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EXCAVATING THE FIELD¹

At least once a year I visit my parents' home in Maryland, in Prince George's County, where I lived in the 1970s. I visit to visit, but also because Prince George's County is adjacent to Washington, D.C., and I regularly have business there. When "home," I take advantage of new bike paths and go for runs through what used to be forests, farms, and the soccer fields my team practiced and played on. In this area, each year, more homes are built, new shopping centers go up, and roads are widened or appear where there had never been any before. On my favorite route, I pass several new soccer fields, even whole soccer complexes that have sprouted near Allen Pond, a longtime recreation area with an artificial pond as its centerpiece. My former team's home field, Blacksox, closer to my parent's home, however, has returned to its former use—baseball—with five groomed ball fields, a small central kiosk/restroom, a big parking lot, and a tree-covered running path leading out the back of it and looping through new neighborhoods. I remember it being surrounded by what seemed an impenetrable scrub forest that always threatened to reclaim the open, flat space of dust and grass. Unbeknownst to my teenage self, Blacksox field had been the home of two Black sandlot teams, the Mitchellville Tigers and, later, the Washington Blacksox. A vital part of the local African American community, these sandlot teams also sent players to the Negro baseball leagues.² When I read the newly posted historical sign on a run a few years ago, a lot of things clicked. Nearby on

¹ I want to thank my father, Fred Saavedra, for filling in organizational details that I was unaware of as a child. I also want to thank him for working so hard to create a soccer program for us. This is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Dorothea (1933–2003) who was also a driving force in the community, club, and home, and who even managed to play a bit of soccer herself.

² W. A. Aleshire, *Sandlot: The Soul of Baseball* (Westminster, Md.: Heritage Books, 2005).

Route 301, I had noticed that Mills, a roadside bar, frequented mainly by African Americans and gutted several times by flames, had this time been resuscitated with a Negro League memorabilia shop. That is now gone and the building is a church, but the sediments of the past open up on each visit home even as its remnants continue to be consumed by frantic urban/suburban development and my own hazy forgetfulness.

I began to play soccer because my father was one of the founders of the local Boys and Girls Club. It was not a sport that my family or I otherwise knew, although one of our German cousins apparently had played on the national team before he emigrated to the United States. Our neighborhood was new, a Levitt-constructed "community" in the middle of a largely Black farming community that was rapidly disappearing. The older Levitt development to the north, built on a former plantation, already had a Boys Club, but the distance was far enough that parents like mine felt another should be established to the south. Having six daughters and one son, my father also insisted it should be a "Boys and Girls Club," now the standard moniker, but not so at the time. The first sport we played was softball. I remember losing 18–0 in one game, and I don't remember wondering why I didn't play another season. Then fall came. Our club, our parents, eschewed American football, the staple fall sport of many Boys Clubs at the time. Too expensive, too dangerous, and not friendly to girls. Instead, they embraced the "new" sport of soccer, and for the next five years I played on the South Bowie Boys and Girls Club team. My younger siblings followed suit as my father worked with the SBBGC for the seven years.

We were too new to be very good. The club was just beginning, searching for fields, for coaches, trying to find its place. Youth soccer in the early 1970s was also just beginning, and the now stereotypical American suburban soccer scene had not yet reached

