



By Pat Cutler

Field of Dreams

Growing up, all the boys between the ages of nine and thirteen in my neighborhood gathered in the field beside Banning's Store to play baseball during the summer. The store acted as a boundary down the first base side of the field. Shorty Hall's garage defined the third base line. Highway 76, some 300 feet from home plate, effectively ended the outfield. JoAnne Griffin's house served as the backstop behind home plate. JoAnne, the best looking girl in the neighborhood, provided our inspiration.

Just like the major leagues, there were local rules at Banning Field. Balls hit into the ivy bed beside Shorty Hall's garage were difficult to find, so the batter was not allowed to advance past first base. Any hit ball that crossed the highway was a home run. After picking teams and making sure JoAnne was watching from her kitchen window, we would spin a bat to determine who took the field first.

The best players pitched, caught and played the infield. Everyone else was an outfielder. The worst players, then as now, were sent to right field. An uneven infield and erratic pitching often resulted in bruises and bloody noses. Trying to impress JoAnne sometimes resulted in more serious injuries.

We played seven innings or two hours, whichever was longest. During lulls in the action we held spitting contests. Form, distance and volume were all taken into consideration. After the game, we adjourned to the store for drinks and candy bars to rehash the good and bad plays made that day. When it rained, we met at our clubhouse (the Matthews barn) to trade baseball cards, read comic books and smoke monkey cigars (pods from a Catawba tree). While I seldom see the guys from my old neighborhood, I still feel the strong bond we developed many summers ago playing baseball at Banning's Field.

We are the Champions

On June 29, 2010, the University of South Carolina's Whit Merrifield singled home the winning run in the bottom of the 11th inning, allowing the Gamecocks to beat the UCLA Bruins 2 to 1 and become college baseball's National Champions. It was the first time that USC's baseball, football or basketball program had won a national championship. The next day I gathered with thousands of other fans to welcome the team home. Queen's *We are the Champions* was played as the team entered the arena.

As Americans, we know what it takes to be champions of the world. The Great Recession proved to be a formidable opponent. To meet the challenge, unprecedented amounts of monies in the form of stimulus packages were distributed. Companies were bailed out. Cash for clunkers and caulkers was handed out. Our spending as a country has increased 29% in the last four years. Meanwhile, revenues declined as millions became unemployed, resulting in lower tax collections from individuals and businesses negatively impacted by reduced consumer spending.

We must make adjustments or risk losing our title. A baseball player can hit a baseball harder and further with a metal bat. This year, college teams are required to use metal bats calibrated to perform like wood bats. Teams can no longer count on hitting home runs to win games. As a country, we can no longer count on growing our way out of our deficit problem. Our deficit is too large and our current level of economic growth is too slow.

To continue our winning ways, a bold plan must be developed and enacted to reduce the federal deficit. Like a batter looking for a walk, our elected officials have been standing with the bat on their shoulder, for fear of suggesting an unpopular solution to solving our deficit problem and being voted out of office. We cannot afford to take a called third strike. We must swing the bat and drive in the winning run or be relegated to being economic cellar dwellers.

Congressman Paul Ryan, chairman of the House Budget Committee, batted first and reached base on a blue darter hit to right field. His plan includes unpopular reforms to both Medicare and Medicaid. After giving a Bronx cheer to the Republicans, the president reached second on an opposite field hit down the left field line. The president's plan calls for arbitrary caps on spending and tax increases on the rich. Due up next is the "Gang of Six", a bipartisan group of Senators

working on a compromise between cutting entitlements and raising taxes. Meanwhile, Vice President Biden is meeting with another group to formulate yet another plan.

Everyone knows that you cannot spend more than you make for long or you will find yourself in a very precarious situation. As a country, it is time we cut up some of our credit cards and find additional sources of revenue. Will the president and members of Congress reach agreement on a plan to reduce future spending and increase revenues, or sit on their hands and catcall each other from their dugouts? Time is running out to address our deficit problem and remain champions of the world.

Housing Benched

Following a prolonged slump, housing has been benched for the foreseeable future. Wages remain stagnant, while higher gasoline and food prices have eroded income that could be used for housing expenses. Unemployment and underemployment prevents thousands of potential buyers from purchasing a home. Regulatory and judicial overreach has delayed the disposition of millions of foreclosures, putting further downward pressure on housing prices and derailing plans for new construction.

Special mortgage initiatives for first time homeowners and underwater mortgagors have failed to return housing to pre-recession form. We are now in peak season for buying and selling homes. The news is not good. New home sales for March rallied only slightly from February, when sales were reported at their lowest level since the government began keeping records in 1963. Distressed sales make up 40% of existing home sales. Prices continue to weaken, trends in sales and construction are disappointing and qualifying guidelines remain restrictive.

See the Ball, Make Contact

Housing plays a significant role in our economy. Most people's net worth is tied to the value of their homes, not their stock portfolio. Hundreds of thousands of people employed in real estate, construction, and mortgage lending depend on the housing market to make a living.

In baseball, when a hitter is in a slump, he is coached to focus on fundamentals. Stand up tall, bat back, concentrate on the ball as it leaves the pitcher's hand. See the ball, make contact. Fundamentally, as a country, we have lost our confidence in our leaders' ability to work together to make good decisions. Until something changes to restore our confidence in our country and ourselves, our economy will continue to limp along and housing cannot make a meaningful recovery. There are many things that can be done to build our confidence, but let's focus on correcting the most serious flaws first:

- There is no middle ground anymore. Like little boys playing tee ball, our politicians are all herded together in either left field or right field. Hardly anyone is playing center field. Let's show we can move towards the center. Reach agreement on reducing the deficit.
- The Fed has kept monetary policy accommodative for too long, which if left unchanged could heighten inflation fears, resulting in much higher interest rates. Over the remainder of the year, the Fed should gradually return to a more normalized monetary policy.
- Uncertainty over health care and financial reform, coupled with the added costs of implementing as yet unwritten rules and regulations, prevent companies from putting people to work. Regulators and bureaucrats caught leaning too far out over the field should be removed from the ballpark for interfering with the recovery. Czars and Agency heads must be prevented from implementing grandiose agendas that impede job creation and increase costs for everyone.

It is called the National Pastime. Not that long ago, baseball was as integral to the country as hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet. As Joe Biden would say, Baseball was a big ---- deal. Not long ago, America was a great country. Now, it kind of is. Government, the most inefficient institution on the planet, has become too involved in everything we do. We need government to get out of the way and give us a chance to bat. I have no doubt America will step up to the plate and hit it out of the park.

The smells of freshly cut grass, draft beer and chili dogs permeate the cool night air. A-Rod is at third, Jeter is at short, Sabathia is on the mound and Rivera is waiting to turn out the lights. The hated Red Sox are going down, Pinstripes Rule – Pat Cutler

This article contains information gathered from numerous sources. The information is considered reliable but is not guaranteed as accurate. The opinions are my own and not deemed appropriate for any purpose other than to provide information to customers and potential customers.

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