

Baseball stories

By [Richard A. Kauffman](#)

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I have friends who always count the days till spring training begins. Now that it's underway, their thoughts are moving on to their teams' post-season chances. I'm not a big baseball fan myself, but I appreciate the game's storied place in American culture.

Michael Jordan, who [just turned 50](#), tried to break into Major League Baseball in 1993. That year my wife and I were in Florida during spring training. Jordan and the White Sox were playing close by, so we decided to attend a game.

Jordan, playing right field, was able to show off his superior athleticism for the unusually large crowd. At one point an opposing player hit a sharp, low line drive far to Jordan's left. Jordan ran toward it and, at the last moment, made a leaping catch with his six-foot-six frame parallel to the ground.

Things were less exciting at the plate. Jordan struggled to hit Major League pitching, and at this point he hadn't yet gotten a hit. The crowd cheered him on as he stepped up to the plate the first time. When he fouled the ball off, the first baseman ran to the stands, reached in a couple rows and snagged Jordan's popup. The crowd booed the first baseman.

The next time Jordan grounded out to second. Then he was taken out of the game—and well over half the crowd left. Like us, they were there to see MJ.

After spring training, Jordan was assigned to an AA farm team. That team's manager, Terry Francona, [recently published his memoirs](#) and included a revealing Jordan story. During some down time, Jordan, Francona and some others played a pickup basketball game. Francona, who was on Jordan's team, took their last shot of the game. Jordan approached his manager and said, "Hey, man, I always shoot last."

Francona responded, "Well, you know, this isn't on TV."

"I don't care," said Jordan. "I always shoot last."

So Francona said to Jordan, "Well, now you know how I feel when I watch you try to hit a curveball." Jordan laughed, and Francona realized that Jordan liked being treated as one of the guys.

Carey Newman, publisher of Baylor University Press, recently told me a great spring-training story. He was at a Braves-Dodgers game in West Palm Beach. The teams had both their A and B squads along, and the facility's dugouts weren't big enough. So some players and coaches sat on folding chairs up against the wall between the field and the stands. This put them very close to the fans.

Between innings, a young boy leaned over and asked Tommy Lasorda, the Dodgers' fiery manager, for his autograph. Lasorda picked the boy up, put him on his lap, and signed his game program. Then Lasorda passed the boy on to the next guy. It took several innings, but the boy sat on every Dodger's lap and got an autograph from each of them.

Carey observed that this wouldn't happen today. An almost impenetrable wall now separates professional athletes from their fans. Kids are less likely than ever to have improbable stories like this one to share with their own grandchildren. That's a real loss.