

Poffenberger Pitching

By Kyle Crichton

Detroit's prize package from baseball's grab bag. He can pitch, he can field and he can hit. But he's best of all at disappearing

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT YARNALL RICHIE



THERE have been other Poffenbergers; no man in his right mind can deny it; but it is highly improbable that there has ever been another Poffenberger named Cletus Elwood Poffenberger. There was a Poffenberger who made the Harrisburg-Altoona run on the Pennsy for many years and there were also the Poffenbergers who migrated to the Middle West and eventually had a little dispute with the authorities over a mail train, but none of these Poffenbergers were Cletus Elwood Poffenberger, who is known as Boots for short. Our Mr. Poffenberger, Cletus Elwood Poffenberger, comes from Williamsport, Maryland, and pitches for the Detroit Tigers and is a case.

Mr. Poffenberger has been in organized baseball exactly three years and three months at this writing, and already people are comparing him with Rube Waddell. This is based not upon the thought that Mr. Poffenberger can pitch as marvelously as could Mr. Waddell but that he can disappear as completely. Mr. Poffenberger has disappeared in New York, Chicago and Philadelphia, breaking disappearance records in all three cities. He has just as consistently turned up again and pinned back the ears of the gentlemen who represent the American League clubs in the various cities, for Mr. Poffenberger has a very sneaky fast ball and a curve that surprises even Mr. Poffenberger himself. As for Mr. Gordon Cochrane, manager of the Detroit Tigers, he is surprised only about Mr. Poffenberger.

"That bullheaded Dutchman!" exclaimed Mr. Cochrane recently, half irately, half affectionately.

This was shortly after Mr. Poffenberger had disappeared in Philadelphia and had been fined a total of \$100 for a subsequent infraction of the training rules of the club. Upon being informed that all players must check in at the hotel by twelve midnight, Mr. Poffenberger did what any decent free American would have done and appeared promptly at 12:15. When haled before Mr. Cochrane for this crime, Mr. Poffenberger replied he had nothing to say. When asked where he had been, he said he wasn't a-tellin'. When asked whom he was with, Mr. P. maintained a dignified silence. When Mr. C. mentioned the \$100 fine, Mr. P. winced but said nothing. A Poffenberger never squeals, a Poffenberger never takes a back step, a Poffenberger never explains.

The history of M. Poffenberger is quite simple. He has never played football, he has scorned basketball, he had played baseball at his home town of Williamsport, Maryland (near Hagerstown), for all the conscious days of his life. One Billy Doyle, scout for Detroit, discovered Mr. Poffenberger in 1935 and shipped him down to Fieldale, Virginia, which was a Detroit farm at the moment. Fieldale was about a mile off the main highway and only a quick eye could detect it.

Even then Mr. Poffenberger was known as Boots, his grandfather having been Boots and his father known as Little Boots, for reasons known only to antiquity. He went to Fieldale as an outfielder, being a pudgy little man even in those tender years of his youth. His sneaky fast one was soon discovered; his salary went up from \$50 to \$70 a month and he won sixteen and lost fifteen, being almost unhittable on Sundays before the big crowds.

Next year, 1936, Boots was with Charleston in the Middle Atlantic League, another Detroit farm under the guidance of Watt Powell, a famous man in the mountains of West Virginia. In that setting Boots did right well, winning sixteen and losing twelve. Salary now \$125, which was high for the Middle Atlantic. The team traveled by bus, and Boots still shrinks inwardly when he thinks of the jaunt from Charleston to Johnstown, Pennsylvania, starting immediately after the night game and riding steadily until

six o'clock the next afternoon in a tiny red school bus with a tin roof.

"You don't die," says Boots. "You just gradually seem not to be there no more."

Next year, which was last season, he was sent down to Beaumont but didn't report until the season had started, because of a dispute over money. They said come on ahead; when you get all steamed up over playing, you'll forget about those few bucks. "You get steamed up first," suggested Boots, who had been promised the money and wanted steam left out of it. When he once got there he won nine and lost one, and six weeks after the season opened he was in Detroit.

When he came into the dressing room on the first day in Detroit, he said very modestly: "You might as well get used to me around here; I'm going to be here a long time."

The gentlemen were not sure about this, for Mr. Poffenberger looked like anything but a pitcher. He is pudgy, as hinted, and he has short arms and small hands. The only reason he was allowed to live upon arrival was that he was a likable young man, as anyone could see, and furthermore Detroit, having just lost the great Rowe, was eager to welcome anybody who could lift an arm in defense. They hurled him into the arena, torn between a desire to see him rended and a hope that he might not be impossible. He began to win almost immediately. Things were so good that the kid, only two years out of Fieldale, which is a town as easily located as Shangri-la, was now a starting pitcher for Detroit.

In the Poffenberger Tempo

And then came the first great episode in the adventurous life of Cletus Elwood Poffenberger. He was told that he was to start a game on a Wednesday in the Yankee Stadium against Mr. Gehrig and his murderous companions. Mr. Poffenberger has always desired ardently to combat big game. When it is a question of facing the St. Louis Browns or the Philadelphia Athletics, Mr. Poffenberger would just as leave stay in bed. It isn't worth the bother. Against the big boys, he has a system.

"You got to charge 'em," he says, meaning to bear down on every pitch.

