

**Excerpt from: *A Neighborhood In The Middle Of Nowhere*, Ray Hazel**

Chapter 2 – My Little League Experience

At nine years of age my dad took my hand just before I ran onto the field of fear and tears toward the first day of tryouts. I was more than ready because this was my big dream. I took off the only way I knew how, in a hurry.

Dad seemed so serious. He knelt down just a second before saying, “Ray, you have the right to hold onto your dream.”

He was near tears when he said, “Go now and focus on giving your very best effort. Taking advantage of this opportunity is entirely up to you now. You can do it, Ray.”

I sprinted toward right field where the nine-year-olds were congregating for tryouts. As I ran full speed ahead onto the playing field, I must admit visualizing myself at Yankee Stadium heading toward short with #7 Mickey Mantle who was nursing a knee injury hobbling to center field.

For a couple of weeks, the reality of disappointment for nearly 200 boys came true in every age group. Somehow, I survived through the anxiety. Frankly, it was sad to witness tears staining the dirty cheeks of a few of my friends. In those days there were no participation awards. There was no way around the fact that as fair as the tryouts seemed at the time, three things needed to be changed. We needed more teams; there was a discrepancy in age difference and the League needed to allow the participation of girls. All three of those issues were addressed over time in the Little League experience.

It didn't take long before I realized the reality of the meaning of competition. After booting a ground ball, I felt my chances had dwindled to slim to none. The only thing that really mattered two weeks later was when I was handed a complete baseball uniform that was entirely too big. I hoped I would grow into it at around age eleven. I didn't realize it at the time, but that uniform represented responsibility and life lessons.

Little League believes in the power of youth baseball and softball to teach life lessons that build stronger individuals and communities. Following is the Little League Pledge:

I trust in God  
I love my country and will respect its laws I will play fair  
And strive to win but win or lose  
I will always do my best

It was June 18<sup>th</sup> of 1953, the first opening day morning for the first Little League games in my hometown. My mom was frantically preparing my family and me in particular, as I put on my baseball uniform for the first parade of sixty hopeful future Hall of Famers.