

# A requiem for catchers: Why home is worth defending

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By: David E. Prince, PhD

“Half guru, half beast of burden,” is how columnist Thomas Boswell once described baseball catchers (*Why Time Begins on Opening Day*, 159). Most baseball players simply don their uniform but catchers gird themselves for battle. Resembling a medieval warrior, the catcher wears a protective mask and body armor that allude to the uniqueness of his responsibility on the baseball diamond. It was Herold “Muddy” Ruel of the Washington Senators in the 1920s, a lawyer turned catcher, who lovingly dubbed catcher’s gear “the tools of ignorance”—a fitting name, only if you understand that the ignorance does not refer to intellectual capacity but in the audacity of willingly embracing such a burdensome and self-destructive task.

The indignity of the catcher’s body armor and the inglorious squatting position he assumes about 150 times each game belies his vital role as field general. An effective catcher possesses simultaneously a vast array of mental and physical skills. Whereas most players react to what is happening in a baseball game the catcher initiates and shapes virtually all action during the course of the game. As he relays signals to the pitcher he is not simply concerned with a single pitch but how any given pitch will fit into the entire sequence of pitches throughout the game. Particularly gifted catchers possess a keen baseball intellect and lightning fast judgment. His task calls him to understand the temper and ability of his pitcher. He must also be an expert in the tendencies of each hitter on the opposing team and the strike zone of the umpire that day. With every pitch this baseball guru must process information about the score, the inning, the count, the positioning of all the fielders, the base runners, the strategic tendencies of the opposing manager while catching 90 mph fastballs and blocking sliders in the dirt.

An excellent catcher is a baseball savant, though his body often bears the scars of a roughhewn frontline combat soldier. Anyone who has ever shaken the hand of a man who spent a couple of decades catching is reminded that he paid a price to play the position. A former catcher’s fingers are usually described with words like gnarly, disjointed and twisted. His hands often look as though they possess several thumbs. The beast of burden’s well-worn exterior disguises his aptitude as a baseball chess master. Catchers are brutish but graceful, stout but quick, rugged but able to delicately frame a pitch, field generals but also competent psychologists. It is not at all surprising former catchers are more likely to become major-league managers than any other position player.

So many things about baseball exhibit a nearly perfect tension. Famed sportswriter Red Smith once said, “Ninety feet between bases is perhaps as close as man has ever come to perfection.” Everything is so perfectly calibrated: the pitcher stands 60 feet six inches from the catcher, the bases and home plate are 90 feet apart and outfield fences are just close enough to make home runs a constant possibility but far enough away so they do not dominate the game. The result is an almost mathematically precise competitive balance on every pitch and play.

Baseball is not a collision sport; it is patient and measured with sudden bursts of intense action and is occasionally punctuated by a collision—usually involving the catcher at home plate.

A catcher who is doing his job well will largely go unnoticed but there is one moment when a baseball catcher has every eye riveted. The catcher is charged with the responsibility to protect the most sacred spot in the baseball universe, that irregular pentagon with two parallel sides called home plate. Bart Giamatti asserted that baseball is a narrative epic about going home and how hard it is to get there (Take Time for Paradise “Baseball as Narrative, 71-91). The catcher must position himself to receive from a fielder the urgently hurled ball while preparing himself for a potentially savage collision. Courage and toughness are daily demands on a catcher but blocking home plate from an adrenaline filled base-running missile is his seminal moment of truth. The hit, the catch, the throw, the runner, the catcher, impact, a cloud of dust, the umpire leaning in as closely as he can without getting demolished himself, he holds his call to see if the catcher held onto the ball. With every eye fixated on baseball’s ground zero, a breathless stadium waits for seconds that seem like hours, the umpire finally makes the call. The stadium exhales with either joy or grief.

