

Breaking the Rules

We always ignored our littlest cousin—until Grandpa stepped in.

By Audrey Corn

My cousins and I could hardly wait for baseball's Opening Day at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn, N.Y. Brooklyn was Dodger country when I was a kid in the 1940s.

Back then, our whole family ate Sunday dinner at my grandparents' house. The grown-ups debated endlessly about the Dodgers' chances for winning the pennant. Statistics were quoted, and Dodger manager Leo Durocher was praised or condemned, depending on the outcome of that week's games.

We kids cared about statistics. But we preferred *playing* ball to *talking* ball. After Sunday dinner, we rushed outdoors to choose up sides for our stickball game. Stickball was the city child's version of baseball. We used a broomstick for a bat and a pink rubber ball called a spaldeen, and we marked off our bases with whatever was handy—a parked car, Mrs. Russell's front stoop, a manhole cover.

Cousin Sammy tagged along behind us when we left the house. Sammy was the youngest cousin. He couldn't hit very far, throw very straight or run very fast. We pretended we didn't see Sammy. If we ignored him, maybe he would go away.

But Sammy never went away. He just stood there and watched us choose up sides. The team that picked Sammy was guaranteed to lose, so no one ever chose Sammy.

"I'm gonna tell on you if you don't let me play!" Sammy threatened.

"Blabbermouth!" we jeered. "Tattletale!"

Sammy burst into tears and ran back to the house. Usually Grandma managed to distract Sammy. But occasionally, Sammy's mother or one of the other aunts came out to the front porch to say that we couldn't play unless we let Sammy play. At times like this, I vowed that I would treat kids fair when I was a grown-up.

One Sunday, Grandma, my mother and my aunts must have been busy cleaning up the dinner dishes because they sent Grandpa out to confront us.

"Uh-oh, we're in *big* trouble!" cousin Michael muttered when he saw Grandpa coming.

Grandpa got straight to the point. "Your little

cousin here tells me that you don't have a place for him on your teams," Grandpa said.

Michael, who was the oldest, spoke for the rest of us. "We'll let Sammy play when he learns how. He needs to wait a couple of years."

"I know a slot that Sammy can fill right now! Sammy can be your umpire," Grandpa said.

"You're mixing up stickball and *real* baseball," Michael said. "Stickball doesn't have an umpire."

"Show me the law that says stickball *can't* have an umpire," Grandpa challenged.

We all knew that stickball had no written rules, just traditions. Umpires were not a tradition.

Michael and Grandpa argued back and forth. Michael wouldn't give in. Grandpa wouldn't give in. Stubbornness runs in our family.

The rest of us got tired of listening to them haggle. We wanted to play stickball before it got too dark to see the ball.

"Let's take a vote," cousin Benjy said. "All in favor of letting Sammy be the umpire ..." Every hand shot up. And so, that Sunday, Grandpa made history when my cousins and I became the first two stickball teams in Brooklyn to use an umpire.

Sammy took his job seriously. He called out hits, runs and errors. The rest of us were too busy playing to listen to him. But Sammy didn't complain. He just wanted to be part of the group.

Sammy was happy, we were happy, and Grandpa was happiest of all. He sat on his front porch, watching the game and smiled. Grandpa knew that you couldn't choose your family, but you *could* choose your friends. He freely admitted that his greatest joy on Sunday afternoons was watching his grandchildren play together as pals, not just cousins.

Our stickball games happened a long time ago. Michael, Sammy and the rest of us no longer play stickball on the streets of Brooklyn. But we still talk about our games, about Grandpa, and about how we understood the rules. But Grandpa understood the exceptions back in the Good Old Days. ❖