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LESS TIME SPENT SCHMOOZING

The porch attached to my family's three-bedroom colonial in northern New Jersey was for many years the center of our social universe. Any activity—productive, antisocial, or aimless—typically started on its rickety (until the late 1970s, when my parents finally had it rebuilt, and the house sided) stairs. My brother and I began and ended our days, particularly in the summer when school was out, shooting the breeze on the porch—arguing, dreaming, planning, and later, as adolescents, bullshitting.

The porch was also the place where friends would show up, often unannounced, but usually after a phone call made from the fire engine red desktop phone in our living room. Chris Young, a fireplug-shaped redhead, would come down from his house, located at the top of a hill on Prospect Street. The Taylor brothers, Chris and Steve, would swing by from their nearly identical three-bedroom colonial next door. Joe Kuhl would cruise over on the three-speed bike he seemed to be constantly rebuilding. They all had perfectly good porches, but we rarely used any of them as a base of operations.

The porch also served as a primitive pitch-back for me as I tried desperately to copy my favorite Mets pitchers. The middle step was a strike; once, I even spray-painted what I thought was a reasonable approximation of a strike zone on the steps. No wonder it almost collapsed. Mom and dad were not thrilled with my attempts to improve my pitching precision. I had more success—and was less embarrassed by the imaginary tryouts and games I would host—in the backyard, pitching against the side of our garage.

It was on the porch that Chris Young and I decided on a boring August night in 1983 that it might be nice to hop in the car the next day and drive, for the hell of it, to Ottawa, Canada's capital. Neither one of

us had been there; it had a football team and a little history, which for us, at twenty-two, was enough. We ended up having to retrace our steps and retake photos of Ottawa's parliament complex when I realized that I didn't have any film in the camera on the first day of our journey. It was on the porch where, as children, my brother and I set up our imaginary Matchbox-based cities, using cardboard boxes obtained from my dad after a regular delivery of pipe organ parts. It was on the porch that I basked (and wallowed) in my first serious case of puppy love, over a girl who lived around the corner, and who could play baseball as well, if not better, than most of my friends and me. And it was on the porch that we would end most summer nights—road-testing our profanity, and exchanging stories about feats of bravado that never actually happened. One feat did happen: we became so bored one evening that six of us picked up Steve's tiny Honda and placed it gingerly on the sidewalk in front of his house.

So much for romance.

We couldn't know that we were engaged in what noted sociologist Robert Putnam has called "schmoozing," in his best-selling book *Bowling Alone*. Pick-up games certainly fall under the same heading. Those who "schmooze" spend a great deal of time involved in informal social activities—less structured, less purposeful, and more spontaneous and flexible than the "machers" in a community. "Machers," notes Putnam, are more likely to become involved with, among other activities, politics, charitable work, and clubs (93).

Where "machers" do most of their work in middle age, "schmoozers" are most active as young adults. Children and growing community obligations cut into the time available for informal social connections—visiting a neighbor on the spur of the moment, sending a greeting card, or writing a personal letter. Putnam posits that we may not feel comfortable just stopping by to see a neighbor. We still visit neighbors, but the ties we have to them are far weaker than a generation ago. Perhaps more significantly, we simply have less time, which has caused us to see the time we do have as valuable, and not worth spending on what we believe are unproductive activities.

Still, despite the sharp decline in the number of individuals who "schmooze"—down from 65 percent in 1965 to 39 percent in 1995 (106)—these informal activities are still significant sources of social support. Surveys done in the late 1980s revealed that half of us had friends over for an evening, and that two-thirds of us had visited a friend. The vast majority of us had gotten together with a friend during the last month. We commit a half-hour a week to the organizations to

which we belong, yet spend three hours per week visiting friends (97). We get together with friends twice as often as we attend the meeting of an organization.

Despite these promising statistics, the amount of “connecting” we do with friends has dropped significantly. We entertain friends less often, and are not nearly as willing as in the past to make new friends, Putnam notes. Dining out is less popular; we prefer to stay home and entertain. While the number of full-service restaurants has fallen by a quarter and the number of bars and luncheonettes by one-half, the number of fast food restaurants opening between 1970 and 1998 has doubled. Finally, we do not picnic as much as we used to (100). In short, there are fewer “hangouts” for us to visit just to sit and talk—not that we would, anyway. We seem to like our pockets of privacy.

