

## Dream Team

*Arms straight... palms out... line up the left elbow with the corner of the left eye... snap the wrist...*

“Strike three! It’s over! The Tigers win!” I yelled in sync with the roaring crowd. Every single fan was on his feet, banging whatever he could against the bleachers in celebration. The whole world was watching when I struck out the last batter with the bases loaded, two outs, bottom of the ninth, and the tying run on third base. I threw my glove into the air and ran towards the plate to do a jumping chest bump with my imaginary catcher. Then I ran back and did it again because I felt I didn’t throw my glove enthusiastically enough. Yes, that was much better – I liked my last pitches to be perfect, even if it was just practice.

*Beep beep* went my scratched-up watch. 4:05p.m. – just in time for the Mariners game on TV. Snapping myself out of my daydream, I began to gather up the gear strewn about the front yard of this abandoned house. I dusted off the makeshift home plate and tucked it away behind the stacks of moulding firewood under the overhang; I had cut the plate from a piece of thick cardboard I found lying outside the corner store. Then there was the old box spring I had put upright in the cracked driveway. I used all the ink in my only black felt to draw the strike zone on that box spring last year. It was now spotted with little fuzzy circles, where the dirt from the ball would leave a mark, indicating where the impact points were. Eight strikes and two balls in my last set – not bad, I thought, as I recorded it onto a scrap piece of paper. I wiped off the spots with my shirt then dragged it back into the living room of the abandoned house. I came back for the mannequin I borrowed from Auntie Laurie’s clothing store. It was wearing a cracked bike helmet and had a thick branch duct taped to its hands. I put a torn shirt on it and wrote the words “Pirates” across it in intentionally messy writing. The mannequin could hardly balance itself –often times it would fall over before I even pitched. I would just pretend it got scared from my concentrated stares. In fact, it got to a point where I would practice staring at the mannequin

with steady and unwavering eyes, braving the urge to blink, just to see if I could make it fall over. When I started doing that during little league games, kids thought I was aiming at them so they would stand really far back in the batters' box, making it easier for me to pitch to the outside corner. Lastly, I picked up my worn Spalding glove and tattered baseball, put the ball inside the glove, and rested it on the firewood beside my cleats. Once, I left the ball outside the glove and the next game I played I missed every ground ball that came to me. I never wanted to make that mistake again.

I rushed into Auntie Laurie's, just in time for the game. My favourite spot on the couch was everyone else's least favourite, mainly due to the graveyard of blueberry and oatmeal stains on all sides of the seat cushions. I had read in the library that oatmeal helps soak up unwanted fat and has tons of "carbohydrogens" – something that gives athletes lots of energy. Blueberries are loaded with anti-bad-things that help with your blood pressure, which I need for clutch situations. Today though, I had beside me a large bowl of yogurt – giving me lots of calcium so that my bones and muscles can grow properly. I watched attentively as Jamie Moyer warmed-up and the animated announcers went through his stats, not noticing the mischievous drip of yogurt slipping off my spoon and onto the cushion. Hardly anyone went to Auntie Laurie's run-down store except me, and I only went because it had cable. And it was kind of my home.

I began calculating my own stats with the spoon still sticking out of my mouth. Out of the 100 pitches I threw every day, 65 were strikes today. That was a five-strike improvement from yesterday; I added it to my graph that resembled the bent TV antenna lines you see in cartoons. I drew it on top of a large newspaper crossword, which already has gridlines neatly drawn, and was impossible to complete anyways. Two pitches hit the mannequin and four were wild pitches; I noted those at the bottom so that tomorrow I would punish myself by doing 20 push-ups and 40 sit-ups – 10 for each mistake.

Spider once said I was a loser for being so obsessed with baseball. That made no sense to me. From what I know, you have to be obsessed with something in order to be a winner at it. I had ripped

out a magazine picture of Jim Abbott pumping his right arm stub in the air after he threw a no-hitter for the Yankees in 1993. To achieve that took nothing less than obsession – especially for him and the situation he was born with. I felt a connection with Jim Abbott. I lived and breathed baseball. I held the unofficial school record for the number of times my baseball cap got confiscated because I would always wear it in class. It was embarrassing to ask for it back because it was the only one I had, and the only one I could afford. Spider couldn't understand my obsession. He didn't get his nickname because he was really interested in spiders. He got it because he once ate the class spider to prove to Mrs. Higgins that humans are in fact predators of spiders. He always had to be right. He must have gotten it from his parents.

There were two weeks left until the Regional Championship game and the tension at recesses and lunch hours were justifiably higher than ever. Many of the kids that played for the Pirates also went to our school. If you were a Tiger and you were seen with a Pirate, word would get around fast. Our catcher Tubs was once seen trading his Pepperoni Stick for a Fruit Roll-up with Chuck, the Pirates' shortstop. When we found out, we punished Tubs to 10 cyclones on the tire-swing and a lifetime ban on eating Fruit Roll-up's. We simply couldn't allow a weak link on our team, even if it was a bargain trade for Tubs. Who knew what Chuck could have done to that Fruit Roll-up? Not that I would know the difference – I've never had the privilege of eating a Fruit Roll-up. My older brother couldn't afford it, just like how he couldn't afford to go to college after high school.

