

## Chapter 30

### The Labor Day Weekend World Series of West

#### Holyoke

"It just isn't fair, Eileen," my brother Pat said that night. We had broken apart the lighthouse puzzle and we were putting it back together. "It just isn't fair. What are you going to do?"

"You mean like go before their rules committee and plead my case? Change their small-minded minds? What am I going to do? Nothing."

"You've got to do something."

I wanted to telephone Grandpa and ask him what I should do but I didn't dare tell Pat. I wanted to talk to Grandpa. Maybe Grandpa could tell me why it wasn't all right for a girl to love the feel of a baseball in her glove and why a girl shouldn't throw a good curveball if she was lucky enough to have one.

I concentrated on the jigsaw puzzle and I thought of Grandpa's secret to puzzle making. "It's simple, really," he would say. The lamp over the puzzle table would shine on his bald head and light up his blue eyes. "Focus on one thing. Find all the pieces for that one thing. Make that one thing. Then choose another thing and do it again. Keep it simple." So, I focused on the lighthouse, the white and red tower, the guiding light. I gathered the pieces. I fit them together. And when it was made, I knew just what to do.

Kids in Morris Heights in 1967 almost never used the telephone to call each other. We'd just go over to someone's house, stand in their front yard and sing out their name until they responded. The call was always done in a two syllable "song". It would be "Jo eeeeeee" or "Bob eeeeeee". Even "Ta aaaaank" or "Cra zeeeeee Ah ahmmm" could be manipulated into that multiples of two format. The next morning I serenaded a few homes in the neighborhood before breakfast, hours before the opener of the Labor Day Weekend World Series of West Holyoke. I was focusing on one thing.

The Holyoke Parks and Recreation Department stopped taking care of the city's baseball diamonds as soon as little league season was over so dandelions dotted the infield of Robinson Field at 10:30 that morning. The grass in the outfield hadn't been cut for weeks but it didn't grow very fast in the hazy heat of summer anyways. Beyond the outfield in right was a softball diamond that had been constructed for Holyoke's Lassie League, the newly formed girls' softball organization. I sat on the bench of the girls' diamond. I was waiting for the pieces to gather.

Muriel White was the first to arrive. "I borrowed my dad's old glove," she said. "It's pretty old and flat as a pancake."

"Thanks for coming down," I said.

"I wouldn't miss this for anything, Eileen."

"You want to catch?" I asked her.

"It's not as much fun as jumping rope but sure."

Joey Mitchell brought his little brother Timmy over. "Here he is, Eileen," Joey said. "My mom was going to take him shoe shopping for kindergarten. He thinks you saved his life. I've got to get over to the big field. Jimmy and Ray's dad called the newspaper and Zipper Zwick is supposed to take some pictures of this Labor Day Weekend World Series of West Holyoke. Can you believe it? See you a little later."

The big field, the Mighty Midget League diamond, was filling up with boys. The familiar sounds of summer, gloves popping and kids razzing each other, followed.

The third and fourth graders from Nutmeg Circle arrived at the softball field. They were pretty good ballplayers and it didn't seem to bother them that they'd be playing with girls and a four and a half year old. "Thanks for the game," one of them said to me. "I heard you've got a nasty curve. Hope you don't mind if I get a hit off one of them."

"Looks like we've got some competition," shouted Speed Miller from the big diamond. "It's about time you figured it out, Eileen. You look good on that girls' softball field." I could hear some laughter.

The new kid who moved into the Sipowitz house and who skipped around the bases skipped over to join us. He made eight if you included me. It wasn't much but it was good enough for us to get a game going.

Timmy Mitchell led off the first inning. He swung a bat that was bigger than he was. "Thwow da ball, Eiween. Wet me hit it." So I threw Timmy the ball and he hit it, over the Skipper's head into left field. Timmy was so stunned that he didn't budge until Muriel White scooped him up and carried him to first base where they tripped over the bag.

