

Slugger

Aaron had been a chubby kid, not shedding his baby fat until he entered high school. He hadn't been athletic and that hadn't changed as the years went by. In the early grades, if teams were chosen for softball, he would be one of the last to be picked, even after most of the girls. When he struck out and returned to the bench, one of the boys would go up to him and punch him in the shoulder, saying, "Way to go, slug – *her!*" The name stuck, morphing into "slugger" the following year.

His parents were divorced and it was his Uncle Ted who took him out in the back yard on Sundays to play catch and practice hitting. Ted's sister had told him about the teasing; she was concerned that it would make Aaron even more withdrawn. "He hardly ever has any playdates. I know he's just eight, but..." and her voice would fade.

Ted had offered to help. "Look, Lottie, he's a good kid. Just needs a little confidence in his abilities. I'll try to come by Sundays, weather permitting. I wouldn't mind a good game of catch. See if I can pass on my hitting skills. You remember, I played right field on my high school's baseball team twenty-five years ago. Hammering Hank Aaron was my hero even before he broke Babe's record in 1974."

He kept his promise and most Sunday afternoons he and Aaron would practice in the backyard. Ted would have him warm up and stretch. "Listen to me, A. H." – his uncle liked to use his initials – "if you don't warm up and stretch, you'll get injured. And these exercises are good for you; I'm still doing them and you'd never guess how old I am."

Aaron would laugh and start to say, "A hundred and..." just so his uncle would come over and tousle his hair, countering, "Hey, guy, no joking. I ain't half that age...yet."

They'd stretch and go through the warm ups. Ted would jog with him around the yard. "Hey, A. H., get this right for when you hit one out of the park; it's like running the bases."

The next ten minutes were spent tossing the ball back and forth. Then Ted would lob fly balls for Aaron to snag. Finally, batting practice. Ted would get out a whiffle ball and Aaron would take his stance against the garage, batting towards the house. Ted would pause on the make-believe mound and solemnly say before the first pitch, "Not too hard, you break any windows and your mom will make me pay."

A couple of swings and misses and Ted would come down off the mound to coach. "OK, Slugger, you remember what I told you about The Hammer: you connect with yourself, move from your core, and follow through. Good lesson for hitting and a good rule for life. Trust this hundred-year-old man on that!" He'd move Aaron's hands on the bat, go through a couple of practice swings, and then go back to the mound. By the end of the season, he was doing fine and Ted promised that next spring they'd go out to the park and practice batting with a real softball against a backstop.

By the third season Aaron could consistently hit deep into the outfield. One of his classmates saw them practicing and the next day at school approached him at recess. "Hey, Slugger, I saw you with your father in the park. Way to go, making your old man run after those long balls. Why don't you come out for the team?"

Aaron smiled. "Nah, don't think so, and besides, that was my Uncle Ted. He played on his high school's baseball team so he's pretty good."

That was thirty years ago. Aaron is now a G.P. practicing in northern Wisconsin outside of Hayward. He moved there to help those medically underserved. His nurse jokes that he should have set up his clinic as a non-profit. “Would you believe he refers to his patients as his teammates. He says they both win when they stay healthy and that they should pay what they can if they’re not covered by insurance.”

If her friend has a few more minutes to listen, she’ll continue, “Do you know he’s got a kid’s bat mounted behind his desk? He said his Uncle Ted gave it to him and told me it’s better than a trophy muskie. ‘It taught me to work from the core – same core that’s in everyone – that’s why I went into medicine.’ He’s a good doctor, so I guess he’s right. I bet he got the idea of comparing that little bat to a muskie from looking at the giant one on top of The Fresh Water Fishing Hall of Fame!”