Putnam explains that we don’t make up for these changes by spending more time with our families. A little more than one-third of us report that our families eat dinner together. This is certainly not a new finding. Still, many forms of “family togetherness” (101) are fading from the scene: we vacation together less often, and even watch television together less often.

Recreational activities that revolve around social contacts such as playing cards (bridge, specifically) have been replaced by solitary avocations such as inline skating, jogging, walking, and (for the young folks) video games, Putnam notes. We watch sports more often than we play them. We watch people play musical instruments more often than we attempt to learn to play them. Young people are giving up more popular team sports such as baseball and football, part of an overall decline in sports participation by kids. Americans sixty and older, however, are spending twice as much time in exercise classes, and are walking more than their younger counterparts (110).

And what about our so-called “confessional culture,” where we fall over each other to confess sins, are constantly accessible, thanks to technology, and share our lives on reality television? The 2004 General Social Survey revealed that we each only have two close friends—folks with whom we feel comfortable actually confessing. This is down from three in 1985. When asked, we are significantly less likely to name someone not related to us when listing the members of our “inner circle” (Hurlbert 2006, 15). Maybe, speculates Ann Hurlbert of the *New York Times*, we’ve simply upped our standards for what she calls “genuine closeness”—we come in contact with so many people that we’ve become quite discriminating when it comes to creating close friendships. A recent survey by the Pew Internet and American Life

Project found that we maintain what the survey's writers called "core ties" with fifteen people—to whom we turn for help with major problems—and "significant ties" with sixteen others. It's tougher to stay in touch with everyone as a personal network expands. E-mail, notes the Pew study, helps us break even—we regularly contact the same number of "core ties" and "significant ties" even as we connect with more people (4).

Putnam offers several possible reasons for why "we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century" (27). Much is written about how busy we are, but this is only a partial explanation. The increase in the number of two-career families is also on the list of modestly important factors. We spend more time in our cars, commuting to socially segregated, "physically fragmented" communities (215). And when we're not commuting, we're watching more television—"watching it more habitually, more pervasively, and more often alone"—than our parents. We favor entertainment over news programming—the latter being the kind of programming that might promote civic engagement, Putnam argues (246). But would those who isolate themselves by watching so much TV suddenly become active community leaders if TV was taken away? Putnam claims the answer to this question is unclear.

Turning our attention to children, let me suggest a few other as yet unexplored possibilities, which will be discussed in detail in ensuing chapters. First, children's experiences are more structured, thanks in part to overindulgent, competitive parents who want to ensure their children's future success. Second, the federal government's controversial No Child Left Behind initiative has introduced even more structure into their lives, with its focus on test-taking and student (and teacher) accountability. The pressure felt by educators to prove to the government that their schools are adequate has led nearly 40 percent of school districts across the country to eliminate recess—a fond memory for many of us, but most important as an opportunity for free play. The push to improve student performance has also led some to call for kids to go to school all year round, with shorter breaks. We now insist that children learn to read before they get to kindergarten—time better spent, contend Hirsh-Pasek and Michnick-Golinkoff (2003, 8) on unstructured play and on learning to interact with one's peers. It is clear that our anxiety about performance affects our children. Nearly 5 percent of children in the United States suffer from significant bouts of depression. Anxiety in children and adolescents, particularly when it comes to taking tests, is a growing problem. And an increasing number

of children report suffering from phobias (Hirsh-Pasek and Michnick-Golinkoff, 9).

Finally, the popularity of “zero tolerance” policies, where students are strictly disciplined, often for innocent mistakes and minor errors in judgment, may also be chipping away at the desire of young people to engage in behavior that is even slightly outside the norm. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that three-quarters of the nation’s public schools have zero tolerance policies that cover a variety of student offenses, from violence to possession of weapons. Officials have also made it harder to leave school grounds during the school day, and now typically enforce strict visitor sign-in procedures.

But there is no evidence, suggests Russell Skiba of the Indiana Education Policy Center (2000), that creation and enforcement of zero tolerance policies has made our schools safer (15). Skiba has called on school officials to adopt an “early response” model of student discipline that “relies upon a more graduated system of consequences that encourages a more moderate response to less serious behavior” (15). Thus, it seems reasonable to suggest that “zero tolerance” policies have also deprived students of at least one more significant experience: learning from minor mistakes.

