

Squeeze play

By Nancy McKibben

Illustration by Mario Noche



Hockey has the Stanley Cup, soccer the World Cup and tennis the Davis Cup. Little League baseball, meanwhile, has the Athletic Cup—that monument not to victory, but to perseverance in the face of squirming discomfort.

Youngest son Justin first encountered the cup at age 7 as part of his baseball uniform. Although leery of tucking his privates into a hard plastic shell, he bowed to the rules of the game and retired to the bathroom to wrestle himself into it.

Some time later he emerged, clutching his nether parts and staggering down the hall like Frankenstein after a hard night's pillaging.

"I can't wear this thing," he gasped. "It's strangling me."

At our urging, he unzipped his fly and the offending jock strap and cup at once sprang into view—he was wearing them on the outside of his underpants. We explained that he needed to don the jock strap before the briefs, an improvement that he found only marginally more comfortable. There followed a period of intensive experimentation with different sizes and models. The scientific conclusion, buttressed by weeks of field testing: All cups are torture devices.

We left the cup to languish unworn in the sock drawer, and so it stood until the summer Justin moved up from the Minors to the Majors. At each game, the coach required his players to knock their knuckles against their crotches to prove that they were wearing protection. The cup was back.

This time, Justin trekked to Dick's Sporting Goods to trade in the strangling jock strap for sliding shorts, which hold the cup in a handy interior pocket. After we coaxed him from behind the rack of sports socks where he had hidden at the approach of a perky teenage salesgirl, he chose his new cup—a sporty triangular number in blue plastic with three ventilation holes, like a miniature primitive mask with round staring eyes and a mouth held in a permanent "o" of surprise.

Once home, a curious phenomenon emerged: Although Justin could scoop up a grounder on the bounce and hurl it from third to first with the accuracy of a heat-seeking missile, he seemed to lack the coordination necessary to insert the cup into the nylon pocket. It fell to me, his mother, to marry the cup to the shorts before each game. But first I had to find it.

The cup proved to be as elusive as

Bigfoot, with frequent sightings and few captures. Each of us remembered seeing it . . . somewhere. It hovered on the edge of our collective family consciousness, its dusty blue face faintly mocking us. As the minutes ticked closer to game time, the quest for the cup often provided more drama than the game itself. A typical scenario:

Justin's voice thunders up the stairs, its tone plaintive.

"Has anybody seen my cup?"

A teenage sister provides incriminating evidence. "You were wearing your stupid cup on your face when you were on the computer last night." She wrinkles her nose. "Which was gross."

Justin shrugs. "I was being Darth Vader."

That night we found the cup under the computer desk. On another occasion it was on the landing by the front door. Under a chair in the living room. On the dining room table. It was a puzzle how an item of sporting equipment as intimate as a cup could lead such a nomadic life. Why didn't it turn up in the wash each week, secure in the pocket of the sliding shorts?

Then one evening after a game I witnessed the launch of the cup's weekly peregrinations. We unlocked the front door of our bi-level and my son stepped inside, reached into his baseball pants, yanked out the offending cup and dropped it on the floor, where it rocked gently for an instant before triggering the subconscious message always looping through the brain cells of the 10-year-old male: "Alert! Object on floor! Kick object!" Message received, his cleated toe sent the cup bouncing down the steps to the lower level. When I rounded on Justin, he was unfazed.

"It's so uncomfortable, Mom—I just can't wait to take it off!"

Myself the frequent and unwilling victim of pantyhose, I could relate to the urge to kick the cup downstairs, so I stifled a sigh and sent him to retrieve it. Despite its arch expression and wandering ways, I knew that for the rest of the season I could depend on the cup for two things: one, to protect my son's manhood and, two, to show him that baseball is a game whose every idiom is layered with meaning, beginning with the phrase shouted at the start of each half-inning: "Balls in!" ■

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