

# Baseball SAVED US

by Ken Mochizuki

They were treated like enemies  
in their own country.  
How can baseball heal that hurt?

### Connect to Your Life

What do you know about the game of baseball? With a classmate, write these column headings: *Field*, *Equipment*, and *Baseball Skills*. Fill in as much as you can under these headings.

### Key to the Story

*Baseball Saved Us* is an example of **historical fiction**. This is fiction set in the past that often tells about actual people and events.

The story takes place during World War II. In 1941, Japan bombed the U.S. naval base in Hawaii. Soon after, the United States entered World War II.

People were afraid that Japanese Americans would turn against the United States. As a result, the U.S. military forced 110,000 Japanese American citizens to move to places called *detention camps*. Decades later, the U.S. government apologized for making citizens live in these camps.

### Vocabulary Preview

#### Words to Know

barracks  
bleachers  
glinting



Reading Coach CD-ROM selection

The narrator and his family, like other Japanese Americans, must live in a detention camp. Look for details that tell what daily life in the camp is like.

One day, my dad looked out at the endless desert and decided then and there to build a baseball field.

He said people needed something to do in Camp. We weren't in a camp that was fun, like summer camp. Ours was in the middle of nowhere, and we were behind a barbed-wire fence. Soldiers with guns made sure we stayed there, and the man in the tower saw everything we did, no matter where we were.

As Dad began walking over the dry, cracked dirt, I  
10 asked him again why we were here.

"Because," he said, "America is at war with Japan, and the government thinks that Japanese Americans can't be trusted. But it's wrong that we're in here. We're Americans too!" Then he made a mark in the dirt and mumbled something about where the infield bases should be.

**infield bases**  
four bases  
arranged in a  
square around  
the pitcher

Back in school, before Camp, I was shorter and smaller than the rest of the kids. I was always the last to be picked for  
20 any team when we played games. Then, a few months ago, it got even worse. The kids started to call me names and nobody talked to me, even though I didn't do anything bad. At the same time the radio kept talking about some place far away called Pearl Harbor.

**Pearl Harbor**  
U.S. naval base  
located in Hawaii

One day Mom and Dad came to get me out of school. Mom cried a lot because we had to move out of our house real fast, throwing away a lot of our stuff. A bus took us to a

30 place where we had to live in horse stalls. We stayed there for a while until we came here.

This Camp wasn't anything like home. It was so hot in the daytime and so cold at night. Dust storms came and got sand in everything, and nobody could see a thing. We sometimes got caught outside, standing in line to eat or to go to the bathroom. We had to use the bathroom with everybody else, instead of one at a time like at home.

We had to eat with everybody else, too, but my big  
40 brother Teddy ate with his own friends. We lived with a lot of people in what were called barracks. The place was small and had no walls. Babies cried at night and kept us up.

**barracks**  
(bär' əks)  
*n.* houses built for military purposes

Back home, the older people were always busy working. But now, all they did was stand or sit around. Once Dad asked Teddy to get him a cup of water.

"Get it yourself," Teddy said.

"What did you say?" Dad snapped back.

50 The older men stood up and pointed at Teddy.

"How dare you talk to your father like that!" one of them shouted.

Teddy got up, kicked the crate he was sitting on, and walked away. I had never heard Teddy talk to Dad that way before.

**REREAD**  
How is Teddy changing? Why?

That's when Dad knew we needed baseball. We got shovels and started digging up the sagebrush in a big empty space near our barracks. The man in the tower watched us the whole time. Pretty soon, other grown-  
60 ups and their kids started to help.

#### THINK IT THROUGH

The narrator's dad wants to build a baseball field. How does the daily life in Camp lead to his decision?

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- Find out how the narrator performs in one of the early ball games.

We didn't have anything we needed for baseball, but the grown-ups were pretty smart. They funnelled water from irrigation ditches to flood what would become our baseball field. The water packed down the dust and made it hard. There weren't any trees,

but they found wood to build the  
bleachers. Bats, balls and gloves arrived in  
cloth sacks from friends back home. My  
mom and other moms took the covers off  
70 mattresses and used them to make  
uniforms. They looked almost like the real  
thing.

**bleachers**  
(blē' chərz)  
*n.* outdoor stands  
or benches for  
watching games

I tried to play, but I wasn't that good. Dad said I  
just had to try harder. But I did know that playing  
baseball here was a little easier than back home. Most  
of the time, the kids were the same size as me.