FEWER OPPORTUNITIES FOR FREE PLAY?

Devoting so much energy to ensuring that children perform well in school or on the athletic field has come with an additional cost: the marginalization of unstructured play. Allen Guttmann (1988) argues that this change took place gradually during the early part of the twentieth century. The Progressive Era saw the launch of the playground movement, a concerted effort by community activists and “genteel reformers,” writes Guttmann, “to bring children’s play under the control of reform-minded adults” (83). Unchecked population growth in American cities was a major problem. Wealthier individuals waited to get involved until community residents had laid the groundwork for the movement.

The goal of both groups was to “control the behavior of lower-class immigrant children,” as Guttmann notes. The benefits they saw in organized play are similar to the ones we ram down the throats of children today: making them better people and productive citizens, and preparing them for the “work rhythms and social demands of a dynamic and complex urban-industrial civilization” (84). In short: getting them ready for a job. To others, the loss of opportunities for

unstructured play signaled “the switch from the notion of abandon, where body and mind range freely in time/space, to the rigorously enforced game rules that control body and mind, regimenting them to the iron cage of military and industrial disciplines” (Aronowitz, quoted by Guttmann, 84).

By the late 1880s, private benefactors provided the necessary funding to open two parks in New York City: Seward Park and Hamilton Fish Park. Luther Gulick, the director of physical education for the city’s schools, soon launched the Public Schools Athletic League, which as a complement to its roster of competitions offered participants “secular sermons on good sportsmanship and fair play” (Guttmann, 85). Most of the reformers bought into the idea, advanced by noted psychologist G. Stanley Hall, that the child should be viewed as a “primitive.” But rather than try to prevent children and adolescents from getting out of control during what Joseph Lee, founder of the Massachusetts Civic League, called in 1915 the “Big Injun” stage, their energies should be controlled through structured play, Hall argued. Hall, Gulick, and others somewhat blithely saw the playground as a hotbed of “individualism and cooperation” (87). They believed that the antisocial, sometimes destructive behavior seen in the streets of American cities at the time could be ameliorated simply by introducing children and adolescents to the joys of team play.

Not everyone was convinced, however. Cary Goodman, executive director of a New York–based group called Directions for Our Youth, whose focus is lowering the dropout rate in New York City’s public schools, argues that the introduction of team play on such a broad scale sucked the social life right out of New York’s neighborhoods, particularly those on the lower east side of Manhattan. Consider author Jane Leavy’s (2002) description of life in the Lafayette section of neighboring Brooklyn, boyhood home of pitching great Sandy Koufax.

Everyone played stickball, punchball, square ball, Gi-Gi ball. The streets and playgrounds were multicultural before there was a word for it. Diversity was a fact, not a goal. Political correctness was preached only by Mao Tse-tung. Italians were guineas. Jews were born with silver spoons in their mouths. Nobody took offense. (30)

Like the members of so many of today’s councils and committees on education, early-twentieth-century reformers wanted to produce efficient cogs in a corporate machine, not fulfilled individuals. “How many

tens of thousands of children were readied for the robotized Taylorized factory system as a result of accommodating their time sense to time schedules, play directors, and a stopwatch?" Goodman asks in his book, *Choosing Sides* (quoted in Guttman 1988, 90).

But Guttman contends that Goodman's view is a bit naïve. "It is important not to become too misty-eyed about nineteenth-century play," he writes (90), especially since there is a dearth of research about how play shaped the personalities of children and adolescents in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. "[I]t is foolish simply to assert that a romp in the woods or stickball in the street was socially superior to playground basketball or fifteen minutes on the teeter-totter," Guttman argues (90). Reformers such as Hall and Gulick were simply doing what reformers do, he claims: trying to improve what they believed was a troubling situation by introducing their values into the mix.

Still, I contend that a great deal of effort has been expended by parents, educators, school and sports league officials, and the media, to attempt to persuade us that playing just for the sake of playing—without structure, without a set of goals, is unproductive, and even potentially damaging to children. Hirsh-Pasek and Michnick-Golinkoff (2003) remind us that we did not even acknowledge that childhood was a separate stage in one's life until the nineteenth century. They claim that it was the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau who inspired many to see children as having their "own way of seeing, thinking, and feeling" (5).

