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Spring Training and Tragedy

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There is no other time like it in sport.

Spring training in Florida is a dream, a fantasy, and a time of eternal optimism. It is a dream for all those caught in the endless winter trying to become spring. And it is a dream for all those players at every level of the game trying to start or consummate the march to the majors.

It is a fantasy for those who sit in the snow and imagine themselves in the warm sun, hearing the familiar sounds of a ball being caressed into the pocket of a glove, or the crack of the bat—those marvelous sounds of baseball.

It is the time of renewal, a spring ritual tied to the rural rhythms of an earlier age, a time when everyone is young, everyone has hope. The dreams of pennants will ultimately be crushed in the passage of time, but for the moment everyone is in first place, everyone an optimist.

Is there any other sport in which dreams are so tied to the simple rituals of practice?

On Monday night I wrote these words in a first draft of this week's commentary. When I finished I turned on the late news and heard the report of the boating accident involving Steve Olin, Tim Crews, and Bob Ojeda of the Cleveland Indians. One player was reported dead and by morning it was two, Olin and Crews. Both leave behind wives and young children.

It is amazing how quickly things can change, how fragile life really is, and how death can strike at any moment. We are reminded how tangential existence is, how meaningless the games we watch and play are, in the larger scheme of things.

Events like this one also make you think about fate, about what brings three people to this point at this time. The Cleveland Indians for the past 26 years have been in Arizona for spring training. They moved operations to Florida and were scheduled to open a new training camp in Homestead this year. But last fall Homestead was devastated by Hurricane Andrew.

And so the Indians needed another Florida home. It just so happened that Winter Haven was available because the Red Sox had abandoned that town after several decades. The Indians took the
opportunity and came to Winter Haven. This brought Steve Olin to this particular place.

For Tim Crews and Bob Ojeda there was another step in the process. Both of these pitchers had been in Los Angeles and chose to leave the Dodgers and pursue free agency. They both signed with Cleveland and both were doing well. In fact the Sunday Orlando Sentinel had an article about how well things were going for Crews and how happy he was to be back near his home. So this is what brought Crews and Ojeda to this place.

And then there was the schedule maker. On Monday March 22, the Cleveland Indians had a rare day off, something unusual for spring training. The three chose to spend that day with their families and together. The time and place were found.

For over a century now spring training has been taking place in Florida and there has never been one like this. Fans of the Cleveland Indians and members of the Cleveland organization must be devastated. This was a team with great promise. Steve Olin had arrived last season as the Indian closer. Crews and Ojeda were likely to bolster the pitching staff. The Indians were maybe two or three players, two or three seasons, away from the American League East championship.

How they will react to the tragedy is difficult to know. In other sports a loss of this magnitude often produces a wave of emotion that is translated into dedication. This can carry a basketball team or a football team through a season or part of one. It can raise a team to new heights as they ride the wave of emotion.

For a baseball team this is much less likely to happen. The long season of 162 games is simply too long for emotion to be sustained. In baseball there can be the dedication, but in the end it probably cannot carry a team beyond a few weeks. In baseball the season grinds on, the schedule seeks out a team's weaknesses, and in the end a team's weaknesses are exposed. No amount of emotion can compensate.

For the Indians this tragedy will be felt both on and off the field, and it will take its toll on each of them. What they must do now is try to overcome the losses, try to reach deeply into the spirit that is so much a part of the mythology of spring training, the spirit of renewal and hope. They must reset themselves within the cycles of the game, reenter the struggle of another pennant race.
In baseball you are likely to fail. In all sport you finally lose, to time, if not to the opponent. Each loss, some say, is like a death. A little piece of you dies. But you go on to the next contest seeking to triumph over death.

This loss was enormous and this loss was not just figuratively, but literally, death. The challenge now is the existential one. The spirit needed is that of spring training, which remains today, what it was on Monday, the spirit of hope, of dreams, and of renewal.

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