

## Chapter 13

### *Don't Leave Any Bullets in Your Gun*

“This is it, men. It’s do or die. It’s now or never. There’s no tomorrow. It’s make or break time. I hope you brought your game to the field today and you’re ready for action. Don’t leave any bullets in your gun.” I hoped that Mr. Mitchell had run out of clichés.

“Coach Mitchell is delivering yet another of his inspirational speeches. We are hanging on his every word,” said Mike “the Microphone” Milkiewicz. His volume was way down but Mr. Mitchell’s scowl convinced Mike to completely turn off his radio voice. That almost never happened.

Mr. Mitchell continued, “Remember what I said last week: we don’t cut you, you cut yourself. We are doing our part by giving you every opportunity to show us what you can do, so make the most of it. We’ll split you guys into two groups, two teams. I’ll coach one team. Coach Reynolds will handle the other. Now, we’ve got a friendly wager on the outcome and my squad has won this little game of ours every year. Coach Reynolds has had to pony up for dinner at Luigi’s Spaghetti House three years in a row, and I can almost taste this year’s spaghetti supreme. At the end of the game, you guys will get some water over at the fire station while Coach Reynolds and I make a list of fifteen names, the fifteen ball players who will be the 1967 Gas. Before we start the game, it is a tradition that Coach Reynolds give us one of his speeches. Settle in, boys, because Coach Reynolds can really bring it. Here he is.”

Coach Reynolds wore the new Gas cap. Every one of the twenty-eight players noticed it enviously. Coach Reynolds cleared his throat and said, “Good luck.”

I played on the team coached by Mr. Reynolds. Every inning each player had to play a different position. I was slated to bat leadoff and start in right field. Joey Mitchell was pitching for his dad’s team. This was not going to be easy.

Joey’s first pitch to me was his fastball and Joey’s fastball was in a league of its own. It made a noise like a tornado as it blew by me. “Strike one!” Mr. Mitchell said. “Bring on my spaghetti.” I fouled off the next pitch, but only just barely. Joey looked at me and winked. I knew what he was going to do and I didn’t like it one bit. Joey was going to let up on me and lay a meatball as big as one of Luigi’s famous ones, across the middle of the plate. I called for a timeout. I stared at Joey, shook my head and let him read my mind. Joey shrugged. He understood. He fired his fastball on the outside corner, at the knees. It was utterly unhittable. I offered a feeble swing and sat down at the end of the bench. “And I’m going to have the strawberry shortcake for dessert,” said a smiling Mr. Mitchell.

Mr. Mitchell’s team scored a run when Speed Miller doubled in Ray Flanagan. Joey Mitchell came to the plate with Speed on third and Tank Arbuster on first with no outs. “Who picked these teams?” I wondered. Catfish Reynolds was pitching for us and although he was good, I knew that Joey would clobber him. I moved back ten steps and towards the gap in right centerfield. I started running before Joey even swung his bat. Joey blasted a long, high drive that was either going to fly over the snow fence that I was racing towards or bounce off

of it. I crashed into the fencing and it gave way under my weight. I bounced to my feet. The ball was safely in the webbing of my glove. Joey was out. Speed Miller tagged up from third and scored easily. Mr. Reynolds grinned and said, "How about that?" My brother, Pat, hit next and he didn't step into the bucket. He lined a hard single to center. Pat wasn't going to leave any bullets in his gun.

The next time I batted, I faced Willie "Wee Willie" Wintergreen. Wee Willie had pitched in the Pee Wee League the year before and he had been a star, even though he was the smallest kid in the whole league. He hadn't grown much during the off-season either. I lined Willie's first pitch towards right field. It was as hard as I could hit a ball. Speed Miller dove to his left and snared it. Speed held the ball high in the air to show that he had caught it and to await the cries of "nice catch" from his teammates. I was running out of opportunities, out of bullets.

