

Now in my 70s, I find myself reminiscing more and more. In my mind I often travel back to Massachusetts Street and relive those days at the Massachusetts playground.

It was that glorious summer of 1953. School was out and the playground was in. I was living on West Ferry Street and fortunate to be within a stones throw from the beloved Massachusetts playground. In those days playgrounds existed in every neighborhood in the city and were staffed by city employees. The city was divided by ethnic neighborhoods, and the flavor of the playground revolved around that ethnicity. Needless to say ours was Italian and it was our home away from home.

Epifanio Saia was the playground attendant. He was a well respected teacher at Lafayette High School who worked the summer season at Massachusetts. Outside of a few minor incidents, he was in control of the grounds, if you misbehaved or caused trouble you found yourself suspended for a day or two. This usually did the trick and the culprits stayed in line the rest of the season.

It's early in the morning, the sun is shining, its going to be a glorious day. I hop out of bed, gulp down a fast breakfast of Italian toast and a cup containing half coffee and half milk. I grab my well oiled Rawling baseball glove and headed down Massachusetts Street to the playground. In the near distance I could see the crowd starting to assemble. I spotted Sammy Asarese and Joe Burgio coming from Winter Street and joined them for the walk to the park. Sammy carried his baseball bat over his shoulder. It was the only bat that we had to play with. It was handed down to Sammy from his older brother Tovie. Unfortunately it was previously cracked and had to be secured with black electrical tape.

Approaching the entrance of the playground we bumped into Vinny Scime and Buddy Ruggerio and together we scooted to the far end of the playground where we made our own diamond. It was near Richard Tezel's house and away from the other diamond that was used by the older players. Tezel's yard had a fence with a gaping hole in it. Richard, hearing the morning activity getting under way, came out through the hole to join the crowd. He wouldn't miss a day. He was a sports jock who

enjoyed verbalizing every play in every game played. He made the most simple plays sound exciting. He later in life actually worked radio as a stat man and spotter on radio sports programs.

Soon the remainder of the playground gang showed up. They were Jimmy Caputi, Joe Iraci, Sam "Underdale" Lipomi, Sam Genco. We were ready to play. We had two baseballs, one fairly new and the other covered with black tape. I don't think that we could have gotten through the summer playing baseball without that roll of black tape.

We played endless days on this makeshift diamond until we were old enough to graduate to the big diamond. There the competition escalated as the guys from the playground at school 77 came to play. They were led by Sal Maggiore, noted for coming up periodically with a new ball or bat. The remainder of the bunch consisted of Joe Pepperone, Joe Foglio, Jimmy Cirrito, Len Pepe, Ben Licata, the Ganci brothers, John and Don, and Jimmy "Red Sox fan" Randazzo.

The big diamond had a short right field fence, that was no match for the left-hand hitting Randazzo or later arrival Mark "gaberden pants" Tiftickjian who continually attacked the fence with hard shots to right field. We right-handed hitters were out of luck as leftfield went forever.

A foul ball down the right field line had the opportunity to end up in the swimming pool. When that happened one of the players had to climb the fence and retrieve the ball. Except for Sal Maggiore who had a fear of water. Too bad because after playing ball on those hot July-August days we would all go [except Sal] swimming in the pool.

The pool was the domain of the Ganci brothers who swam and dove like fish. They were the first to master the "Carl Huber" arch dive. Sorry, you had to see it, too hard to explain. At night we went to the pool to gawk at Red Mosier, the Ester Williams of the neighborhood. Our reactions were similar to those of the boys in Federico Fellini's Amacord.

Later on when they put in the basketball court, we

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basically played 12 months a year. The guys who lived close brought the shovels if we had snow. West Side basketball legends Joe Merlo, Don King, and Charlie Tedesco often played here.

I was at the playground everyday except Saturday and Sunday. Those days I shined shoes with my uncle George Ranallo at the landmark Felix's shoe shine stand at Niagara and Ferry Street. The money was nice but I would rather be at the Massachusetts playground.

On Sundays, the playground hosted an illegal crap game. "Gazuookas" from all over the west side came to shoot dice. Guys dressed to the hilt with Stetson hats, spade shoes, Charlie Baker suits. It was a sight, especially when the cops pulled in, and all the "suits" headed for the holes in the fences to get away. Away from what? All the cops wanted were the loot left behind in the pot. Dozens of raids! Zero arrests.

In the early 40s everyone in my neighborhood, either took accordion or guitar lessons.

My teacher was Joe Colby who played with the Buffalo Philharmonic. When he came to the house for my lesson, you had better be there ready to learn. I tried to skip one day and he tracked me down in the playground and drove his car right into the baseball field, picked me up and took me home for my lesson. Here's what I learned, don't mess with Colby on lesson day. I still have the Gibson he sold my parents. I'm told it increased in value 10-15 fold. To bad my guitar playing didn't improve as well.

I'll never forget the story Sam Maggiore tells about his father, a quiet, non-smiling man who, at supper time always came to the playground to fetch Sam.

One day, when his father arrived Sam had just hit a home run. He said, through the corner of his eye, he saw his father witness the feat. As he and Sam walked past the swimming pool, Sam asked his father if he saw the homer? He didn't respond. Just then, a female friend of Sam's approached to say, "hello". It was fourteen-year old (going on twenty) Marie Notaro, now Marie Caccamise who could have been Jane Russell's movie stand-in. She

not only got Sam's father's attention but made him smile. It was obvious mister Maggiore was impressed more with Maria than his son's homer. Fifty-five years later Maria is still impressively beautiful.

Lucy Andolina, who lived next door to Sal Bottaro on Winter Street, married Jimmy O'Connell. They now live in Florida adjacent to Charlie and Patti Tasca's winter home.

Early in our teens we were bullied by two 16-year olds: Larry Shields and Austin Morelli both of whom grew to their full height: 5' 3" at best. Larry Shields married Tom Miceli's sister and is a butcher at Johnny's Meat Market on Hertel.

We played a lot of touch-football in which the Gancis excelled. Maggiore often played quarterback. Sam was judicious at play calling as he wanted everyone to get a chance at the ball. But after the play was called and the huddle broken I'd whisper to Sam where I'd be and Sam would throw the ball to me thus ignoring the play.

A day didn't pass without seeing our mascots, the Pieri brothers, John, now a first tier criminal defense lawyer, and Steve, a Buffalo building inspector, who, in his formative years was a student of Sam Maggiore's school-teacher-wife, Sue.

I recently spoke to Sue. She said she had many vivid memories of the Massachusetts Street playground and pool. She remembers her mother standing by the pool fence and watching as Sue, at age six or seven along with her sister, Rachel, stood in line with other children who were practicing swimming strokes. Sue said she will always be thankful for Buffalo's public swimming pools where she spent many happy days ... before she met Sam. (ONLY KIDDING!)

By 1955 the Butler Mitchell club took over the management of the Massachusetts building and playground. My friends and I grew older and acquired new habits. We had out grown the playground and began the journey to adulthood. But needless to say, those days spent at the playground were one of the happiest times of our lives.

*Larry LaDuca*