

## Chapter 29

### Some Great Way To End The Summer

The Boston Red Sox kept alive the dreams of New England all summer long. The Twins, Tigers, White Sox, Angels and Red Sox all had designs on first place and every day the scrambled standings seemed to change. One steamy night Dad drove us to the Tastee-Freeze for soft serve ice cream. We were listening to the ballgame on our car radio and stopped at a traffic light when another car pulled alongside us.

"Hey, pal, how we doing?" the man in the car asked my dad. "My radio is busted."

"We're up, 4 – 3 in the sixth inning," Dad answered. "Reggie Smith just drove in two for us with a double."

"Thanks, pal. Go Red Sox! Right kids?" It was that kind of summer.

We would relive and reenact each Sox game the next day during pick-up. The day after Red Sox outfielder Jose Tartabull made an amazing throw to nail a runner trying to score the tying run in the ninth inning, we set up the situation at Robinson Field.

"I'll be Jose Tartabull," said Crazy Arm Dunn. "Who wants to be Ken Berry?" Ken Berry was the Chicago White Sox runner who was gunned down at the plate.

"You can't be Tartabull, Crazy Arm," said Ray Flanagan. "No way, Jose! You can't even get the ball to the catcher from second base, never mind from right field. We'll lose all our baseballs in the swamp."

"I'll be Elston Howard," said Jeff Baker. Howard had won the American League MVP award as a member of the Yankees in 1963 but during the season of 1967 he was traded to the Red Sox. Even though he was at the end of his stellar career we were glad to have him. Elston Howard was our catcher and he had applied the tag on Ken Berry at the end of the surprising throw from Tartabull.

"I'll be Ned Martin," volunteered the Microphone. Ned Martin was the radio announcer, the voice of the 67 Red Sox.

We spent the next hour staging that same play over and over with different kids taking on the roles of Jose Tartabull, Elston Howard and Ken Berry. Everyone wanted to be Carl Yastrezemski. Yaz had hit two homers in that 4 – 3 victory over the White Sox and he was carrying the team, having his own dream season in the year of the impossible dream. The impossible seemed possible; the Red Sox were in first place!

"That ball was foul by a mile!" screamed Jimmy Flanagan.

"Was not," answered Bobby Harty.

"Was too!" shouted Crazy Arm.

"Once again the game is interrupted while players from both sides express their viewpoints in an effort to reach a fair decision," announced the Microphone. "Actually, a fair or foul decision."

"How could you even see it, Crazy Arm? You were in the swamp looking for the fifty baseballs you flung in there in the last week," offered Jimmy Flanagan.

"Oh shut up, Jimmy! You're a jerk," said his identical twin Ray.

"You're a bigger jerk. You big jerk!" answered Jimmy.

"Yeah?" replied Ray. "Except for your good looks, you're a total loser!"

"It's times like this," the Microphone continued, "when the game cries for a man in blue and the order he would bring." We seemed to enjoy the banter and arguments almost as much as playing baseball.

"Foul, you idiot!"

"Fair, creep!"

"Foul, blockhead!"

Discussions like those were part of the fabric of pick-up. The games could get emotional so it was important for more than one kid to bring a baseball and a bat to the field. If only one kid came with the vital equipment, he had the power to

end our game at any time. "Oh yeah, if I am out at second base than I'm taking my bat and ball and going home."

The day before the final weekend of freedom and the Labor Day Weekend World Series of West Holyoke, Jimmy and Ray Flanagan had good news and bad news. The score in our pick-up game was 18 -17 and Timmy Mitchell was on third base, pinch running for his big brother Joey. If Timmy scored it would send the game into extra innings but that would be just fine, we weren't ready to stop playing ball anyways. I was pitching to Duane Bennett. Duane's dad desperately wanted his son to be a ballplayer and he always fully equipped him with the most expensive stuff. We could count on Duane to get us a new bat when one got cracked or some new balls when they were needed. Tank called him "Sporting Goods Store" Bennett. Duane even wore baseball shoes, "cleats", made out of kangaroo leather. The rest of us wore sneakers like Keds or P.F. Flyers. I had two strikes on Duane and I knew I could strike him out even if he was wearing new batting gloves and kangaroo leather cleats. Duane liked baseball okay, but he wasn't very good at it. What he was good at was science. He had won the JFK Elementary School science fair two years in a row. In fifth grade he built a model of the Russian satellite Sputnik. In sixth grade he showed how a curveball worked. Too bad Duane couldn't hit one.