By the middle of the twentieth century, a cadre of newly-minted child psychologists began studying the behaviors of children in earnest. They soon convinced men and women that being parents "required special knowledge and training," write Hirsh-Pasek and Michnick-Golinkoff. Parents soon started tapping the purported wisdom of child development experts. Some political leaders feared that parents had placed too much faith in their expertise (6). Child development soon became a thriving industry. Authors laid on the guilt as families, particularly the growing number of families where both parents worked, struggled to ensure that their children would not be left behind. "The focus on engineering our children's intellectual development had spiraled out of control," write Hirsh-Pasek and Michnick-Golinkoff (6). Trying to cram as many activities as possible into a child's schedule creates unneeded stress. More importantly, "by making children dependent on others to schedule and entertain them, we deprive them of the pleasures of creating their own games and the sense of mastery and independence they will need to enjoy running their own lives" (11).

Shooting the breeze with your parents or trading stories of exaggerated exploits on my old front porch are as valuable to a child's development as a summer reading list or an academic camp, say researchers (Hirsh-Pasek and Michnick-Golinkoff 2003, 11). Just telling a parent about the day's events enables children to "construct and interpret the stories of their lives." The child can more easily make sense of life, and can improve his or her memory along the way.

The marginalization of unstructured play and of "hanging out" has blurred the line between childhood and adulthood, argued famed media critic Neil Postman. Children are not making up their own games, he argued; instead, these games are being professionalized at an alarming rate. "There is no fooling around, no peculiar rules invented to suit the moment, no protection from the judgment of spectators," Postman contended (129). Children often play without joy or spontaneity, and are often subjected to harsh criticism by parents, coaches, and spectators. Instead of being allowed to play just for the sake of playing, children are often goaded into playing for "some external purpose, such as renown, money, physical conditioning, upward mobility, national pride," Postman wrote. As a result, we are less able to see play from a child's perspective.

Echoing Guttman, Lynott and Logue (1993) challenge Postman's view, and highlight a potential obstacle in our path: proceeding under the assumption that there was a "Golden Age of Childhood," as described by Postman and others (i.e., Elkind 1981), where children "were innocent, carefree, and protected" (477). The history of childhood, the authors write, is complex, and reveals more peril (in the form of disease, high infant mortality rates, and unregulated child labor practices) than the so-called "Hurried Child" authors acknowledge. Further, they take issue with Elkind's rejection of these problems since earlier societies did not recognize childhood as a phase of life. Thus, "childhood had to be 'invented' before it could be threatened with disappearance; as such, children could not be 'hurried' when they were not yet recognized as children," Lynott and Logue claim (477). There is also disagreement among these authors of when the "Golden Age" occurred.

But the amount of time spent just playing is declining. Hofferth and Sandberg (2001) explain that between 1981 and 1997, the amount of time spent on free play by children in the United States dropped by about 25 percent. Their finding is echoed by a Harris poll commissioned by KaBOOM, an organization dedicated to helping kids rediscover the joys of play by providing more "playspaces" throughout the country—a prospect no doubt embraced by their chief sponsor, Home Depot, which supplies much of the material for this endeavor. Three-

fourths of the pediatricians surveyed for KaBOOM reported that over the last five years, the amount of time spent by their patients on unstructured play had declined. Not that kids would have any time to play if they wanted to, at least according to a University of Michigan Institute of Social Research Study which revealed that children between the ages of three and eleven lost twelve hours a week of free time between 1981 and 1997 (Murphy 2005).

Too many organized activities in a child's life is a chief cause of this decline, write Burdette and Whitaker (2005). And when children do find time for unstructured play, they typically watch television or play video games, the authors explain. Patients contacted for the KaBOOM study also cited the elimination of recess by more than 40 percent of the nation's school districts (Kieff 2001). Under considerable pressure from government officials to show sustained academic achievement, many schools in the United States have taken recess out of their students' schedules.

Educators argue that students' academic performance will improve if they invest more time in their studies. Parents typically accept this notion, possibly because the benefits of play are not immediately realized. It sounds reasonable: more time spent on a task will cause children to learn more. Very often, however, parents push for good grades, not for lasting knowledge. In fact, as some theorists have pointed out, children "learn more when their efforts are distributed over time rather than concentrated into longer periods" (Kieff 2001, 319). When inserted between demanding tasks, recess enables children to pay more attention. They get bored with the classroom setting and need a little novelty. Eventually, however, they get bored with recess, and need to head back into the classroom, which they then see as novel, writes Pellegrini (1991).