into our neighborhood. And our neighborhood was a bit different. When our family moved to Maryland in 1969 from New Jersey, we were typical New Yorkers who lived in Jersey and were hyper-aware that we had gone below the Mason-Dixon Line. People said "y'all" and we heard "pin" instead of "pen." Blue laws still applied—no stores were open on Sundays. At eight, I learned what the word *miscegenation* meant and that some people were really opposed to it. Prince George's County was still predominantly white at that time but had a significant African American population, especially closer to the D.C. line. And the scars of the riots in Washington in the aftermath of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination were still fresh and very visible as we drove down East Capitol Street to the Mall for our regular Smithsonian visits. Race and racism was palpable, but puzzling, with my family's own mixture (Peruvian, German, Canadian/Irish/English) not quite fitting anywhere—except in our enclave. The northern part of our town was reserved for whites. Segregation was officially over, but not that long gone. While our new development was predominantly white, if Blacks, Asians, or Latinos (and my family was the only one vaguely Latino at the time) wanted to buy into this housing stock, the development real-estate agents ever so gently (or maybe not) directed them to this new development in what had been Mitchellville, the mostly Black farming community. Some of the adults came from farming backgrounds (my mother, my Girl Scout leader); some came from the cities (my dad, my soccer coach). But all the families were now solidly middle-class, mostly drawing paychecks from government jobs. Unlike the northern part of town, though, we were Black, White, Latino, and Asian. And the kids, White and Black (and some definitely mixed), from the local farming community also came to our school. In 1974, when there was court-ordered busing in Prince George's County, I remember hearing that the city chose our neighborhood

as the one to be bused because we were already used to “integration.” In elementary school, kids from near the D.C. line were bused to our school. In junior high and high school, we were bused to schools near the Beltway that were majority African American. Court-ordered busing ended in 2001. The county is now predominantly African American and is now the wealthiest Black-majority county in the nation. The unofficial color line in our town has faded, although the line between Prince George’s and Montgomery County, the other Maryland county bordering Washington, seems a little sharper.

In the 1970s soccer was just starting in the Washington area, although some communities, particularly in Virginia, were ahead in skills and organization. The largest all-girls soccer tournament, the annual Rael Vodicka Memorial, organized by the Washington Area Girls’ Soccer League, was first held in about 1975 just when the SBBGC got going. These clubs assisted the SBBGC in associating with FIFA and establishing spring soccer, which the Prince George’s County Boys Club at the time did not organize. Perhaps unlike these clubs, the SBBGC articulated what could be called a “sport-for-all” philosophy. High-level competitive success was not the goal, although we traveled to and sponsored tournaments and played a lot of soccer. Two of my younger sisters experienced some dissenting coaches, who sought to win at almost all costs. Perhaps that is why they didn’t continue to play in later years. My youngest sister and a friend, on a dare, used their soccer experience to join the high school team—which was a “boys” team with no female counterpart—in the mid-1980s. They were not the first. In 1978, a girl one year ahead of me in high school played defense on the boys’ team.

For me, the club team was a good fit. I managed to combine this with being an athletic trainer for high school teams (volleyball and wrestling), something that would not have been possible had

this been the equivalent of a Class I competitive youth team these days. We practiced once or twice during the week and on Saturdays, with games on Sundays. One summer, some of the players went to a soccer camp in North Carolina. The coach, Dr. B, also attended clinics there run by Anson Dorrance, the longtime coach of the powerhouse women's soccer team at the University of North Carolina. At the time I had no idea who that was, and, to be fair, he was still early in his career. We did pick up the pace and occasionally contested for the championship in our league, although I don't think we ever actually won it. It was then that I learned the beauty and satisfaction, even if I didn't do it that well, of stringing together a series of passes, of faking out an opponent, of gives and go's, of weaving down the field, and of a great header. I also learned the frustration of being on a team that at times could not finish, that knocked the ball back and forth in front of the goal endlessly, but could not put it in. And in the process I sustained a torn retina and lots of sprained ankles. My gymnastics coach lamented that he was losing all his athletes to soccer and sprained ankles. I loved gymnastics and before soccer I thought I would follow in Olga Korbut's and Ludmila Tourischeva's footsteps (despite not having access to the Soviet system of gymnastics production). Unable to really execute them, I would dream of intricate uneven-bar routines in my sleep. Although I continued to dabble in gymnastics until I was twenty-six, I had much more opportunity and ability to link together a series of moves with my foot, the ball, and my teammates.

