

The Rules of the Game

- by Eric Schempp

While working at an orphanage in the rural Russian town of Uglich, I tried to teach the children how to play baseball. The game was completely foreign to them. My original assumption had been that baseball was a fairly simple game with simple concepts that wouldn't be too difficult to explain. But I learned otherwise. I now know that explaining baseball in English is hard enough, let alone in a foreign language. And the fact that most of the children hadn't even seen the game played before didn't make it any easier.

I quickly realized that I didn't need to explain everything. It wasn't necessary. The trouble was that I left out essential fundamentals of the game. I taught them strikes, but I left out the concept of balls. I didn't bother trying to explain foul balls - I let them chase the ball wherever it went. I even left out the concept that you have to go around all four bases to score.

All they really ever figured out was that for some reason, a person must stand at each corner of the diamond where the bases are, and everyone else on defense chases after the ball. They figured out that after they hit the ball, they had to run to first base. I tried to tell them that they could take more than one base, but they never wanted to. After much explaining they finally figured out that they had to run to second if someone else on their team was running to first. I had trouble explaining that it wasn't the first baseman that ran to second base, but rather the runner who had just reached first base. They wanted to do a tag and go type thing. Eventually they caught on.

One boy hit a pop fly that was caught. After the congratulations died down, I explained to the batter that he was out. He then wanted to go into the outfield so he could catch future pop flies. When I told him, "No, you can't, you have to go sit down," he thought he was out of the game for good. I didn't realize this until his turn came to bat and he refused to participate because he thought he had been kicked out.

The children came to grasp the idea of the "three strikes and you're out" rule and "three outs and then you switch positions" rule, but they never caught onto the fact that they were literally two different teams. On one occasion, a batter weakly hit the ball. It

was fielded by the pitcher and correctly tossed to the first base area. However, the one who caught the ball was not the first baseman, but rather the first base runner who forgot that he was supposed to run to second. Upon being yelled at, he quickly dropped the ball and bolted for second base. Aside from the fact that it was mass chaos, everyone had fun for a good couple of hours. I was completely surprised that the game held their attention for more than 10 minutes. We eventually had to quit because someone had recognized that there was a possibility of getting hit in the head with a flying ball.

I walked away with a minor headache. I had never quite experienced such a test of my Russian language skills before and my mind was spinning. But they all were very patient with me and I thanked them for it. They thanked me for an evening of baseball (it was all they talked about all night) and insisted on playing again sometime. Obviously, they had quickly forgotten the grave danger of getting smacked in the head by the ball.