Giants since the Volcanoes' inception in 1997.

In 2015, the ballclub reached out to the association to create "Nursery Night" and fans were able to walk through the parking lot and see first-hand the top-notch plant material as they bought their family-friendly priced tickets. The Stone family was in full attendance.

I have been at OAN for 15 years and remember well the only first pitch by an OAN president in my time with the association. On that beautiful evening, Mike Coleman, owner of Arrowhead Ornamentals, strode out to the mound and delivered a legit pitch. There was no Fauci moment here. As a high school baseball player from St. Paul High School — that's St. Paul, Oregon — Mike crushed it and zipped that puppy in.

I, too, was a high school pitcher but I'm certain that I would have sailed it to hit the mascot, à la "Bull Durham."

For the history buffs out there, the first presidential first pitch was thrown in 1910 by William Howard Taft, when the Washington Senators hosted the Philadelphia Athletics on opening day. Since then, every president except for the current one has thrown out a first pitch at a major league



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baseball game. Franklin Delano Roosevelt did it a record 11 times as president.

Harry S. Truman and Gerald Ford each accomplished the noteworthy feat of throwing out left-handed and right-handed first pitches in the same game. Truman did it in 1950 on Opening Day, while Ford did it in 1976 at the All-Star Game. Ford, was a star athlete in college for the University of Michigan. His sport was football, though.

Two other presidents had closer ties to baseball. George H.W. Bush pitched for Yale and was team captain, while George W. Bush was managing general partner of the Texas Rangers.

Catchers wear masks — we should too

It is a fantasy that each of us is not responsible to do our part to get the nation healthy and back to whatever might resemble "normal." There are no hot dogs being raised on ranches. There is no Queso River, located in the beautiful Gelatinous Goo River Basin. Things happen because we make them happen, even when it's hard. So it will be with the end of this pandemic.

I will leave this column in the capable hands of a quote from the movie "Field of Dreams." James Earl Jones plays Terrance Mann and tries to help a struggling Ray Kinsella, played by Kevin Costner.

"The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It has been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game: it's a part of our past, Ray. It reminds of us of all that once was good, and it could be again." ☺