The team is what made it for me. I have remained friends with many of my teammates and my coach over the years. Not all of my friends were on the team, but most of them had been at one point or the other. Given we were from the neighborhood, soccer was not the only point in common. There was Girl Scouts when we were younger and the teen club when we got older. Shared car rides to

school (to avoid taking the bus), Advanced Placement English, dissecting cats in biology, trigonometry, and pre-calculus. Driving around aimlessly at night on the back roads and waiting overnight in line at the gas pump. Going to the Catholic Youth Organization dances up Route 3. Skipping classes. Smoking cigarettes in between classes and before games (for some of us, not all). I think half of the team smoked. Some still do. I quit soon after high school and never smoked that much. Of course, it slowed us down. The fastest runner on the team smoked. She was like a gazelle streaking down the wing. A few years ago she died of breast cancer. Her mother died of the disease as well at a young age. We didn't think about cancer then. It was not until several years later that the health fairs would haul out the blackened lungs for you to touch and ponder or that public campaigns would kick in to prevent kids from buying cigarettes. In high school, some parents even shared their cigarettes with their kids. On road trips, we knew which parents would let us smoke (really only one). But the cigarettes contributed to our "laid-back" approach. On one road trip, our goalie, a serious smoker, sat in the far back of our Ford Econoline van. Seat-belt laws were unknown and many a team traveled packed sitting on the floor in the back of that van. Hot and bored, she took off her bra, hung it out the back window. She added to the effect by pressing her face decorated with cigarettes up to the window. My father had no idea why drivers in others cars were honking and waving at him.³

And then there was the underage drinking. It is old news perhaps, but playing sports does not keep teenagers from breaking rules. We didn't drink because of soccer. Most of my friends from school drank before we were eighteen, the legal drinking age then. On the state-championship wrestling team, there were several

³ I thank my sister, Vivian, a young fan at the time, for reminding me of the details of this adventure.

champions who were connoisseurs of “partying.” There were alcohol-related traffic deaths among the teens in my school, including the boyfriend of our gazelle. Drugs, mostly pot, were also available, although they weren’t particularly related to soccer. PCP became a scourge around that time, coke was coming onto the scene, and amphetamines circulated, but few of members of the team went much beyond basic pot, if that. But there were alcohol episodes related directly to the team. Early on, I remember a teammate stealing one beer from the adult bin at a soccer party and four of us running off to a field nearby to drink it. More of a thrill than a buzz. The most memorable incident was the slumber party for one player’s sixteenth birthday. We waited until her parents were in bed and then broke out the booze—from rum to the Boone’s Farm Apple wine. Because time was short, we imbibed it rather quickly in large quantities. Soon girls were pontificating philosophically, vomiting, and crying to God (a streak of evangelicalism ran through us as it did through the community at large.) We woke grandma and soon mom and dad up. Dad happened to be our assistant coach, and we had a game the next day. Not all the partiers were on the team, but the game, on a cloudy day, was low-key to say the least. He made it clear to all of us that by early that afternoon all of our parents had to call him after we had told them what we had done. Teammates who didn’t drink were disgusted with us, and those who did, but were more discreet, laughed.⁴ Later that year, the assistant coach died of a massive heart attack. The whole team turned out to support the family. He was even more like a father to us after that party.

Our coach, Dr. B., was a father and mentor to us all. Even after our team, including his daughter and my friend (a nondrinker and

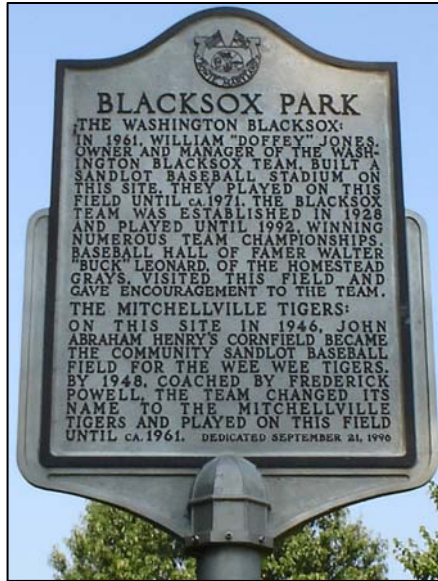
⁴ Only in high school, our behavior exemplified the correlation between female college athletes and binge drinking in the United States found by D. Sabo et al., *Her Life Depends on It: Sport, Physical Activity and the Health and Well-Being of American Girls* (East Meadow, N.Y.: Women’s Sports Foundation, 2004).

