

Spring Training

by John Farrow

*Well, beat the drum and hold the phone
The sun came out today
We're born again, there's new grass on the field.**

Ah, Spring is in the air! The sun is shining with just a wisp of snow still on the mountains as a crack of the bat announces that baseball is right around the corner. Trees and flowers are in bloom and the air is filled with (*Gasp, Wheeze, Cough*) pollen!

Take time to smell the roses, you say? Fine, but just remember - all those minute particles of pollen have the very real potential to make someone's life miserable.

*A-roundin' third and headed for home
He's a brown-eyed handsome man
Anyone can understand the way I feel.**

Try this - take a long, deep breath. Inhale slowly, until your lungs can't hold any more . . . and then let the air out gradually . . . ahhh! Breathing is so natural and relaxing that it's easy to take for granted.

Now try something different - run in place for a few minutes, or run down the street and back. Then put a straw in your mouth, close your lips tightly around it, hold your nose and try to breathe in and out only through the straw. Not so easy, is it? That's what it's like to have asthma, and here in what is fast becoming the allergy capitol of the country, allergy-induced asthma is something many runners deal with on a daily basis in the Spring.

*So say hey Willie, tell Ty Cobb
And Joe DiMaggio
Don't say it ain't so you know the time is now.**

For millions of Americans, Springtime also means struggling to breathe. And for runners, it can mean walking home only a mile or so into a run with nary a drop of sweat to show for it. On good days, the miles seem to click by dreamily and effortlessly, but on bad days, when the juniper and

elm and grass pollen counts are off the scale, something as natural as breathing, or the inability to do so, makes it just too hard to keep going.

Sometimes bagging it is the better part of valor. I know. My grandfather died of an asthma attack.

But those who contend with New Mexico's annual pollen onslaught can take heart that we have something in common with Olympic gold medalists like Jackie Joyner Kersee, Amy Van Dyken and Tom Dolan. They all have asthma, too. World-class asthmatic athletes excel in such diverse fields as track and field, swimming, diving and long distance running.

*Got a beat-up glove, a homemade bat
And a brand new pair of shoes
You know I think it's time to give this game a ride.**

Sometimes the culprit isn't the air-borne pollen but other common substances like animal dander, dust mites or, repulsive as it may seem, cockroach waste. Whatever it is - scientists call them allergens, anything that provokes an allergic reaction - the immune system goes into high gear to fight off the intruder by releasing chemical "weapons." This causes the airways to become inflamed, constricted and flooded with mucous, leading to coughing, wheezing and difficulty in breathing -- in short, an asthma attack.

Fortunately, there are a lot of things that can be done to avoid such an attack, like running in the morning when the pollen counts are low, avoiding cold or windy days (i.e. kiss off serious Springtime running) or warming up thoroughly to deliberately induce a mini-attack. The theory behind that last one is it gives the good guys in your immune system a chance to take over and carry the day. Frankly, it has never worked for me as the symptoms just keep on keeping on. Morning runs, yes. But a supplement of some great new medications now available, those inhalers you see more and more people using, help keep the lungs open. And keeping the lungs open is what it's all about.

*Just to hit the ball and touch 'em all
A moment in the sun
It's gone and you can tell that one goodbye.**

Research has shown that as regular physical activity increases physical fitness, the result is less troublesome broncho-spasms. Unfortunately, too many people seem to think that those with asthma should not take part in sports or vigorous activities.

However, people with breathing problems often get in a vicious downward cycle. Once they feel breathless, they reduce their level of activity, leading to a greater degree of deconditioning, which leads to breathlessness at even lower levels of activity.

With proper management, there is no reason that those with respiratory problems cannot participate in a regular exercise program. This is especially critical for children who are just beginning to form life-long habits. If they learn to avoid sports and other physical activities that produce symptoms, lasting physical and psychological damage can result. So see a good allergist and get those kids outside, you with them.

Put me in, Coach.

I'm ready to play today.

*Look at me, I can be centerfield.**

*John Fogerty. *Centerfield*. ©1985.□

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