"Good wood, Eileen," Mr. Reynolds said to me. "Warm up that arm. You're pitching the next inning." Mr. Mitchell's squad was leading 5 - 3 and they had the top of their order coming up: Ray Flanagan, Speed Miller, Tank Arbuster and Joey Mitchell. It was like facing the Mighty Midget League's version of "Murderer's Row". The big league version of Murderer's Row featured Earle Combs, Mark Koenig, Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Bob Meusel, and Tony Lazzeri. They were the 1927 New York Yankees. After losing a game by the score of 21 - 1, a player for the Washington Senators said, "Those fellows not only beat you but they tear your heart out." My heart was beating about 200 times a minute. I raced over behind the backstop and began to loosen up. "Hey, Eileen," Mr. Reynolds said. "You might want to take off your batting helmet."

"Just relax and throw strikes," Mr. Reynolds said as I stepped onto the mound and faced Ray Flanagan. Mr. Mitchell called Ray his "on base machine" because of Ray's ability to find creative ways to get on first base. He was the best leadoff hitter in the Mighty Midget League. I knew that Ray liked to "take a strike", to avoid swinging until the pitcher had thrown at least one good pitch. Ray would crowd the plate and crouch down into an unusual stance he called "the clamshell" that left the pitcher throwing to an incredibly small strike zone. Ray drew a lot of walks so I was not going to let him get ahead in the count. I threw the first pitch right across the heart of the plate. "Strike one," Mr. Reynolds said. Ray was an outstanding base runner and bunter and when he looked over at the third baseman and noticed that the Microphone was playing way back, almost on the edge of the outfield grass, I knew what he was planning. I threw him a curve on the outside half of the plate, hoping that it would move away from him as he tried to bunt it down the third base line. Ray lowered his bat to drag the pitch but my curve spun outside and instead of bunting it towards Mike the Microphone, Ray sent it harmlessly to me. I picked it up and threw to the first baseman. "That's one big out," Mr. Reynolds said to me.

Wally "Speed" Miller stepped into the batter's box. I relaxed a little; Wally had never gotten a hit off of me in the many pick-up games we played. Wally could drill a fastball, but he just couldn't seem to handle my curve. I knew it and he knew it. Wally swung badly on my first two curveballs and he was behind in the count, 0 - 2. My catcher, Jeff Baker, signaled for a fastball on the next pitch. I shook him off. I had to trust my best pitch, the curveball. I aimed it inside expecting Wally to bail out as he so often did but I hung it and it wobbled weakly into Wally's hitting zone. He launched a fly ball to centerfield. I breathed a sigh of

relief as I watched my centerfielder camp under it. Then I noticed that my centerfielder was Stephen “Crazy Arm” Dunn. The ball bounced off Stephen’s glove and rolled away from him. Wally rounded second base and headed for third. Crazy Arm scooped up the ball and aimed it in the general direction of the infield. It sailed high over the shortstop’s head, bounced once and settled into the cat o’ nine tails in the swamp behind Robinson Field. Wally lifted his arms in the air and trotted across home plate. “Hey, Microphone,” Wally shouted. “It’s Wally “Homerun” Miller from now on! Broadcast that!”

“Don’t let it bother you, Eileen,” Mr. Reynolds said. “That’s not your fault.”

“If I hadn’t hung my curve, he’d be out,” I said.

Tank Arbuster was a power hitter with a big, looping swing. He could hit a ball into orbit around the moon but he swung and missed a lot of pitches, too. Tank was smart and he could think along with the pitcher, often guessing exactly what was coming. Jeff Baker knew this and he called for a change-up. A change-up on the first pitch would not be what Tank was expecting. I palmed the ball and pushed it towards the plate with my normal motion. Tank wasn’t ready for the change; he swung way ahead of the slow offering, missed it by a yard and laughed out loud. I looked to my catcher for his next call. Jeff Baker wanted the change-up again. I nodded and duplicated the first pitch right down to the exact location. The results were not identical. Tank was not fooled a second time. He rolled his massive wrists and lined a shot to left that darted for the monkey bars deep in the outfield but at the last moment hooked two feet foul. “That’s just a long strike, a very long strike,” Mr. Reynolds said. I bounced two curveballs in the dirt and the count evened at 2 - 2. I wasn’t impressing Mr. Mitchell with this display. I was pitching like I was terrified, which I was. Jeff Baker wanted me to throw my best pitch, the curve, but I knew that Tank was waiting for it, and Mr. Mitchell was expecting it, too, so I reached back and placed my “fastball” on the inside corner of the plate, right under Tank’s huge hands. He flinched and turned away from the pitch. The head of Tank’s enormous bat crossed the plate and Mr. Reynolds said, “Strike three, you’re out, Tankster!”