Lost in all of this, suggest Burdette and Whitaker, are vital opportunities for children to develop problem-solving skills and nurture their own creativity. Play also may cause a child's mood to improve (49). A less constrained outdoor play setting may also encourage "executive functioning"; children permitted to play become good planners and organize tasks effectively. Unstructured play also gives kids the chance to hone their social skills. "This is because all play with others requires solving some form of social problem, such as deciding what to play, who can play, when to start, when to stop, and the rules of engagement," Burdette and Whitaker note (48). This is just the kind of social connectedness discussed by Putnam—yet researchers have barely explored the influences that enable children to develop sound social connections as adults, influences nurtured during free play. The authors

also speculate that children who engage frequently in free play are more likely to develop a strong sense of empathy. There has been a push back, with organizations such as the American Association for the Child's Right to Play marshaling forces in nearly all fifty states who advocate the reinstatement of recess.

The results of a recent study by the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) suggest that our worry about stressed-out, always active children may be misplaced. The SRCD found that four in ten kids between the ages of five and eighteen have no activities at all on their agendas. Structured activities consume only five hours of their time each week. Only a handful of kids (between 3 and 6 percent) are engaged in activities for twenty hours a week or more.

But the discussion of the study in an October 2006 issue of *Newsweek* (McGinn 2006, 43) sheds critical light on the news media's approach to covering this issue. After quoting the study's lead author, Joseph Mahoney of Yale University's Department of Psychology, as saying that the news media is at least partly to blame for arousing the concerns of parents and educators about overscheduled kids, the story reassures readers that all of that running around does pay off: "[T]he more activities they do, the better kids stack up on measures of educational achievement and psychological adjustment," writes Daniel McGinn, the *Newsweek* reporter. The photo that accompanied the article showed a nine-year-old girl admiring a medal she had won at a gymnastics competition.

Critics of the study point to the authors' reliance on the kids logging information about their activities in diaries, as well as the study's failure to discuss the impact of the time spent traveling between lessons and games. McGinn notes that the SRCD study "doesn't sway" educators, physicians, and psychologists "who've advocated against activity-creep." McGinn's approach suggests that these folks are intransigent—he later calls them "doubters." But to be fair, McGinn does acknowledge (toward the end of the story) that the study's findings, though far from conclusive, offer support for the idea that "every child is different—and some will absolutely do better with less" (43). McGinn describes the decision by a Michigan woman to cut back on her children's activities. She "feels as though her 6-year-old twins . . . are the only kids in town who don't take skiing and ice-skating lessons," McGinn writes. "There is nothing wrong," the woman contends, "with cuddling up on the couch with Mom and Dad."

As we will discuss in a later chapter, such an approach to covering this very important issue suggests that parents who decide to limit their children's activities must be ready to defend going against the conven-

tional wisdom, which changes with glacial dispatch, and that experts who offer valid points about the benefits to children of fewer structured activities are still far outside the mainstream.

A final point: the article also fails to provide an “in-between” for parents who might be grappling with this question. Either your kid takes lessons on three instruments, plays two sports, and participates in the a range of after-school activities, or else they sit in front of the TV or play video games. Making up games, or sitting on your front porch until one comes to you, is not an option.

TO PROPITIATE THE GODS

Before discussing these trends further, let’s explore a few definitions of “play.” Educators, physicians, and school psychologists agree that “free” or “unstructured” play greatly benefits children and adolescents. Burdette and Whitaker (2005) define “play” as “the spontaneous activity in which children engage to amuse and occupy themselves” (46). Noted scholar Johan Huizinga argued in 1970 that play is indeed a significant activity. Participants derive meaning from play; it enables them to “transcend” the pressures of day-to-day life. Most attempts by social and behavioral scientists to study play have fallen short because of the failure to highlight play’s “profoundly aesthetic quality” (2). Scholars have developed a number of what Huizinga believes are limited explanations for why we play: it is a release for pent-up energy; a training ground for life’s more serious work; an “exercise in restraint”; an expression of our desire to crush the competition, to borrow a phrase from the sports pages.

