

# A Grandfather, a Boy and a Baseball

By Ray Elliott

Jim's grandfather loves baseball. He used to play baseball. He likes to watch baseball. He likes to listen to baseball games. Sometimes he listens to one game on the radio and watches another on TV. When he gets disgusted with the game on the radio, he shuts it off and says, "They can't play ball for beans."

The St. Louis Cardinals are Jim's grandfather's favorite team. They are the ones he listens to on the radio and gets disgusted with — more disgusted than usual this year. "I'd send the whole bunch back to the minors and get somebody in there who wants to play," he says of this year's team.

But there was a time when they could play ball for beans and play well, too. That was a long time ago, though. Jim doesn't remember those times. He was only 3 years old the last time they won a pennant.

Jim's grandfather remembers Pennant and World Series winners since 1926. That was the first year they won the pennant. He wants them to win it every year.

When Jim was a small boy, not over five years old, his grandfather took him to St. Louis to see the Cardinals play. It was a bad year for the Cardinals. They hadn't won a pennant for two years and wouldn't win another one for a long time. Maybe never.

They were not even close to winning a pennant. They were not among the league leaders. That was not an unusual situation for them, even though it is not as normal as it is for the Chicago Cubs.

The game was not an exciting one and before the end of the game, Jim's grandfather had to go to the bathroom. Had it been a good game, he would have waited. But it wasn't a good game, and he didn't wait. It was his way of tuning the game off as he did when he listened to games on the radio.

On the way back to his seat near the left field bullpen, Jim's grandfather heard the crowd roar and looked up to see a foul ball hit the concrete at the top of the entrance way he was walking up. Remembering how to field a ground ball, he went down on one knee, kept his eyes on the ball and fielded it cleanly as it careened off the wall of the walkway.

Only a small boy was walking back to the seating area with Jim's grandfather. He, too, had tried for the ball. He was disappointed that he didn't get it. Jim's grandfather could tell that by the look on his face.

Another man had watched the two scramble for the foul ball. He walked up behind them and said, "Why don't you give that ball to the kid? He needs it more than you do."

Jim's grandfather looked sheepishly at the boy and the man. "I've got a little fellar up there that wants this ball, too. He's my grandson," he said and walked away.

By the time the pitcher threw the next pitch, Jim's grandfather had found his way back to his seat and Jim and his family. He was ready to turn the game back on. A grin covered his face from ear to ear.

"What took you so long?" one of his family asked him. He had been gone for over ten minutes.

Jim's grandfather grinned at them. "I got me a drink," he said. His family watched the next pitch.

"Well look at what I got here," he laughed and slapped his leg with one hand twice in rapid succession and held up the caught foul ball with his other hand.

His family looked at him again.

"I just sort of wandered around down there for a while and decided to get me a drink," he said. "When I finally started back up here, this little boy and me were walking together. This foul ball hit the top of the incline and came rolling down.

"Both of us went for it. I've been to a lot of ballgames and seen a lot of foul balls hit, but I never caught one. Never figured I would, either. This one was mine, though. Wasn't anything going to stop me from getting it. And old grandpa got it.

"When I stood up with the ball in my hand, I could see the little boy was disappointed. This other old boy walked up behind me and said, 'Why don't you give it to the boy? That little feller needs it worse than you do.' "I reckon he thought I was terrible for keeping the ball. But I told him, 'I got me a little feller up there who wants this ball just as much as this one does. And he's my grandson.' Here it is, Jimmy."

Jimmy held out his hand and took the ball.

"You give this ball to your daddy, Jimmy," Jim's grandfather said. "Have him get somebody to write the date and things on it. Then when you grow up you can look at the ball and remember that your old grandpa caught the ball for you in St. Louis when we came to see the Cardinals play."

Jim still has the ball his grandfather caught for him. It is in his room. It has no writing on it. Jim doesn't remember much about the game except that his grandfather caught the ball for him.

"I remember that Grandpa said, 'Look what Grandpa got for you, Jimmy.' That's what I remember about the game," Jim says now. "Grandpa really likes the Cardinals, I guess."