All the time I practiced, the man in the tower  
watched. He probably saw the other kids giving me a  
bad time and thought that I was no good. So I tried  
80 to be better because he was looking.

Soon, there were baseball games all the time.  
Grown-ups played and us kids did, too. I played  
second base because my team said that was the  
easiest. Whenever I was at bat, the infield of the other  
team started joking around and moved in real close.  
The catcher behind me and the crowd for  
the other team would say, "Easy out." I  
usually grounded out. Sometimes I got a  
single.

**REREAD**

How do you  
think the  
narrator feels?

90 Then came one of our last games of  
the year to decide on the championship. It was the  
bottom of the ninth inning and the other team was  
winning, 3 to 2. One of our guys was on second and  
there were two outs.

Two pitches, and I swung both times and missed. I  
could tell that our guy on second was begging me to  
at least get a base hit so somebody better could come  
up to bat. The crowd was getting loud. "You can do  
it!" "Strike out!" "No hitter, no hitter!"

100 I glanced at the guardhouse behind the left field foul line and saw the man in the tower, leaning on the rail with the blinding sun glinting off his sunglasses. He was always watching, always staring. It suddenly made me mad.

**glinting**  
(glĭn' tĭng)  
*adj.* sparkling

**THINK IT THROUGH**  
How would you feel in the narrator's place?

I gripped the bat harder and took a couple of practice swings. I was gonna hit the ball past the guardhouse even if it killed me. Everyone got quiet and the pitcher threw.

110 I stepped into my swing and pulled the bat around hard. I'd never heard a crack like that before. The ball went even farther than I expected.

Against the hot desert sun, I could see the ball high in the air as I ran to first base. The ball went over the head of the left fielder.

I dashed around the bases, knowing for sure that I would get tagged out. But I didn't care, running as fast as I could to home plate. I didn't even realize that I had crossed it.

120 Before I knew it, I was up in the air on the shoulders of my teammates. I looked up at the tower and the man, with a grin on his face, gave me the thumbs-up sign.

**THINK IT THROUGH**

What are two surprising things about the narrator's victory?

**FOCUS**

The war ends and the families leave Camp. Read to discover how the narrator performs in a game back home.

But it wasn't as if everything were fixed. Things were bad again when we got home from Camp after

the war. Nobody talked to us on the street, and nobody talked to me at school, either. Most of my friends from Camp didn't come back here. I had to eat

130 lunch by myself.

Then baseball season came. I was the smallest guy again, but playing baseball in Camp had made me a lot better. The other guys saw that I was a pretty good player. They started calling me "Shorty," but they smiled when they said it.

By the time the first game came around, I felt almost like part of the team. Everyone was laughing and horsing around on the bus. But as soon as we got out there, it hit me: nobody on my team or the other  
140 team, or even anybody in the crowd looked like me.

When we walked out onto the field, my hands were shaking. It felt like all these mean eyes were staring at me, wanting me to make mistakes. I dropped the ball

Why do you think the narrator's family is treated this way?



that was thrown to me, and I heard people in the crowd yelling “Jap.” I hadn’t heard that word since before I went to Camp—it meant that they hated me.

My team came up to bat and I was up next. I looked down. I thought maybe I should pretend to be sick so I wouldn’t have to finish the game. But I knew  
150 that would make things even worse, because I would get picked on at school for being a chicken. And they would use the bad word, too.

Then it was my turn at bat. The crowd was screaming. “The Jap’s no good!” “Easy out!” I heard laughing. I swung twice and missed. The crowd roared each time I missed, drowning out my teammates, who were saying, “C’mon, Shorty, you can do it!” I stepped back to catch my breath.

**THINK**

What do you predict will happen next?

160 When I stepped back up to the plate, I looked at the pitcher. The sun glinted off his glasses as he stood on the mound, like the guard in the tower. We stared at each other. Then I blocked out the noise around me and got set. The pitcher wound up and threw.

I swung and felt that solid whack again. And I could see that little ball in the air against the blue sky and puffy white clouds. It looked like it was going over the fence.

**THINK IT THROUGH**

1. What happens at the end of the story? Why is this important to the narrator?
2. How do you think baseball "saves" the narrator?
3. What good things does baseball do for the families in Camp?