But more is clearly going on, Huizinga argues—fun for its own sake, to be precise. “Why does the baby crow with pleasure? Why does the gambler lose himself in his passion? Why is a huge crowd roused to frenzy by a football match?” he asks. Our desire to play, and the meaning we derive from play, “find no explanation in biological analysis” (2). Participants rarely see play as work; they *voluntarily* engage in play only for the enjoyment it brings. Play, writes Huizinga, is “free”—it represents *freedom* for participants to spontaneously immerse themselves in a world apart from real life. “It is rather a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own,” he argues (8).

Participants are generally quite serious about play, which should come as good news to parents and coaches who believe that unstructured play is aimless and unproductive. Our devotion to the twin gods

of achievement and progress, where we try to “explain every advance in culture in terms of a ‘special purpose’” (Frobenius, quoted in Huizinga, 16), is certainly not new, but we certainly have a hard time coming out from behind our devotion to view it the least bit critically. “The consciousness of play being ‘only a pretend,’” Huizinga writes, “does not by any means prevent from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes that troublesome ‘only’ feeling” (8).

We didn’t play hockey and baseball particularly well on Kensington Terrace, but we cared deeply about playing—about sustaining the significance of the play. We wanted to play well, and we wanted to win, but it was more important to immerse ourselves in the game, made-up or not. Games would often last for hours—after dark on weekday nights, and entire weekend afternoons. And, if Huizinga is correct, we actually gained something from the experience: an enhanced ability to make sense of the world. He cites Plato, who argued that “life must be lived as play, playing certain games, making sacrifices, singing and dancing, and then a man will be able to propitiate the gods, and defend himself against his enemies, and win in the contest” (19).

Not that we were serious all the time, or that we would have been able to recognize that we were serious. I’m not sure we engaged in any god-propitiating—and we certainly didn’t include a lot of sacrifices among our pick-up game rituals. I must also resist the desire to pass off warm and fuzzy recollections of childhood as mileposts of genuine personal development. But I can say this: remembering the meaning derived from these experiences has helped me to trust my own instincts a bit more readily. The simplicity of these experiences is a reassuring counterpoint to the gaggle of would-be “experts” that clog our television screens with regurgitations of common sense designed to persuade us we don’t have any. The answers (discussed in more detail when we look at what my respondents took away from their pick-up game experiences) don’t necessarily come from the games, or from the people; they come from the fact that we engaged in these activities on our own. We screwed up a lot, and rarely found lasting answers to our surprisingly significant questions—but we did the emotional and intellectual scrounging. We weren’t being hauled off to a lesson or a game or a camp every five minutes—we had to come up with and sustain relationships and activities, if only to pass the time and to prevent mind-numbing boredom from setting in. We made our own fun—sacrilege in our “all fun must be packaged and researched” culture. Actually, that’s too simple, not to mention unfair to today’s parents; it is more accurate to say that we have come to believe that fun must somehow still be pro-

ductive—to be productive, play must be rooted in consumption. Making a city out of old shoeboxes with my five-year-old son is somehow less impactful than if we bought him a DVD about how to build a city out of old shoeboxes.

At times, the games we played became greater, more significant, than their players. What we did not recognize was how absorbed we typically were by the games. As Huizinga asserts, the game “can at any time wholly run away with the players” (8). But this is not absorption in the “climb the corporate ladder no matter what the impact on family and friends” sense with which we are so familiar. We’re talking about joy, claims Huizinga—joy that can create “tension,” but also “elation” (21). One thing is for sure: the variation in our skill levels was more than offset by the effort we put into the games, whatever their rules. And on those occasions when one of us achieved a resonant “crack of the bat,” or a throw from the outfield landed on the fly in the catcher’s mitt, our play truly did, as Huizinga postulates, “rise to heights of beauty and sublimity that leave seriousness far behind.”

Of particular relevance to our journey is Huizinga’s notion that play is *disinterested*; that is, play “stands outside the immediate satisfaction of wants and appetites” (9). It is a respite—an “interlude” between daily activities. It provides an opportunity to stop, for the moment, our constant evaluation of activities on the basis of what we might gain from them. We talk incessantly about how participating in sports, for example, teaches sportsmanship and teamwork. We hear little else about the experience from parents, coaches, and young athletes. It is increasingly rare to hear a professional athlete talk at length about his or her love of the game; even more rare to hear discussions of “fun.” Without question, these are important attributes. But wringing every last drop of development from our activities—not to mention the constant reminders how the activity makes us a better person—can get tiring. It should be enough to do something because you selfishly enjoy it, because it transports, rather than transforms, you. As Huizinga notes, play “has no moral function” (6). This, I would argue, is a good thing. Not every experience should be thought of as a “teachable moment;” the most significant impact from an experience often comes when we allow children and adolescents to figure it out—to learn the moral lessons—for themselves. At the very least, we should give them a temporary respite from viewing experiences as packaged bundles ready to be consumed and collected.

