

Chapter 16

Boom, Boom

"Mad about Math" Monday was Mr. Enright's attempt at getting his sixth graders "charged up about math" so after lunch every Monday, we became mad about math. We'd do a million long division problems and then we'd play so-called math games like black jack, roulette, and craps. Tank Arbuster called it "casino time" and wondered if Old Man Enright might have a little problem with gambling.

Tank, Bobby Harty, Mike "the Microphone" Milkiewicz and I played black jack or "21" as Mr. Enright referred to it. Apparently, Mr. Enright thought that if we called it 21, it would remind us that we had to do a lot of adding in the game and that adding was indeed math. We just called it black jack and we always bet baseball cards or marbles on the outcome. We had divided up the long division problems between the four of us and shared answers so we could get to the fun stuff. We had gambled that Mr. Enright wouldn't notice.

Joey Mitchell and Paula O'Connor sat by themselves at a table across the classroom. They were playing tic-tac-toe. That wasn't a casino game but Paula smiled her smile when she asked Old Man Enright if she could play it and, of course, he said yes. After each tic-tac-toe game, Paula would gleefully squeal, "Oh, another tie! Can you believe that?" Paula had a way of tossing back her hair and laughing that made all the boys notice her and made me want to inform her that tic-tac-toe stopped being fun for me in kindergarten.

"Boys and girls," the Microphone said. "This could be the year for Nouveau Monde Bakery. Yessiree, the year we get on a roll and become breadwinners in the Mighty Midget League." After getting cut from The Gas, Mike took one of the open roster spots for the Bread Men. The Bread Men's home field was in a tough section of Holyoke called "The Flats". The Flats was an area of apartment blocks built close to the canals 60, 70 and 80 years earlier to house the thousands of low wage, immigrant workers in the paper mills. In 1967, very few moms or dads would drive their kids across town for anything, so the Microphone pedaled his bicycle to and from Jackson Park in The Flats for practices and games. Mike really wanted to play ball.

"What about the Jamboree, Microphone? We clobbered you 9 – zip and that was just two innings," Tank Arbuster said.

"Yeah, and you're the starting third baseman, pal," Bobby added. "So how good can that team be?"

"Doubters, non believers, ignorant masses," the Microphone announced. "All of you will see soon enough. Nouveau Monde vs. Mitchell's Gas tomorrow night, opening day."

"How's the opener going to be any different from the Jamboree?" I asked. "And I've got black jack. You guys all owe me another baseball card." All transactions took place on the playground, far from the realm of Old Man Enright. Tank and Bobby didn't take care of their baseball cards, but I enjoyed winning them anyways.

The Microphone continued, "Here's the deal, guys, not an excuse but a real contributing factor in your annihilating us at the Jamboree. No Cuevas."

"What?" we all asked together.

"No Cuevas. Ricky Cuevas? No. Hector Cuevas? No. Jose "Boom Boom" Cuevas? No. No Cuevas, no contest."

"Did he just switch to a Spanish speaking station?" Tank asked me.

"I've heard about those guys," I answered. "The Cuevas cousins just moved up from Puerto Rico." Holyoke had always been a home for immigrants, Irish, Polish, French and German. 1967 was the beginning of a new wave, from Puerto Rico. Holyoke didn't exactly open its arms in welcome.

The Microphone switched back on. "Here's the rundown, gang. Ricky Cuevas – lightning fast on the base paths and on the mound an ace like the one in your last black jack, Eileen. Hector Cuevas – catcher muy bueno, a steal stopper and doubles popper. Jose "Boom Boom" Cuevas – first baseman, could be your brother, Tankster. Hits a ton, weighs half a ton."

"Why is he called "Boom Boom"? Bobby asked.

"When Jose hammers one," the Microphone said, "he stands at the plate one, two, three long seconds and watches. Then he shouts, 'boom, boom!' and starts his journey around the bases."

“Great, just what the league needs,” Tank said, “another colorful figure.”

The Microphone was right, though. The Nouveau Monde Bakery was indeed a team on the rise. I wasn't there to watch it happen. Instead of going to the opener, I stayed home to help Mom clean the oven. I even dried the dishes. Pat supplied the details later that night.

Catfish Reynolds started on the hill for The Gas because Coach Mitchell was saving Joey for the next game against a stronger opponent, Food Town, one of the powers in the Mighty Midget League. Catfish was good but the Cuevas cousins were better. In the first inning, Ricky Cuevas singled and stole second base. Hector Cuevas drove him home with a double. Jose Cuevas walloped an impossibly long fly ball, watched it one, two, three seconds and then shouted, “Boom, boom” before trotting around the bases. It was 3 – 0 and although Coach Mitchell brought in Joey to pitch and put out the fire, the fire burned on. In the third inning, Boom Boom banged a triple and the Microphone himself laid down a perfect suicide squeeze bunt to score the run. In the fifth inning, Ricky Cuevas doubled, stole third base and then in daring fashion, stole home too. Ricky pitched a complete game and Hector Cuevas threw out Speed Miller on a stolen base attempt to end the contest.

“Coach Mitchell said it was his fault tonight,” Pat told me. “He said that he did a lousy job of coaching, that he thought this team couldn't play ball with us. He said this has happened a lot this year. Said he's grateful for all these lessons.”

“So, he wasn't mad at you guys at all?” I asked.

“Well, he did mention something about a three hour practice tomorrow afternoon.”