“It’s okay, big fella,” Speed Miller said, “I’ll be hitting the homeruns around here from now on.”

Joey Mitchell had actually led the league in homeruns the year before with seventeen in twenty games. I knew that if he clubbed a homer now, my chances of making The Gas would disappear. Jeff Baker set up on the outside corner of the plate as if he read my apprehensive mind. Mr. Reynolds knew it, too. “Keep the ball away from Joey. Don’t let him hurt you.” My first pitch was way outside for a ball and so was the second. I threw the best curveball of my life and Joey watched it go by for strike one. Another sharp breaking curve was taken for ball three, leaving me no choice but to give him something to hit. I could play it safe and walk Joey but my brother was on deck. I’d rather throw a fastball down the middle to the best fastball hitter in the history of the Mighty Midget League than face my little brother. My pitch didn’t split the plate, however; it burrowed in on Joey’s hands as he swung with his usual confidence and power. I’d often heard Curt Gowdy, the old radio announcer for Red Sox games, use the term “big league pop-up”, but I’d never actually seen one until that ball jumped off the bat of Joey Mitchell and climbed into the sky, up and up and up. The shortstop, Jimmy Flanagan, should have called for it but he screamed, “Yikes!”

and ran away into the outfield. I had no choice but to chase it. With my back to home plate and after what seemed like minutes, I found myself near second base with the ball on its downward flight. That pop-up was up in the air so long that Joey Mitchell nearly crossed second base before it came down, and it came down right into my glove! "How about that?" said a smiling Mr. Reynolds.

We ran out of pitchers so the coaches took the mound for the remainder of the game. The score was 8 - 8 in the final inning. We were up with two outs and Bobby Harty was on third base, the go ahead run. Stephen "Crazy Arm" Dunn was supposed to be the next batter but Stephen's mom came down to the field and ordered him home immediately to clean out his cat's litter box. I stepped into the batter's box to face Mr. Mitchell who still had high hopes of winning the spaghetti supreme from Luigi's Spaghetti House. He threw his first pitch to me so hard that his baseball hat flew off his balding head. Winded and sweating, he struggled to bend over and pick it up. I knew what I had to do. "Get a hit, Eileen, and I'll bring you some of Luigi's famous garlic bread," Mr. Reynolds said. I bunted the next pitch from Mr. Mitchell in the exact spot his baseball cap had fallen. Mr. Mitchell struggled to pick up the ball, I safely crossed first base, and Bobby Harty scored the important run. Jimmy Flanagan doubled me home and we had a 10 - 8 lead. We retired Mr. Mitchell's team in the last half of the inning to preserve Mr. Reynolds' first ever victory in the Luigi's Spaghetti House series. We didn't celebrate, however; the real test was yet to come. Twenty-seven players sat in the bleachers awaiting the verdict.

"This is most unusual," said Mr. Mitchell. "We were going to send you over to the fire station and write up the list of just who made this year's Gas but....." Mr. Mitchell either paused to increase the drama or because he was genuinely bewildered. "We can't do that just yet." There was a group groan. Mr. Mitchell went on, "We can't do that because the competition this year has been just too close. We need a little more time to get this right. It just wouldn't be fair to rush into this. I figure what we'll do is, I'll take Coach Reynolds over to Luigi's and buy him that meal I owe him." At least now Mr. Mitchell was smiling again. "And after he and I eat a few meatballs, well, then I think we'll be able to get it done. In the mean time, you should all be proud of yourselves. If we had twenty-seven, twenty-eight uniforms, we'd keep every one of you. We'll call you tomorrow night."

The coaches packed the equipment into their cars and Mike "the Microphone" Milkiewicz turned on his radio for the first time in hours. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said in his announcer's voice. "I mean, lady and gentlemen, you all know what this means, don't you? Why the delay? The answer: tomorrow afternoon the league's board of directors will meet. The topic? Eileen Romanowki, this is your life."