

Chapter 8

Not An Impossible Dream

Carl Yastrzemski was the son of a Polish potato farmer. A terrific baseball player in high school and the minor leagues, Yaz struggled in his first year with the Boston Red Sox. That was during the 1960 season. Yaz had inherited left field from the retired Ted Williams, the greatest hitter in the history of the game. By July, Yaz was hitting only .230. He wasn't the next greatest hitter in the game. In fact, he was playing like he was one of the worst hitters on the team. The fans were booing him and he began to think that he couldn't make it in the big leagues. Then one day he said to himself, "I'm not Ted Williams. I am me. I've got to start playing the way I can." Carl Yastrzemski began to play the way he could. He hit over .300 for the second half of the year. He led the league in doubles three times in his next six seasons.

Sunday afternoon I decided that I was no Ted Williams and that I had to start playing the way I could, too. If I didn't, Mr. Mitchell wouldn't have to cut me; I would cut myself.

The first compliment I got from Mr. Mitchell wasn't much. Batting practice featured the hitter dropping down two bunts and taking seven swings. Mr. Mitchell never gave a player an extra swing so you had to make the most of the ones you got. The hitter ran out the seventh swing if the ball was put into play. I placed a perfect bunt between the pitcher and the third baseman on my first chance and another beauty just inside the first baseline on my second. "At least she can bunt," Mr. Mitchell said to Mr. Reynolds, who was hitting fly balls to the outfielders. I didn't let it go to my head. The first six of my seven swings were not anything special but I did hit all six balls in fair territory. Mr. Mitchell threw batting practice and after I bounced a one hopper to shortstop, he increased his velocity on the next pitch. That one I sent towards second base. I only reached the outfield, barely, with two of those swings. On the last offering, Mr. Mitchell fired the ball as fast as Joey did when he no-hit Mr. and Mrs. Woo's Dry Cleaners the year before. The pitch came inside on my hands but I swung anyways, lining it just past the third base bag and into left field. Rounding first base and seeing the left fielder Bobby Harty struggling to field it, I took off for second base. I was the fastest girl in JFK Elementary School and I probably didn't have to slide into second to make it safely, but I did slide. Bobby's throw was weak and offline and Speed Miller didn't get out of my way, so my slide sent him tumbling into the dirt behind second base. As I dusted myself off, Mr. Mitchell looked at me with his head cocked to the side and a thin smile forming.

Pat had a better day, too. Stepping his front foot into each pitch, Pat clubbed the ball like he was Tony Conigliaro. He made a couple of nice catches in right field and Mr. Reynolds, who was often as quiet as a silent movie actor, said, "Way to go, Romanowski!"

The Gas already had two pitchers, Joey Mitchell and Cody "Catfish" Reynolds, Coach Reynolds' son. A Mighty Midget League team could get by with two pitchers, especially when they were as good as Joey and Catfish, but most teams had a third for "mop-up" duty. Towards the end of practice, Mr. Mitchell ran an audition for the mop-up job. After watching Tank Arbuster plunk Mike the Microphone in his rear twice and Ray Flanagan hit the top of the

backstop, Joey Mitchell nudged me and said, “Even you can do better than this, Romanowski. What do you say?”

“I don’t think so, Mitchell. I’ve had a pretty good day so far. I haven’t cried yet and I knocked Wally Miller on his butt. I should probably quit while I’m ahead.”

“Hey, Coach Mitchell,” Joey called to his dad. “Why not let Eileen try it?”

“All men are created equal, Joseph,” Mr. Mitchell said. “So she gets a chance, just like everybody else, but she better not throw like a girl.”

The role of the batter was to be like a mannequin, stand up at the plate, look good and don’t move. My brother, Pat, grabbed a bat, confidently stepped into the batter’s box, and waited for me to throw my first pitch. Pat concentrated on holding his ground, on not stepping into the bucket. At that moment, I knew that Pat could make this team.

“Start with some straight stuff,” Mr. Mitchell said. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

I stood on the mound and blessed myself. It was a ritual that was more superstition than religion, and it always relaxed me. I took two deep breaths and whispered, “Let’s do this.”

“Did you say something?” Mr. Mitchell asked. My first pitch came in at medium speed, on the outside corner at the knees. “Not a lot of movement, but good location,” Mr. Mitchell commented. My next pitch found the same spot. The third and fourth pitches nipped the inside corner of the plate. I was throwing it “on the black” and avoiding the middle of the plate. “Can you throw a fastball?” Mr. Mitchell asked. I didn’t reply; those were my fastest fastballs. “How about a curve or a change up?” he added. I told the catcher, Jeff Baker, that the curve was coming, gripped the baseball along the laces, and snapped off an overhand curveball. The ball started like it was going to take off Pat’s head and then bent down and away, landing in Baker’s mitt. My next one started for the catcher’s glove and then broke quickly, sliding over the outside edge of the home plate.

“That’s the one she struck out you with, Speed,” said Tank Arbuster.

“It won’t happen again,” Speed answered. “Never again.”

My final pitch was a changeup. I buried the baseball deep into my palm and used the same delivery, the same push I used on my “slowish” fastball. Even though he wasn’t allowed to swing at any of these pitches, Pat lunged forward, totally fooled. Joey and Tank cheered like I just struck out Carl Yastrzemski.

“Well, you sure don’t throw like a girl,” Mr. Mitchell said in a voice only I could hear. “You showed me something today.”

The Mighty Midget League was founded in 1952 and more than a thousand boys had played baseball in it during its fifteen years. I could be the first girl. It wasn’t an impossible dream.