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In spring a young man's thoughts turn to — baseball

By Nancy Shohet West APRIL 24, 2014

It may well be the case that “In the spring a young man’s fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love,” as poet Alfred Tennyson so famously put it, but you wouldn’t know it from the conversation in the back of my car as I drive my 15-year-old and his friends home on a recent afternoon.

All that these young men’s thoughts seem to be turning to right now is baseball. Whether they have a chance at making the starting lineup. Which of their freshmen teammates under- or overestimate their own abilities. Who is likely to be called up to junior varsity before the season ends. Which drills were the most difficult at practice, and which ones the most rewarding. Whether it makes sense that pitchers and catchers are required to run approximately five times more laps than their teammates playing other positions.



JOANNE RATHE/GLOBE STAFF/FILE 2002

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I know many parents believe the one upside of drawing carpool duty is getting to eavesdrop. In the commute from school to home (or from school to home to home to home, depending on the number of kids in the pool), it is said that some furtively fill up on adolescent gossip and ruminations on topics social, academic, and societal.

But not in our carpool. In our carpool it's all baseball, all the time. At least this week. Last week too, come to think of it. Pretty much every week since the team tryouts took place last month.

And I have to admit, I think it's adorable.

These aren't little kids, after all. I've known not only my own son the pitcher but also his friend the catcher, and his other friend the first baseman since T-ball days, although back then there was no need for carpooling since every parent attended every game and every practice.

Now that they're in high school, we're a little more detached when it comes to sports; we'll go to their home games when work schedules allow, and maybe the occasional away game if the distance is convenient, but certainly not their practices. Instead, we make up complicated schedules for whose turn it is to drive them home on which days. (For a short time we tried leaving the carpool details up to the boys, but we quickly discovered each boy was certain that his own mother was happy to drive every day if needed. It turns out 15-year-old boys are not actually the best judges of their mothers' time or availability.)

And now that they're in high school, I'd understand if other interests preoccupied their thoughts once practice ended. I expected the conversation floating forward from the back seat to involve friends. Cafeteria pranks. School dances. The latest film screened in health class.

But all they talk about is baseball. To my surprise, once spring arrives, even now at 15 with the baritone voices of young men and the promise of a driver's license less than a year away, these boys' thoughts turn lightly not to love but to double plays and the

infield fly rule.

Perhaps what makes this so endearing is the irrefutable fact of how fleeting it is. In just a year or two, even if they continue to play on the spring team, other thoughts will preoccupy their drive time: SAT scores, college applications, finding a summer job, paying for the prom. I find myself envying their absolute lack of distraction. Adulthood, it seems to me, is one big tangled forest of distractions. I want to be able to focus on anything at all with as much unadulterated concentration as these boys give to baseball.

But I also just want to appreciate that they can do this, knowing in reality I can't. Driving this carpool may get boring after a while; I don't really know all that much about baseball, and the time might come when I'd welcome talk of cafeteria pranks rather than pitching signals.

Right now, though, I'm just happy to let their sports jargon fill my ears. At the moment, it's all they care about. Soon enough, like Tennyson's young men, their thoughts will lightly turn to love, and to all manner of other things. In reality, their thoughts already have, most of the time.

But not on weekday afternoons during baseball season. So while it lasts, I'll cherish this.

Nancy Shohet West is a freelance writer from Carlisle and author of Globe West's arts column. She can be reached at nancyswest@gmail.com.

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