

Cloud of Dust

Okay, it probably didn't happen quite that fast.

But maybe it did.

On a seasonably warm July evening in 2010 in my old stomping grounds of Eleva, I watched Andrew journey from his starting point at second base as the weakly-hit ball was trickling toward the second baseman. Andrew was careful at first. But then, realizing that the runner ahead of him had broken for home and that if a throw was made it would probably (hopefully) be directed toward the plate, he burst into full gallop.

Watching your child between bases is sometimes a difficult thing to do. Until he reaches the next bag, the agonizing reality is right in front of you: he is not safe. You have to fight the urge to do the fatherly thing and help him out. Like so many times in parent's life, though, there is nothing you can do but watch and hope that you have prepared him for the situation.

The coach at third was preoccupied with the run scoring, so Andrew had to decide on his own what the best course of action was. Rightfully, he chose to slide. Ten-year-old baseball players slide all the time, but they usually don't look that great in the process. There are either awkward steps, or timing issues, or simply the problem of not moving once backside meets infield dirt. Andrew's feet-first slide was simply flawless. As the dust kicked up around the bag, a sense of relief washed over me. He did it.

Andrew dusted himself off and got ready to score the next run at the first opportunity. As the veil of dust vanished, I noticed it. I guess I had seen it before, but had never really noticed it.

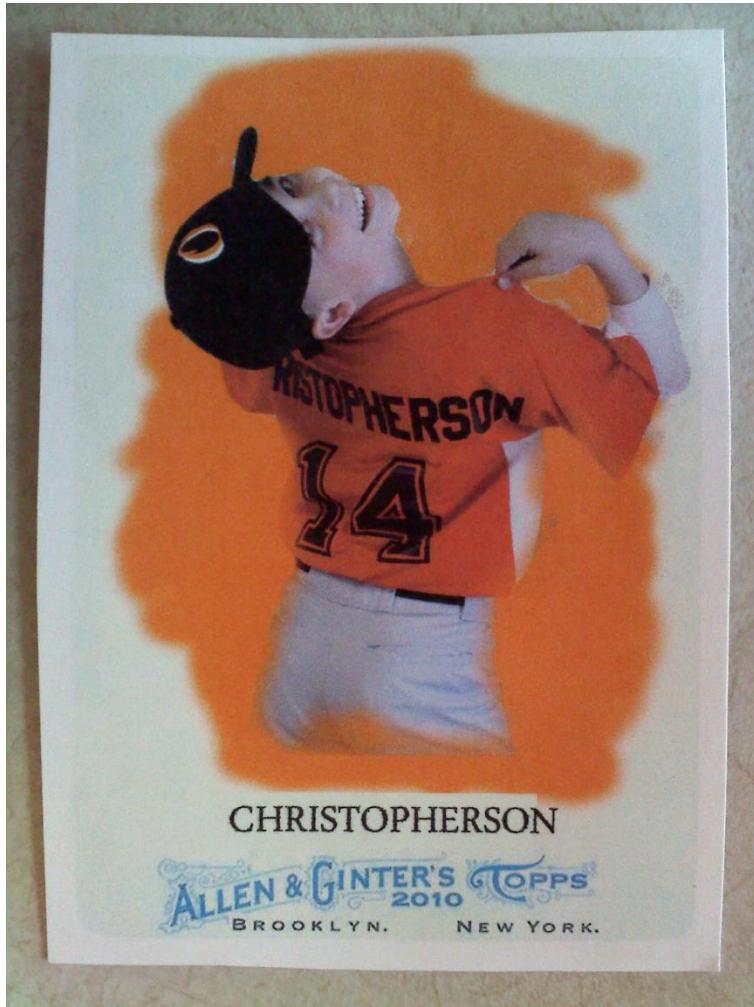
My little boy wasn't so little anymore.

At third base now stood a young man. He would dance off the bag after the pitch was delivered, his eyes focused on the ball the entire time, looking for any chance to step on the dish and receive the congratulations from his teammates. His once small frame now was much taller; scrawniness now replaced with a lean, athletic body. A look of determination was glued to his dimpled face—a face that had long ago lost its "baby" features.

For the next several pitches, I just stared at Andrew. There was my boy, growing up right before my eyes, ironically on the same ball field that I grew up on so many years ago. Andrew probably didn't realize it, but for all the while he was busy getting older, he was also busy at making me younger. How many years had it been since I played baseball on a field? Or played catch with something other than a softball? Or make up a goofy game and go out in the yard and play it without fear of looking ridiculous to a neighbor?

It is kind of sad to think that as I make my own turn toward third base that soon my second childhood will be over. That young man at third will soon be hanging out with his friends after school (and hopefully staying out of trouble) while Dad is resigned to yelling at the Brewers on TV. That's the way it goes, though, and after a little pause to let him grow from young man into man, I imagine grandkids will give me childhood number three.

Andrew scored the eventual winning run a few pitches later. The next day I made a card in an Allen and Ginter style (in a whimsical, "how did they fit a 14-letter name on my jersey" pose) to commemorate a moment that was so mundane to him that he has likely already forgotten it, and yet so important to me that it will be in my memory forever. Of the half million or so cards I have, this one is my favorite. Sorry, folks—this one will never be available for trade:



Unless, of course, you come heavy and maybe knock out a set or two from my wantlist. I can make more...