"Not a big deal little buddy! Your ol' brother's a pro at carpentry – I'll make enough money to send you to college!" he told me one day.

"No need, Chase – I'm going to get a baseball scholarship!" I would reply earnestly. I think we both knew how hard our lives were, but neither of us was willing to confess it. That was fine, because Chase was my hero, and heroes have nothing to confess. After Mom and Dad died in the car accident, Chase and I moved into Auntie Laurie's house, which was right above her store. She neither loved us

nor hated us, which meant she neither fed us nor cared if we ate her food. Chase and I decided pretty quickly that we didn't want to live at her place for free, so I would help out in her store after school and Chase would pitch in part of whatever he earned doing freelance carpentry work. He knew I loved baseball, so he would always keep a bit of the money to buy me used cleats or pay for my uniforms and league fees. I never really knew how much money Chase made, but I knew how much playing baseball cost. I calculated that Chase must be making hundreds and hundreds of dollars a month so I didn't worry too much. Though I would try to save whenever I could, Chase still always made me eat the healthy foods like blueberries or yogurt. He said it was an investment in my future career in the major leagues.

"We're a team, right little buddy?"

"Really? Which team?" I asked. The only team I knew was my baseball team.

"We're Team Morrison. Team Scott and Chase Morrison. The undefeatable team – don't you ever forget that."

I've never known Chase to let the team down. Once, Auntie Laurie accused me of stealing from the cash register. She locked me out of the house the entire day so I sat outside throwing my baseball up in the air and catching it, growing hungrier with each toss. When Chase came home later that night after work and I told him what happened, he got into a big fight with Auntie Laurie. That night, Chase and I slept on my box spring in the abandoned house. It was the first time he saw my makeshift practicing equipment and he told me how proud he was of me. He said he was going to give Auntie Laurie the money she thought I stole, because he said an all-star pitcher shouldn't be living in an abandoned house. It was the first time I saw him cry. I told him not to worry, that I would make Team Morrison proud.

But all those things were in the past – these days, my mind consisted of nothing except my desire to crush the Pirates and move on to the Series Championships. I upped my practice regiment

from 100 pitches to 200 pitches and from 10 push-ups or sit-ups per mistake to 20. I began making notes on how the pitchers on TV pitched, and which types of pitches they used. For example, I noticed that Randy Johnson always followed his up-and-in fastball with a mean backdoor slider. If it was good enough to strike out Derek Jeter, I think it was good enough for the Pirates. I knew the pitcher for the Pirates wasn't practicing nearly as hard as I was – he barely has time between his piano lessons and his debate team. His mother always chauffeured him everywhere so my team came to call him Baby. Baby did not stand a chance against me.

The day of the big game I brought my glove and baseball to school so that my teammates and I could practice during recess and lunch. Spider came by while we were practicing and said that we were only allowed to play with school equipment on school grounds. I told him that it was none of his business – what did he care if the Pirates or the Tigers won? He kept saying we weren't allowed to play and that he would tell Mrs. Higgins we were breaking the rules. I ignored him and tossed the ball to Tubs. Spider intercepted it, turned, and threw my baseball right through one of the windows of the school.

Before I knew it, Tubs had punched Spider in the gut. Spider retaliated by throwing a handful of rocks in his face. I couldn't stand by and watch my teammate take a cheap shot like that, so I tackled Spider to the ground and just let loose. It wasn't fair how kids like Spider could get away with taking the cheap road in life while I had to work so hard. Chase wouldn't have allowed it. We never took the cheap road. Not Team Morrison. Spider didn't play for any team. With each punch, it was as if I was trying to beat the injustice of the world out of him. I knew the playground rules though, and I got up after he started crying. He was no match for me.

The principal had me wait outside his office for half an hour. During that time, I stared at the round clock above his office door slowly tick its way around. Each tick brought me closer to the Regional Championship game while at the same time bringing me closer to Mr. Bernay's notorious poetic justice.

He once made a kid clean off all the gum from the school sidewalk because he stuck gum into a girl's hair. Another time, he made a kid copy an entire textbook chapter out by hand for cheating on that chapter's test. I heard Spider telling Mr. Bernay that I was the one that threw the baseball through the window. And right then and there, I knew what my punishment would be.

*With an oh-and-two count... he chokes up on the bat... the pitch...*

He hits it deep to left field! Back... back... back... it's gone! Walk-off homerun for the Tigers! I ran around the bases giving high fives as I round first base. We won! We won! Wait until I tell Chase!

Then I stepped on some broken glass. I picked up the broom I had used as a bat and continued sweeping up the mess behind the window. The clock read 4:05p.m. – the game was over.