



Ten years behind the plate

David Owen

After ten years of Little League and high school baseball, I may never play again. I'm headed for a university that has the fifth ranked college baseball team in the country, leaving only spots for future and former major leaguers. Over the past decade, baseball has been more important to me than almost anything I have done. It has brought me closer to friends and family and helped me to meet new friends. It has helped me mature and learn discipline and it has been on the baseball field that some of the craziest and most heartbreaking events of my life have occurred. Heartbreaking, like losing a game you thought you had won — in the bottom of the 12th inning, with two outs and two strikes on the last batter. Crazy, like the trip to Havre de Grace for the Little League regional championships when the team unsuccessfully tried to make it to the World Series in 100 degree heat without having had either breakfast or lunch. Crazy, like that first day at Metropolitan Police Boys Club #8 when I began my career as a catcher.

I had never played the game, let alone picked a position. On try-out day at the club, training ground for many of the city's best ball players, the new kids went through simple drills while the coaches watched and decided if they wanted you on their team. If so, they would draft you; if not, you were assigned at random. In my situation, as I recall, the latter was the case. I do remember being terrified that no team would want me and that I would become a free agent even before I knew how to hold the bat

correctly. It turned out, whether they wanted it or not, that the Giants got me. The Giants, as I was to learn, were one of the traditionally bad teams in the league and usually lost about three times as many games as they won.

I came to my first real practice a few days later all excited, full of the dreams every kid had — of pitching a perfect game or becoming the starting shortstop and making some great play in the hole. As I walked onto the field I encountered a large, severe looking man with a dark square face and a gun on his hip. The man looked at me and told me that I was going to be a catcher and that if I wanted to play I had to go out and buy a cup, the protective variety, the next day. I was barely nine years old at this time and the man who was speaking to me, a policeman named Buddy Burkhead, is still remembered in DC varsity high school circles with respect and, in many cases, with memories of fear. A superb baseball coach, Burkhead runs one of the finest youth programs in the area.

As an 9-year-old, though, it was not easy for me to accept what I had heard. Catcher? Where in the world does he play? Not that really sick man who sits behind the plate and lets the pitches bounce wildly off him all day, in the meantime getting little recognition or respect for the abuse he's taking and and job he is doing. I have often heard the catcher's equipment called the "tools of ignorance." To someone who has never played the position, or the game for that matter, catchers must rank up there with NHL

goalies and the men who jump off high bridges attached to rubber bands as some of the least intelligent people in sport, or even in existence. But a nine-year-old doesn't argue with a coach, especially when he's also a policeman.

I would learn to love the dirty, sweaty job. I could tell you that being a catcher can be as much of an art form as dunking a basketball or painting a canvas, but you probably wouldn't believe me so perhaps the best way to explain it is to take you behind the plate for just one batter's chance at the ball and tell you exactly what goes on in that little corner of the field where every important moment in baseball begins and often ends.

As a catcher, one of my jobs is to be observant, to see if a teammate is out of position, if my pitcher has a flaw in his wind-up that I can help him with, to watch the batter's stance and his swing in order to determine where and what to throw at him. The first thing I do when the batter approaches is make sure my team knows the situation and where they should be. I take a long hard look at the batter, to see what kind of ballplayer he looks like. There is an awful lot you can tell about a baseball player just by the way he handles himself when he comes to the plate. First I look at his physical appearance and his size (although not too long because this can often be deceiving). The face, though, is always a give-away. I can tell someone who wants to hit the ball from someone who is looking for a walk from someone who is scared out of their mind—just by the expression on their face. In their eyes you can spot fear or determination as easily as you can spot a 3-1 fastball. Then I look at their clothes: does the uniform fit well, are the stirrups on the right way (although one of our best hitters often wore one facing the right direction and one the wrong), what kind of batting gloves does he have, are his shoes tied correctly, what brand are they? Usually someone who cares so little that he wears torn batting gloves or football shoes is not someone who is going to have the intensity to hit the ball consistently well. Finally, and probably most important because, after all, the physical tip-offs are only based on the averages, you look at his stance and the way he swings the bat. A batter who crowds the plate and has his hands in tight will probably not be able to hit an inside fastball; someone with an open stance who

is off the plate may have trouble with a curveball away.