Timmy Mitchell took a lead off of third base. I winked at my third baseman, Mike Milkiewicz, and tossed him the ball. The Microphone did the rest. "Eileen Romanowski throws to third to get the speedy Timmy Mitchell but the ball is dropped and Timmy is racing home. Go, Timmy, go! He scores the all important tying run. Don't go anywhere gang. This game is not over!"

When it was over, Jimmy and Ray Flanagan delivered their news, good and bad. "You guys all know that our dad works at Mountain Park," Ray began. Mountain Park was an amusement park on Mt. Tom in Holyoke. Mountain Park had a wild roller coaster, an antique carousel, a spooky fun house, a score of rides, an arcade, and a line-up of booths that served fine foods like pink and blue cotton candy and fried dough. "Well, our dad has gotten us free passes for everyone who plays in the Labor Day Weekend World Series of West Holyoke."

"All you've got to do," added his brother Jimmy, "is get a ride to the park in the morning and you'll get in free. And, oh yeah, our mom is making a picnic lunch

for everyone. This was astonishing news coming from the Flanagan twins who were known to routinely charge interest if you borrowed a dime or a quarter from one of them. Astonishing and fantastic news.

"There's just one thing," said Ray. I swear that I saw a black cloud pass in front of the late summer sun at that very moment. I also noticed that Speed Miller was staring at me and he was grinning, stupidly of course. Ray continued, "The Labor Day Weekend World Series of West Holyoke rules committee met and ....."

"Wait a minute," said Joey Mitchell. "There's a rules committee for this thing."

"Yup, and we decided that, ah, well we had to figure out exactly who should and should not be allowed to play you know, and ah...."

Jimmy tried to rescue his stammering brother. "It would be kind of weird if, let's say, your dad wanted to play. Or if Willie Mays or Sandy Koufax wanted to be in the games. Right?"

"Oh yeah, big chance of that happening," said Joey.

"Well, we went back and forth trying to make it fair," Ray said. "I mean, our dad has only so many free passes for Mountain Park. We were kind of stuck when, well, when Speed came up with a great idea."

"Here it comes," I said under my breath.

"And it made perfect sense, you know," continued Ray Flanagan, "that we just follow the little league rules for our Labor Day Weekend World Series of West Holyoke. If it's good enough for little league, it's good enough for us."

"What are you saying, Ray?" Joey asked. "Are we going to have a jamboree? Umpires? Are we going to wear uniforms, too?"

Ray answered, "It means some people won't be allowed to play just like in little league. First, there are age requirements, okay. We can't have real little kids or guys who are too big smashing homeruns into the woods."

"Does that mean that my brother Timmy can't play?" Joey asked.

"Look, Timmy is great and all but he could get hurt. He can be our official bat boy, okay?" Jimmy answered. "He's too young to get into Mountain Park without a parent anyways."

"So then what does all this mean?" Joey wondered. "Why make a big deal out of nothing?"

I knew and I told him. "It means girls can't play. It means me."

With Timmy Mitchell seated on the handlebars, I rode my bike from Robinson Field and headed up the hill to home. "When I get my own bike, Eiween," Timmy said, "you can ride on my handle tings." Wally Miller intercepted us as we approached Glickman's Drug Store. He was winded and out of breath.

"You think I did it to you, don't you?" Wally said. He was straining to keep up with me, standing upright on his bike and pumping furiously. I pedaled faster. "What about the little league rules, Eileen? I didn't write those rules."

"Go fastah, Eiween," Timmy whispered.

"You figure I'm the only guy who thinks it's weird, you playing baseball with boys? Well, I'm not, okay? It's not just me by a long shot. It'd be even weirder with you, a girl, a girl, going to Mountain Park with all us guys."

Wally couldn't keep up. Timmy giggled as the distance between us steadily increased. We couldn't hear his words although he was saying something. "He's not too speedy on da bike, is he Eiween?" Timmy said.

"Figure it out, girl," Wally "Speed" Miller yelled. "We don't want you hanging around with us!"