



Near the village of Pittsford in western New York State is what we called the stopgates, towering above the Erie Canal. In the 1950s and '60s, kids loved to jump off the top of that big black monstrosity that I vaguely understood could be lowered for flood control.

The thing was out of proportion to its bucolic setting among fields, woods and the man-made waterway it hovered above.

One summer day after eighth grade, a bunch of us were poised for jumping when suddenly someone yells, “Hey, look at that snake!”

Slithering through the water was a huge black snake, at least eight feet long. “C’mon, let’s get it!” one kid

yells. Everyone but me jumped in. I wasn’t much for chasing snakes. It was quite a sight — boys swimming as fast as they could in pursuit of their prey.

The snake didn’t break its leisurely pace. It just disappeared. I had a vision of it emerging from the dark water and squeezing a boy down into the depths. But nothing happened. There was some chatter like, “Hey, where’d it go?” The kids treaded water for a while then swam back.

Whether it was swimming in the muddy waters of the canal or playing pick-up baseball, it didn’t occur to us that we needed adults around. If there was an off sides, or unnecessary roughness in a football game we’d work it out. There might be arguments, but it was part of the game to resolve disputes. No one asked a coach whether to run or pass on the next play.

It was pure exhilaration. Connecting on a forward pass to Jimmie Palmer over Mike Spiegel's head was a sight to behold. The play, the disputes, the games themselves were just us kids. There was no man with a whistle starting a race when we swam in the canal. If a snake came along, you chased it, or not.

In baseball we had a universal ritual to start the games called "toss the bat." The acknowledged best players were named opposing captains. One would take a bat – always a wooden bat – and toss it to the other, who caught it with one hand in the middle of the bat. Then they would go hand over each others' hand to the top of the bat. Whichever captain's hand fit at the top of the handle, he got first pick of a player.

Opposing catchers called balls and strikes. If someone slid into second and it was a close play, we'd work it out. These games could go on all afternoon until it was time to go home for supper.

I've often wondered what happens to children when they are constantly supervised by adults, never allowed to go out and just play, never allowed to work out disputes among themselves. What kind of adults will they grow up to be?

I came upon a column in The New York Times a few years ago headlined "On Sandlot Day, Children Call Their Own Shots" by Mark Hyman, the author of "Until It Hurts: America's Obsession With Youth Sports and How It Harms Our Kids."

This piece was about a program developed by the Youth Sports Institute at the SUNY Cortland. The Institute director, Tim Donovan, was quoted saying: "The lessons learned from choosing up sides — negotiation, conflict resolution — they're the building blocks of civilization."

Sandlot Day was catching on — just one day, when the adults would disappear and let the kids play baseball. The Pittsford Little League tried but made sure a few parents hung around.

"The Erie Canal runs by the outfield at two of our fields," said the league president. "I'd like a few adults around so the kids don't jump in."

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I guess that guy never had the thrill of jumping off the stopgates.