After the batter settles in the box, I give a quick glance to coach Eddie Saah to see if he has got a pitch he wants. Saah always stands at the end of the bench, with his arms crossed and one hand dangling down if he has a sign waiting. I have always assumed that he adopted this particular pose to look as if he was being nonchalant, trying not to tip off the other team. For the most part it works, but he looks like a character on 'Get Smart.' If coach does not have a sign for me, it is up to me to call it. Deciding on a pitch, I'll usually stare straight into the batter's box dirt. Then I'll look hard into the batter's eyes, or what I can see of them from that angle, to find out if he is looking to steal my sign or if his eyes are giving something else away. With no one on base, I am usually pretty relaxed and my crouch reflects that.

The most important thing that I do on every pitch is give the umpire a good look at the pitch and make sure that I'm not stealing strikes from my own team. The other trick is learning the umpire: where is his strike zone, where does he stand, when does he call the pitch, early or late? All these things I have to try and establish within the first one or two innings. With a runner on base, particularly on first, my attitude becomes a little different. My crouch is modified to assist the quick release of the ball in case the runner decides to go. In this position, with my back parallel to the ground and my hands way up, it makes the pitches harder to frame, and it takes alot of poise and patience not to jump up in the umpire's face and block his view of the pitch while you're checking the runner.

This time the situation looks good. "One out!" I call to my infield, "Play's at first, nobody on!" That's one thing about baseball; it can be a little boring at times and it is important that your players continue to concentrate even during the longest innings. I turn to face the batter. Their number five man definitely looks like a ballplayer. I can already see the desire in his eyes and the determination in his jaw; this is the kind of hitter who is not going to give us anything. We are going to have to throw good pitches to get him out. I glance at coach, but he is busy scolding the guys on the bench for not being in the game, so

the pitch call is mine. I look down and scoop up a small handful of dirt as the batter stands with one foot in the box and other pointed up third awaiting a signal. Curve ball, got to be, I think as the batter steps up and settles himself in the box after knocking his cleats with the plate and digging himself in. I look up into his eyes and drop two fingers carefully placed on my thigh so that my right thigh and the glove draped over my left knee hide the signal from the other team's base coaches. The batter now takes a few swings waiting for the pitcher to go into his wind-up. As the pitcher drops his foot back and raises his hands, preparing to rear back and throw, the batter cocks himself into position and I raise myself into my crouch. A split second later it's over. My suspicions about the batter had been correct, we had thrown him an excellent curve, the kind that starts right at his head and at the last second falls off the table and breaks into the strike-zone low and away. He took this pitch, the kind of throw you reserve for the third strike in the bottom of the ninth, and fouled it off, barely fooled at all and with a beautiful swing. Now the hard part begins. Getting a strike with the first pitch is crucial, but you would much rather fool him than watch him take a cut like that. Again, I thoughtfully scoop at the hard, sandy dirt beneath my shin guards and begin to work a strategy in my mind. Another curve, then a hard fastball on the hands, and we will see what happens. I look into those confident, concentrating eyes as he stares down the pitcher; again I drop two fingers, adding a quick motion to let the pitcher know that the pitch needs to be low and outside. This pitch comes in with a flatter trajectory and breaks hard and flat. The batter takes it for a ball, but the pitch was right there. I throw back to the mound and turn to the umpire to ask what the problem was.