For 150 years of baseball, home plate collisions have been considered good, clean, hard baseball; extremely rare, but a part of the game. They have been a part of the (almost) perfect competitive balance found in the sport. Home plate is utterly unique from all of the other bases because the runner does not need to possess it to score safely. A fleeting second of contact by any portion of his anatomy or attire with that disputed white rubber pentagon before being tagged and he is welcomed home in celebration by his teammates. The runner’s advantage of only having to touch, not possess, home plate is countered by allowing catchers who possess the ball to defend the plate. He cannot block the plate without the baseball, the MLB rulebook states, “The catcher, without the ball in his possession, has no right to block the pathway of the runner attempting to score. The base line belongs to the runner and the catcher should be there only when he is fielding a ball or when he already has the ball in his hand” (7.06).

Peter Morris, in his book *Catcher: The Evolution of an American Folk Hero* argues that the baseball catcher emerged as an iconic American hero because he embodied the traits Americans most revered: courage, resourcefulness and extraordinary skill in a specific task. Morris explains, “His rise to prominence occurred simply because he was able to resolve the long list of contradictory requirements that had thwarted earlier prospective heroes” (25). Morris contends that because of catchers’ skill and courageous toughness they became “American folk heroes in the tradition of frontiersmen, mountain men, and cowboys” (26). The catcher’s bravery on full display when blocking home plate at risk of personal injury provided young men an inspiring flesh-and-blood stalwart of self-sacrificial toughness. He was not the initiator of violence, but equal to the task when the violence came.

The quintessentially American game rarely changes anything that would tamper with the essential character of the game (the abominable AL DH rule in 1973 being the exception). Baseball is a game of tradition and relishes its continuity with the past. If a baseball fan from a century ago were dropped in an MLB park today, some things would surprise him. However, unlike other professional sports, he would have no problem following the game. Nevertheless, in the name of safety Major League Baseball voted to tamper with the character of the game by banning collisions at home plate effective 2015. The ban amounts to a league mandate for catchers and base runners to stop being courageous at home plate.

When the topic of injury producing home plate collisions arises the Pete Rose and Ray Fosse All-Star game collision in 1970 immediately comes to mind. The 1987 collision when Bo Jackson steamrolled Rick Dempsey at the plate and, more recently, the 2011 collision between Scott Cousins and Buster Posey which resulted in a broken leg for the catcher also comes to mind. There have been other home plate collisions resulting in injury, but what is most noticeable is how infrequently injuries occur. The catcher is in far more danger from 95 mph foul tips consistently careening off his catcher's mask than he is from home plate collisions. The Rose collision that hampered Fosse's career is the most famous (infamous?), but it is important to note the immediate reaction to the incident was praise for Rose's hustle and both players toughness. Rose also had to have medical attention as a result of the collision. The American League manager Earl Weaver responded to the play by asserting, "I thought Rose got there a little ahead of the ball, and Fosse was trying to block the plate. They did what they had to do." Rose and Fosse have both spoken out in vigorous opposition to the coming ban.

What has changed? Baseball has not significantly changed, but we have. Our contemporary safety-centric worldview counts bravery and courage as vices not virtues. Merriam-Webster defines courage as, "the ability to do something that you know is difficult or dangerous." Courage demands a dose of danger. Our cultural cult of safety treats willingly pursuing a difficult or dangerous task as foolish, sinful even—not heroic. G.K. Chesterton argues, "Courage is almost a contradiction in terms. It means a strong desire to live taking the form of a readiness to die. 'He that will lose his life, the same shall save it,' [Matt. 16:25]." Genuine Christian courage, according to Chesterton, combines "a strong desire for living with a strange carelessness about dying" (Orthodoxy, 170). Recklessness and self-protecting safety both have the same sinful root: self-centeredness. A culture where everyone values safety-first is a very dangerous place to live. Biblically, safety is not a virtue, but self-sacrificial courage certainly is.

I know it may seem as though I'm making too much of a simple rule change in the national pastime. It is certainly not the most significant issue at hand in our culture and it will not dampen my delight in the great game. But ideas and actions do have consequences. In 2015, when my family and I are watching the game we love and the catcher swipes at the runner crossing the plate instead of blocking it, I will mourn. One of the things that made a catcher heroic will soon become a relic of a bygone era. I think we were wiser when we rightly appreciated men who would courageously take up "the tools of ignorance" and risk safety to defend "home" for the sake of their team.