nonsmoker), moved on to college, he continued to coach teams, including those of my younger sisters. Dr. B. had a Ph.D. and was a scientist with a federal agency. He was smart, tough, and had a good sense of humor. His wife, Mrs. B, was always rooting us on loudly from the side. So were other parents, but her cheers were memorable. We all had a home with them. Dr. B. once arrived at practice late and very shaken. He had been first on the scene on an accident on Route 214, then a notorious, windy two-lane road with a fifty-mile-per-hour speed limit. The steering wheel had gone through the woman driver. That road was an indication of how far out in the boonies we were, but yet only seventeen miles from the Washington border.

Dr. B learned soccer with us. I don't think he was very familiar with the sport when he took up coaching. But like the other parents involved in building the club, he dug in and worked hard at it. He took it as seriously as getting his Ph.D. I remember when we no longer could call him Mr. B, but now it was Dr. B. The "Doctor" rings so much more truly with him. Some of the players would make fun of how he would try to teach us to weave with three players, or some other concept he brought back from the camp in North Carolina or another clinic. As a coach now, I really appreciate his efforts and just how much he did teach me. Our education went beyond the pitch. He also took us to Walter Reed Army Hospital where we saw all sorts of odd pieces of humanity in formaldehyde. When we were younger, some of us would also go with him and his family to visit his parents in Washington. I remember making candy wreathes with his mother. Dr. B. was maybe the only African American coach in our league, both fall and spring. Our team, our club, our neighborhood were among the most integrated in the area. As in the rest of suburban America, as soccer became more elite, it became more white in the Washington area. Yet, in Prince George's County, in the area that the SBBGC

serves, the community is increasingly African American and more diverse. My family is not involved now in the local Boys and Girls Club, and my runs through the neighborhood have not taken me through too many soccer practices or games. From what I have seen, I would say soccer here, as in the East Bay in northern California, where I now live, is probably more diverse than the average nationally and in U.S. Soccer, but I would have to explore more to find out whether the diversity of the community is reflected on the soccer pitch. I do know that there are women's teams in the Washington area made of immigrants from Latin America and Africa, reflecting an important demographic shift since I left for college in 1979.⁵

⁵ Sarah Hughes, "Women's Soccer," WAMU 88.5 FM, broadcast 31 March 2006 (first broadcast in summer 2005).
<http://www.wamu.org/audio/mc/06/03/m1060331-10811.ram>.



The SB Boys and Girls Club was sanctioned by the Prince George's Boys Club around 1973, but the five men and two women who started the club as a recreation association still had to find facilities. The available soccer fields were near the race track several miles away in the northern part of town. Our first

practices with Mr. R as coach took place at our elementary school, which had lots of land, but nothing fully level and marked out. My father and Mr. R. had heard about Blacksox field, but didn't know where it was. Around our bedroom community were many windy, country roads, cutting through forests and farms. On one, they noticed an unpaved road with dirt piled up to block the entrance. They walked back a few hundred yards and found Blacksox Park—a sandlot stadium still in decent playing condition, level with dugouts and stands. The Mitchellville Tigers had played there from 1946 to 1961. Washington Blacksox had played there from 1961 to 1971. The land had been bought by the Levitt corporation for further development, but some of it was wetland. The club organizers convinced the city to designate it as a ballpark and to install lights. In the mid-1990s, city returned the field to baseball and softball, recognizing its past in the process with a plaque. With several dedicated fields locally, soccer is well-served in the area. The sport has come into its own here.

A few years ago, the South African archaeologist Nick Shepherd directed schoolchildren in a project to dig up the pitch at a formerly all-white school to reveal the history of the black

communities that used to live on what had become the school grounds. Confronted during my runs recently with the layered uses of Blacksox field, I thought a bit about figuratively digging up this pitch. In this case, the field of my youth had reemerged as something new, revealing something old, and all the while standing in for the continual transitions of the local community.

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