23rd May 2025

Back-up

"For this relief, much thanks."
William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

I love Baseball. It started when I was in the USA as a student and has continued since. When we were in the States in the Autumn of 2023, at the height of the Baseball Season, I found I could watch Baseball on a variety of TV channels at *any* time of the day or night. Heaven!

Like all sports, Baseball has its own language. I'll leave "slider", "fly-ball", "triple-play" and "bunt" for now, and instead pick two other terms that intrigue me: the "pinch hitter" and the "relief pitcher". A pinch hitter is a substitute batter. Unlike many other team-sports, baseball doesn't have a free substitution rule. A replaced player isn't allowed back into the game. So, because of injury or tactics, the pinch hitter takes the spot in the batting order of the player he replaces. The pinch hitter needs to be ready to "step up to the plate" at a moment's notice.

A relief pitcher – often known simply as "the relief" – enters the game when the starting pitcher has been removed. They're brought in for a variety of reasons, such as fatigue, injury, ineffectiveness, or strategic decisions. Relief pitchers often specialise in specific situations.

Like all team sports, baseball requires individual talent. A pitcher, batter, fielder or catcher can be the star of a team or excel in an individual game. But it remains a team sport. Collective ability will win out. So, within that, back-ups are needed, at bat, or to pitch, so that the performance of the team can benefit. *Any* team needs its pinch hitters and relief pitchers.

I shared some thoughts with you recently about "number two" people whose roles are as valuable as those in "number one" positions. But we should also value stand-in folk, the back-up people, the relief contributors, who make themselves available as and when they're needed, to fill a role, do a job, offer a skill, so that the team continues to benefit.

If you're a back-up person, I offer you my thanks today. We need you, and we're pleased you're available. And if you're struggling on the pitcher's mound or at the batting plate, I hope you know who *your* back-up people are, and when they might be needed – maybe even now?

A prayer for today

Lord, help me to do my best for the team: to stand down when necessary, and to step forward willingly when the need arises. Amen

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