High school umpires are a strange breed; many of them are former stars in the game and ump to stay in touch. Many are elderly and have been working behind the plate since long before any of the players were born, but this does not necessarily make them good at the job. We only get about 7 or 8 umpires during a year, and so you get to know them a bit, and if you are polite, they love to talk at you. During warm-ups or between pitches, they enjoy explaining why they made a call or telling a story

from when they used to play, but the moment when you know that the umpire is yours is when he turns and asks you if he missed a call. At that point he has foreited the infallibility of his calls and allowed me the opening to work him for calls the rest of the game.

This umpire is not like that; he is one of the old jokers who loves to gab, but I can only pick up about every third word as he attempts to explain why it was outside, just like a similar pitch he had called back in the spring of '49... Now the count is one and one. The last pitch was not a total waste; if you can run a fast ball in on the hands of someone you have just thrown a curve that broke away, you have created one of the toughest possible situations in which to hit the ball. So, as I wait for the batter to take his signal and make himself comfortable, I look out to see how our infield is doing. They look all right, with the exception of our right fielder, who has his arms crossed and is valiantly trying to conceal a yawn. A quick shout and he straightens up and everyone is set. I return to my crouch and signal for a fastball, hard and inside. It is another excellent pitch and badly jams him: he

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fouls the ball hard down the right field line and rattles a few brains on his own bench. I turn to the ump to get a new ball and to make sure of the count and the number of outs, I decide that we might get him with another curve. As I set myself, and again look into his eyes, I see the determination is still there, perhaps amplified. No one, especially a good hitter, ever wants to strike out. The chatter from the bench becomes louder as our team tries to increase the pressure. The pitcher nods confidently as I flash two fingers once again. The pitcher steps back and then brings the leg up in front of him, building momentum for the pitch; the foot comes forward and the arm snaps through. I don't know when other people pick up the spin on a curve; they said Ted Williams could see it before it had left the pitcher's hand. I usually pick it up about mid-way through its flight and am then left to read the break and try to hit the ball. I do not know when this batter picked up the pitch either, but he gets it

early enough to slap it hard to right field, hitting it where it was pitched. Fortunately, sleeping beauty out in right has come alive and is playing shallow enough to grab the sinking line-drive before it falls in for a hit. I walk out onto the infield grass and hold up two fingers, "Two outs, play is still at first!" I turn to exchange a few confusing words with the umpire and check out the next batter.

I figure that something like this happened to me at least 10,000 times over the past decade, counting games, scrimmages and practices, but not counting the endless hours of pickup ball in someone's backyard or on the street. To someone who has never played baseball, never been a catcher, it may seem strange way to learn poise, leadership, concentration, discipline, a strange way to make a family closer. But it happened. And all with a stick of wood and a few pieces of leather. Amazing, isn't it?

EUGENE McCARTHY

The good of the game

The noted historian Bruce Catton wrote in 1977 that baseball is a game that cannot be ruined by forces either internal or external. The strength and resiliency of the game in the face of both internal and external change during recent years seemed to prove Catton right. Some of the changes were absorbed into the game, others were rejected. The integrity of the game remained.

Night games, artificial turf, covered parks, the use of designated hitters, although they raised some questions about the validity of statistics and some incidental aspects of the game, left the basic game intact.

There have been innovations generally associated with the terms of Bowie Kuhn as commissioner, such as the abolition of the

reserve clause, the adoption of the free agent rule, three tier compensation rules, the player draft, etc. These were all designed to make teams more competitive, to even out their strength, and did not destroy the basic integrity of baseball.

Although some of these changes are questionable, they were offered under the protective standard for "the good of the game," proclaimed by the most noted baseball commissioner, Judge Kenesaw Landis, and followed faithfully by his successors. Under this standard, baseball was judge of itself like classical theatre, with its own unities of time, space and action. No higher purpose for the game was recognized, and no objective beyond the good of the game.

Thus, "Shoeless" Joe Jackson and others involved in the "Black Sox" scandal were banned for "the good of the game," not to give a good example to the youth of America, or for some other "good of society."

Higher and outside purposes have been accepted for the national football and basketball organizations, but neither game, in any case, could be conceived as self-contained, or