So Del Baker, acting manager while Mickey Cochrane was out with a fractured skull, informed Boots he'd go against the Yanks on Wednesday. He didn't go against the Yanks on Wednesday because he didn't even show up Wednesday, being so elated by the honor paid him that he had buried his nose in the foam with a few mutual friends the night before.

In Chicago later, Boots disappeared and was found at four o'clock in the morning leading a swing band, which was indisputably dizzy from swinging to the Poffenberger tempo. There was another slight incident in Boston this season, which worked out better because Mr. Cochrane insisted on Mr. Poffenberger's entering the box, although he would have preferred to be almost anywhere else. By the fifth inning Mr. Poffenberger was oozing perspiration at such a rate that all concerned expected him to have a fate comparable to that of a snow man brought down from Pike's Peak to Yuma, Arizona, on a July day. He was belted off the premises along about the seventh inning, being by this time completely cured of anything that had ailed him, except wildness.

There was the further incident last year in Boston when Boots irritated Joe Cronin by yelling, "Hello, Showboat!" at him as he went by. Mr. Cronin had no idea why he was so honored but the idea riled him. By the time the seventh inning arrived, Boston was badly licked and there were two out when Cronin came up. Boots proceeded to put two strikes across on him (Continued on page 49)

The Merry Meatball

By William Fay

ILLUSTRATED BY ELMORE BROWN

The scarcely human antics of Mr. Mike Padoni, box fighter, whose heart was larger than his head

THE bell clanged sharply many times and bit into the gleeful thunder of the crowd. The hot lights reached down from above and set the ring like a jewel in the black of Madison Square Garden. Gentlemen of the trade showed themselves and their vegetable ears to the audience, while Mike Padoni waved happily from his corner.

Mrs. Rose Padoni made short, hurried steps to the ringside where an usher took her ticket stub. She gave him fifty cents, which she suspected was too much, but the ringside at the Garden is very high class. She edged past many knees to her seat, and her shiny satin dress was rather too tight across her loins. The crowded row kept her a prisoner on people's knees. She was conscious of this, and confused; she wobbled. She clung excitedly to her purse and her little fur. Breathless and excited, she gained her seat and sat down. Beneath her small, crazy hat, she was very pretty, just as she was very young, just as her soft eyes were vitally alive and shaded with little fears.

Rose looked up to where Mike stood under the lights, his fighting gloves on his hands. He was where she'd expected him to be, in the middle of everything, big and foolish but great with his gestures, sensitive and grateful for the mob's acclaim. And Mike, indeed, was the only man for Rose.

Mike was rather magnificent. He was built like Maxie Baer, with heavier arms, and his nose had not been sledged so well as Maxie's; but, unlike Maxie, he had a bulge in the middle and it looked as if he'd swallowed a football. Really it was only beer, for Mike was very fond of beer; his capacity was a legend.

He shuffled in his corner and said to his manager, "I'm gonna outsmart this guy. I need a workout."

Patsy Fine said, "You couldn't outsmart an intelligent horse and you need a strait jacket. Punch his ears in."

Mike walked out behind his big fists and got punched in the nose. This Manuel Arredo was not exactly a slob. He was very large and grew endlessly out of his flat feet. His left hand was long and it stayed in Mike's face. Mike grinned and brushed the left hand away. He threw a left hook that exploded



The blonde wriggled while Mike finished his song and joyfully dumped his beer over the head of a pal

against Manuel's stomach. It made a fabulous noise. Manuel moved cautiously, then drove a right to Mike's chin. Mike followed him around, seeking to be fancy. He got a faceful of leather and the blood ran freely down to his chest. Mike could take it fine.

He took it for two more rounds while Manuel sliced him up like a steak. Mike got tired of that and went to work. He hit Manuel a short left hook and the big guy fell like a building. Mike's friends from Bridgeport went crazy and somebody slammed a bass drum. The trumpets and saxophones did not join in, for those musicians were out of breath.

Manuel Arredo got his feet beneath him and shoved. He moved on rubber legs across the canvas, a saddened and confused Argentine. This had never happened to Manuel before. Mike caught him and his left hook flowed again in a brown blur like Dempsey's.

Manuel swayed and swiveled about, then crashed face-down on the floor of the ring. He lay there very limp, like an omelet. . . .

The thunder in the Garden grew, but Bridgeport's voice was louder. The drums beat and the shrill notes of the trumpet pierced all sound. Mike was Bridgeport's own private screwball and they did not mean to lose him. Mike challenged the champion over the radio and he kissed one of the boxing commissioners. That was very funny. There was never a guy like Mike.

IN THE dressing room, Mike had saved a kiss for Rose. His lips were huge and swollen; they were salty against her own. Tenderly her hands traced the wound that parted his cheek, the blue mouse under one eye. His wide grin for the first time was ugly. "I murdered 'im, doll," Mike said, and his big hands closed

tightly about her. Her head was against his great chest but she kept seeing his face. She didn't want Mike to look like that; she didn't want him mumbling hoarsely from the back of his throat, like the broken bums she'd seen.

She said, "You were wonderful, Mike, darling; you were wonderful," but she did not feel the happiness she spoke. Mike was too red in the face and too swollen; his eyes and his voice were drunk with too much strain and excitement.

Patsy Fine kept shouting. He was a little guy, with more energy than a monkey on a string. He clamped a big cigar between his teeth and his mouth was forever wet with his exuberance. He told a receptive press:

"My screwball will fight the Army an' Navy, but first we want the champ. Yeah, the champ. He ain't too tough (Continued on page 46)