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Safe at First

By Dodd Sims, M.D.

Baseball saved me. Well actually, it's more like I came to Christ at a baseball stadium. Now, I'm a little skeptical about using sports metaphors when we talk about God. After all, we already have plenty of good metaphors which attempt to describe the ineffable: God as our father, Jesus as our brother, and for some, Mary as our mother. But it seems that sport is such an important phenomenon in our lives that we can't help but use sports images when we talk about the divine.

There is even a book for NASCAR fans called *Racing for Christ*. I must confess that I haven't read it, but I did take a look at *Fly Fishing with God*. I've also spent some time on one of the websites about Biblical bowling. None of them seems very profound. They offer me few insights into the meaning of it all. Baseball is different.

In November of 1965, Billy Graham held a crusade in the newly opened Astrodome in Houston. Comparing it to places like the Taj

Mahal and the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Astrodome was considered the “Eighth Wonder of the World,” as the world’s first air conditioned and domed stadium. Over ten nights, an estimated 61,000 people attended the rally, including my church youth group. Some 13,000 people came forward to “be saved.” I was one of them.

Toward the end of the service, there was the usual altar call when Billy Graham invited you to make your way down to the infield and offer your life to Christ. With a feeling more of an adolescent prank than a call to a new life in Christ, I stood up and told my buddy Chuck I was going down. He was hesitant, but I convinced him to join me: after all, in this life how many chances would you get to be saved by Billy Graham in the Astrodome?

We made our way down from the upper deck and onto the field on the first base side. There was already a throng around Graham who stood next to a podium constructed over the pitcher’s mound. I never got to shake his hand, but I was warmly greeted by one of his helpers. He dutifully took down my name and address and welcomed me into the fold. And that was sort of that. For years afterwards, Billy Graham literature and solicitations for donations showed up in my parents’ mailbox.

So that’s how I got to first base. The rest of the game played out over decades. I had to steal second when no one was looking. I finally made it further around the bases on a sacrifice fly. And now here I am at third with a bit of a lead off the bag. I’m just waiting for that soft line drive to right field that will let me scamper home.

I’m still not even sure what it means to be saved, though I have come to understand, if even incompletely, what it means to commit yourself to Christ. Like so many things in life, it only starts to become clearer in hindsight. For me, what started out as a prank has come to have real meaning.

I didn't know at the time, but those steps in the Astrodome were my first steps as an adult into a life in Christ. In fact, for many years I saw it just as a funny story to tell friends. It was only later – after being astounded by the sheer joy of bringing children into this world and watching them grow, after being supported in my career by mentors who believed in me, after experiencing the love of my parents and my wife through good times and bad – it was only then that I was able to look back and find meaning in that trip to first base.

And I think that's likely true for all of us. There are moments in our lives that seemed trivial at the time, but which have come to define who we are. We have "stolen" our way around the bases when no one was looking. And God knows, we have been carried forward by the uncounted sacrifices of those who care for us, those who truly love us.

So, in this Lenten season, I encourage you to take the time to reflect on how you got to where you are and how you'll make it home. At the end of the day, we can only express these things in metaphors. And if sports metaphors help, use them.

Spring is coming. Let's play ball!