"That was a frozen rope off the bat of Timmy 'Following in his brother's footsteps' Mitchell and a rather clumsy fall from Muriel 'I can sure jump rope but I trip over first base' White." It was the voice of the Microphone who had somehow made his way over to our game from the big field. "I figured you might need an announcer," he said. "And a third baseman."

"There's always room for you, Microphone," I said.

One of the Nutmeg Circle boys, a pudgy fourth grader, hit a ball so far that it rolled over to the Mighty Midget League diamond. Speed Miller fielded it and held it high. "Hey! You little boys and girls need this ball back?" He grabbed a bat, walked out to second base and hit the ball out of his hand. A long fly ball sailed out by the monkey bars in left field. The ball bounced off the blacktop and settled into the high grass. There wasn't as much laughter as Speed expected.

"What did you do that for?" asked my brother Pat. Pat went over to their bench, picked up a brand new ball that was going to be used for the second game of the Labor Day Weekend World Series of West Holyoke and brought it to our field. "It looks like the sides are uneven over here," he said to us. "Could you use an extra player?"

"As long as you don't mind being on the same team as a girl," I said.

"All I see are ballplayers," Pat said.

The score was 3 – 3 in the second inning. The level of play wasn't great but it didn't matter; we were playing ball, the sun was shining, and the day and the

weekend belonged to us. Between pitches to Muriel White I stopped for a moment, stood there on the mound, and listened to the "chatter" all around me. Chatter is the stuff that baseball players say, chant really, during a ballgame. We might not have had the best players in our game, but we sure did have some all-star chatterboxes.

"C'mon baby, c'mon baby, c'mon baby, you can do it, Eiiiiieeen," chattered the Skipper without skipping a beat.

"Hum you, chuck. Hum that apple. Hum, baby," chattered my brother Pat.

"Les go, battah. Battah, battah, battah. Two ducks on the pond. Little bingle here," chattered one of the kids from Nutmeg Circle.

"Hey, hey Muweal. Hey, hey, hey. Wittle hit here, baby," chattered Timmy Mitchell.

"The sounds of baseball, boys and girls, the sounds of baseball. Listen and enjoy." There was so much chatter that I almost didn't notice the nonstop "radio signal" coming out of Mike "the Microphone" Milkiewicz or the sounds of the arguing drifting over from the big field.

Crazy Arm Dunn and Duane Bennett drifted over from the big field, too. "We got tired of being picked on," said Crazy Arm.

"They called me Spaceshot," said Duane Bennett. "And it sounded like a lot more fun over here. Do you mind if we join you? I brought over two brand new baseball bats."

"You can play with us anytime," I said.

We had our share of arguments, too. "Do over!" shouted Duane Bennett when he popped up with the bases loaded. "Do overs" were always controversial. They were allowed only if there was some good reason that the play should be redone, replayed, done over.

"Are you insane, Duane?" My brother Pat never called for a do over, even if one was warranted. "Why?" he asked.

"I got something in my eye. I was going to call for time but you quick pitched me. I got something in my eye."

"I got something in my bat," said Tank Arbuster. He was standing behind the backstop. "It's called a grand slam. And if you let me hit right now, I'll show you it."

"I'm not sure if this field is big enough for the both of us, cousin," said Biggie Bob. "But if you're going to hit homers for this team than I'll have to hit homers for the other team. That is, if they'll let us play with them."

"Two very big yeses," I said.