Our games were contained, played in discrete blocks of time. We would remember what had happened in previous games, but the most resonant experiences came when we were able to block out school, our

parents, our siblings, troubling world events, adolescent feats and foibles. As one of the contributors to the book eloquently said, "It was a world of our own." We did not have to aspire, please anyone else, or manage our time. We did not have to take part in an organized program; we did the organizing. As Sennett notes, "Children learn to believe in the expressivity of impersonal behavior, when it is structured by made-up rules" (315). Children who play express themselves through "the remaking and the perfecting of those rules to give greater pleasure and promote greater sociability with others." The involvement of adults in all aspects of play has caused the focus to shift to the pursuit of what Sennett calls "a deeper life" (315), marked by superficial introspection and the ongoing assessment of the motives (and personalities) of others. Our behavior sometimes suggests to children that casual friendships have no value, and should be avoided.

Sennett theorizes that the goal of play is not instant gratification. Children generally don't want games to end—they want to delay the completion of a game as long as possible. In many cases, children do not seek to dominate play; they also often change the rules in order to maintain what we might call a "level playing field" for all players, regardless of ability. A child involved in play purposely delays his or her "mastery over others and creates a fictive community of common powers," Sennett contends (319). They do all of this in order to keep themselves "free of the outside, non-play world."

As will be discussed in the next chapter, such "seclusion," to use Huizinga's word, is impossible today. "Play begins, and then at a certain moment, it is 'over,'" Huizinga writes (9). It is self-contained. You play for a period of time, then decide to end the game. But the experience stays with the participants—"a treasure to be retained by the memory" (10)—as long, if not longer, than memories of an experience with organized sports. Participants also easily pick up where they left off. The game will continue tomorrow, or next week.

Play almost always takes place on a "consecrated spot"—and typically in secret. These were our games, nobody else's. "We were different and do things differently," suggests Huizinga, as if writing a slogan for our group. As we will discuss further in the next chapter, participation in sports, at all levels, has become jarringly homogeneous. Truly eccentric players have been moved aside by players who radiate packaged strangeness. Everywhere you look, athletes, at all levels, look, sound, and gesture the same way. Little leaguers mimic big leaguers, right down to their batter's box rituals. We did this, too, but never with such purpose. Where we played games to escape "ordinary life," (12), these kids and today's professional athletes make games seem like an inex-

orable part of ordinary life. It seems that they are closer to actually believing they are Albert Pujols, Lisa Leslie, or Peyton Manning than we were. Goaded by their parents, many simply don't think that they are engaged in "representative acts" (Huizinga, 15). They seem to think that someday, come hell or high water, they will be engaged in "real, purposive action."

For us, the "consecrated spots" were the porch, my backyard (which I kept neatly manicured, like the infield at Shea Stadium; I was training for a job on the grounds crew in case the first baseman's job wasn't open), our garage, whose east-facing wall served as the site for many an imaginary one-person World Series victory, and, yes, "the hump" in front of my house. "All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world," Huizinga writes, "dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (10). I remember the "hump" and the garage wall more fondly than the tennis courts and baseball fields at the nearby park, although my friends and I spent many hours there. As Huizinga notes, a dedicated space such as our garage wall "continues to shed its radiance on the ordinary world outside, a wholesome influence working security, order and prosperity for the whole community until the sacred play-season comes round again" (14). When warm days in February hinted that spring—and spring training—was near, I headed to the wall with my mitt and baseball, not the park. I drew a new strike zone on the wall, and knocked away the paint chips. We could have played touch football at the much roomier local park more often than we did, but somehow, games of five-on-five, played on crisp fall days with a "steady" quarterback, wearing doctored jerseys with duct tape used to make numbers, and with everyone trying to dodge parked and moving cars, simply meant more to us.