Tank grabbed the bat that had looked like a redwood tree in Timmy Mitchell's hands. It was more like a matchstick in Tank's. "Here's where I make good on my grand slam promise," he said. "Hey, I'm kind of like Babe Ruth calling his shot, huh?" There was a baseball legend that the mighty Babe Ruth had promised a sick kid in the hospital that he would hit a homerun for him and, later that day, just before he belted it, the Babe pointed to the outfield bleachers to show where it would land. No one knows if it really happened just like that, but we firmly believed all baseball legends. Just like he promised, Tank connected on one of Pat's pitches and launched his own shot out beyond center field. Tank dropped the bat, waited one, two, three long seconds and shouted, "boom, boom." Then he began his journey around the bases. Crazy Arm tracked down the rolling ball, picked it up as it entered some tall grass, pivoted and let it fly. I was the shortstop and cut-off "man" and I was shocked when Crazy Arm's relay found my glove and not the swamp or the trees or the parking lot. I took his perfect throw and knew that I needed to make my own perfect throw to have any chance of getting Tank. The ball left my hand on a line, a direct line to Pat who was, and I couldn't believe what I was seeing, actually blocking the plate. The 200-pound Tankster was rumbling towards home and my little brother, 80-pounds maybe, was blocking his way. Pat caught the ball and braced for the collision. "You got me, little man," Tank said. Somehow, some way Tank had applied the brakes and avoided putting my brother in a body cast. Pat tagged him out.

Biggie Bob couldn't stop laughing. "Cousin," he said, "some people are born to boom, but the rest of us, we just have to run everything out."

"Amigos!" shouted Mike Milkiewicz as Ricky, Hector and Jose "Boom Boom" Cuevas jogged onto the ball field.

"We'd have been here earlier," Ricky Cuevas said. "But we don't have our bicycles anymore and it's kind of a long walk from Wyckoff Park. But hey, we're here now and we are ready to play ball. It was nice of you to include us."

"Everyone is welcome," I said. "Everyone." An inning later we welcomed one more player.

"Do you guys have room for me?"

"What took you so long, Joey?" I asked.

"Well," said Joey Mitchell, "I was having so much fun watching the Labor Day Weekend World Series of West Holyoke fall apart that I didn't realize you had yourselves a pretty good pick-up game going on over here."

"Wets move to da big field," said Timmy Mitchell. Sure enough the big field was open. The last bikes were pedaling away.

We rode our bikes and hauled our stuff over to the Mighty Midget League diamond. One of the teams got "stuck" with Joey Mitchell and we picked up where we had left off. "Hey, does anyone even remember what the score was?" I asked.

"Does it matter?" said Joey Mitchell.

"Guess not," I said.

We played another inning and called "halftime". Now baseball isn't a game that usually has a halftime the way basketball and football do, but it was lunch time and after a quick break, we didn't want to have to make new sides or get a fresh game going. That could take all afternoon by itself. So we'd just play a second half, a second half that would last all afternoon if we were lucky. We were gathering our gloves and bats when a man with a camera and a suitcase of camera equipment walked over to us.

"Is this the, wait, I've got it written down here somewhere. Is this the Labor Day Weekend World Series of West Holyoke?" the man asked us. "What a goofy name for a game," he added. It was Zipper Zwick, the photographer of the town newspaper. "Is that what this is?"

"Nope," said Joey Mitchell.

"This is just a pick-up game without a name," I said.

"Well, would you kids mind if I took some pictures of you? My editor sent me down here to get some shots of what kids are doing on the last weekend of summer. What do you say?"

"Why not?" Timmy Mitchell answered for all of us.

A photograph of us ran on the Holyoke newspaper's front page, the Labor Day edition. It looked like one of those little league team photos that you see on a wall in the barbershop or on the counter of the local diner. Just like one of those team photos except none of us had uniforms, and there were no coaches, and one of the players was only four and a half, and two of the players were girls. Biggie Bob and Tank Arbuster stood on either side of the bench like bookends, mammoth bookends. Duane Bennett wore his UFOs Are Everywhere tee shirt. Timmy Mitchell was on his brother Joey's shoulders. Crazy Arm Dunn tossed a battered baseball in the air. Mike "the Microphone" Milkiewicz had his arms around Ricky and Jose Cuevas. Muriel White held her dad's pancake glove in one hand and her jump rope in the other. The Skipper wore his hat backwards, something that wasn't fashionable yet in 1967. The Nutmeg Circle gang knelt down in front and crossed the baseball bats. My brother Pat held my hand.

And every single one of us eighteen kids in the photograph was smiling. Big smiles.