Today, children are expected to be totally immersed in whatever activities they undertake. They are expected to rehash and deconstruct their performance on the field. Further, the crush of a full schedule seems to leave them little time to go off and play—to make up and manipulate their own rules. They are not permitted to experience the self-distance Sennett describes. What the sports and games mean to them is of less importance than what they can gain from their participation in them. Far from an "interlude," participation in sports becomes a low hum in their lives. Instead of "adorning" life, to use Huizinga's word, it can consume or overwhelm one's life. The tear-streaked faces and often vacant stares of the players on the team that lost the 2006 Little League World Series support this view. The players were clearly sad about losing, but they also seemed to be crushed by the pressure to win caused by the accelerated professionalization of a child's game.

Yet many parents, egged on by some of these same professionals, and fresh from their child's most recent practice, game, or lesson, are giving their children fewer chances to "have fun" or "hang out." Scared that allowing children to make their own fun will somehow send their children spiraling toward juvenile delinquency, or worse, mediocrity, they complain that play doesn't teach anything, and doesn't instill a sense of order. Yet Huizinga contends that order is a necessity for play—"it creates order, *is* order," he writes (10). It may not be the expression of order that parents are after, but it is order nonetheless. Flouting the rules set up so carefully by the participants "robs it of its character and makes it worthless," argues Huizinga. And just because the games aren't professionalized within an inch of their lives doesn't mean there isn't tension. The outcomes of our makeshift games were uncertain. To paraphrase Charlie Brown, we all wanted to be the hero, not the goat, when the makeshift game was on the line. There were just more ways to win—resourcefulness, in the *MacGyver* sense, was often as important as physical prowess. When we played Running Bases, for example, you had to know how far away a "dropped" ball could roll so that you could entice a runner to try to make it to the other base.

There was no rule book to refer to, but failure to follow what rules we had was met with consternation, or as much consternation as a bunch of twelve-year-olds can muster. There were some common complaints: rushing the quarterback without having first completed the required number of "Mississippis"; using a cleverly manipulated stick to pull the blade of the goalie's stick out of the way of an oncoming shot; our lame attempts at loading up a baseball—and nobody ever came up with a satisfactory, mutually agreeable definition of pass interference.

Cheating was bad, but questioning the validity of the rules—usually expressed using some variation of the phrase "this is bullshit," followed by an abrupt departure—was more serious. Huizinga's description of play suggests that these transgressions highlighted the "fragility" of our games. Perhaps more troubling—although I'm not sure we realized this at the time—acting like what Huizinga (and my grandmother) calls a "spoil sport" also pierces the illusion of play.

The treatment of professional athletes by fans supports this view. For the most part, fans have shown marked indifference to reports that Barry Bonds and other professional baseball players have for some time, it seems, used steroids and other substances, to enhance their performance. There was some outcry, too, when we learned that Sammy Sosa of the Chicago Cubs, the only major league player ever to hit sixty home runs in a season three times, corked his bat. After the requisite amounts

of indignation and hand-wringing, we collectively shrugged our shoulders, and went back to supporting our teams.

But our dissatisfaction is far more pronounced when an athlete has the audacity (in our minds, anyway) to withhold services until the team capitulates to the athlete's contract demands. Holdouts are viewed as pariahs who threaten not only their team's potential success, but also the very fabric of the game. It doesn't help an athlete's case when ill-advised comments are made about having to have more money in order to feed one's family, but these individuals are most certainly banished, symbolically anyway, from their sports with more dispatch than an athlete who throws a spitball or overinflates a football to make it fly farther when it (not the athlete) is punted. As a colleague pointed out in an early review of this book (2007), however, the banishment "lasts only until the sins are forgotten." Forgotten or shared: Baseball fans still get a chuckle about the cleverness exhibited by admitted spitballer Gaylord Perry. We know he did it. He knows he did it. The fact that we were all in on his "secret" made it OK—rebellious, as my colleague pointed out.

The most serious sin one of us could commit was leaving, for whatever reason, what Huizinga calls the "play-community" (12). Leaving to play an organized sport—as I did briefly in the summer of 1979 when, as an incoming senior, I tried out for my high school's football team—was a pretty serious breach of the play-community faith. Even *suggesting* that after all of our "practice," it might be worth a try to play a season of Little League, or skate in an organized hockey program, was viewed as heresy, as if Tucker Carlson told Rush Limbaugh of his hidden interest in joining the Green Party.