

## *The Dead End Kids*

When Little Nick graduated from the Pony League to play “county ball” the following year, his dad could not coach Nick because the ten-and-under travel “county” team already had two coaches. Unable to coach him, Nick’s Dad volunteered to coach anywhere the Boys Club might need him. The men who ran the Boys Club said there was a vacant coaching position in the “Intramural League.” This was the older Boys Club baseball league in “The Heights” for boys between the ages of 12 and 15. Nick’s dad accepted the offer to coach the team that had no coach. This team was called the Senators, after the hometown major league Washington Senators.

Although Nick did not play on his dad’s new team, he went with his dad to the club’s first practice. That first evening, in the Spring of 1963, Nick and his dad learned why these particular “Senators” did not have a coach. The dozen boys on the team, with one exception—Billy B., were so rowdy, ill-mannered, foul-mouthed and sarcastic that no one wanted, or dared, to coach them. Nick’s Dad immediately dubbed them “The Dead End Kids” after a similar group of teenagers from the ghetto of New York City who lived during the Great Depression and somehow managed to wind up making movies of their irreverent and often times misguided though comical antics in Hollywood, California.

That first practice, Nick watched as his dad gathered the boys into the bench of the Junior High School field, which most of them attended, to see what kind of a hand he had been dealt. It did not take him long to find out. As he introduced himself and Nick to the boys and explained his previous coaching history, the boys (except for Billy B.) talked, joked or tussled playfully, and not so playfully, with each other, generally ignoring Nick’s Dad. He had a team roster, so he called out the boys’ names, asking what position each boy played. Seeing that he was getting no where

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with this group of recalcitrant dead beats, Nick's dad told the team to take their positions in the field for defensive (fielding) practice.

He hit fungoes (flies) to the outfielders and grounders to the infielders and "dropped" a couple of bunts to the catcher, finishing with a foul pop up to the catcher. Nick could tell that his dad's skill in hitting the fungoes; especially, the final foul pop-up he hit to the catcher, impressed the boys. Foul pops are difficult to hit. Some coaches did not even attempt them for fear of being unable to execute the hit and looking bad. If you don't think so, try hitting one yourself and see.

Next, Nick's dad pitched batting practice to the boys. It was evident to Nick, and if it was evident to him, it must have been evident to his dad, that these boys showed some promise. There were some talented ballplayers on this team. Some were probably good enough to play at the higher county league level. Their problem wasn't a lack of talent; it was a lack of discipline. That is why no other adult wanted to coach them.

The boys dressed in the "uniform" worn by tough kids of that day and place, mimicking the dress of typical blue-collared construction workers, which was the occupation of most of their male family members, if any, they had. They wore T-Shirts or sleeveless undershirts, and unbuttoned, plain, collared, square-hemmed, short-sleeved, light-colored shirts, loose—untucked, over Mac (MacGregor) work pants. These slacks were baggy-legged, cuffed pants with broad belt loops that came in colors of grey, green, tan or navy blue. Most of the boys removed their opened, loose-flowing shirts to bat, showing off their developing adolescent muscles and sprouting underarm hair.

Of course, some of the older showed signs of acne—pimples—and some, burgeoning wisps of peach fuzz over their upper lips or the sides of their cheeks. Several carried a pack of cigarettes rolled up in their shirt sleeve or stuffed in their pants pocket. A few of the kids including Mick and Paul M. didn't even wear baseball caps. Though most of them wore the blue caps with the red bills that were the standard for the Boys Club. They wore brush cuts or greased back, straight hair

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styles with “duck tails” reminiscent of Elvis Presley and other American Rock and Rollers of the day. A few wore a medallion around their neck of St. Christopher or the cross. They were a motley-looking, coarse-speaking bunch of teens and what’s more, they knew that and were proud of it.

After batting practice, Nick’s Dad advised them when and where their next practice would be. He asked the pitchers and catchers to stay for a few minutes to see what he had in the way of a battery. Four kids remained behind, but several others waited around for their “buddies.” Of the four, three claimed to be pitchers, while the third was the only kid willing to catch. Nick’s dad asked the pitchers to warm up and toss a few off the mound. Two showed accuracy and decent velocity. The better of the two was called Kenny F. and the other was Paul M. who had taken up position earlier during defensive drills at shortstop.

But it was the highly active and vocal, lone catcher Mickey M., who caught Nick’s eye. Mick was a brash, red-headed, heavily freckled kid of Irish heritage. His eyes were blue and his red eyelashes were long and thick. One of the older boys, Mick was long in the waist and short in the legs, but well-muscled, as was evident from his sleeveless undershirt. He wore his hair in a long-brush cut, combing his thick red, almost red-orange hair straight up, with ducktails behind his head. A Saint Christopher medal hung on a chain about his neck, bouncing against his undershirt. The kid had a certain swagger and upbeat confident air about him that the others seemed to respect. When Nick’s dad let them go for the evening, the others who had been waiting around for the pitching session to finish, gathered around and fell in behind the catcher as they walked off, smoking their cigarettes, talking profanely and generally horsing around, with Mick cuffing one or two of the boys playfully.

As Nick helped his Dad and Billy B. gather up the equipment and stuff it in a canvas duffle bag, a man who had been standing quietly in the background pitched in to help. He introduced himself as Billy’s dad and offered to help coach the team. He said Billy was a quiet boy and was kind of new to baseball. The man said he didn’t have much of a baseball background either but he would be willing to help in any

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way he could. He explained that Billy's mom had recently passed away and he hoped that working with the team and Billy would help them to recover from their loss and bind them more closely together. Nick's dad shook his hand and said he would be glad to have his help. He introduced the man—Mr. B.—to Nick.

Mr. B. acknowledged the team appeared to be a "pretty rough group." Nick's dad agreed, calling them "The Dead End Kids." Chuckling, Mr. B. concurred, because he knew of those celebrated cut-ups who had risen from the lowly Bowery tenements of New York to Hollywood stardom. He suggested, as coaches, they might have a tough task on their hands this summer with these rough adolescents. Nick's dad agreed but said he understood them though, as he used to be just like them when he was growing up. But the Marine Corps had straightened him out, making a man out of him. He said he had a plan to handle these boys, something similar to what he had learned during his days as a Marine in the War. Mr. B. asked him what his plan was. Nick's Dad said he had to get the ringleader on their side and he had an idea how to do that.

Because Nick's county league team usually practiced and played on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, he was able to tag along with his dad to the Senators practices and games, which were usually on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

At the next practice, a few evenings later, Nick's Dad called the boys into sit on the bench. Most stood. As before, they joked around, making snide remarks while Nick's Dad was talking. Suddenly, Nick's dad got angry. His black eyes flashed, his face reddened and his expressive, bushy dark eyebrows took on a hardened straight line. He pointed his finger at the boys and said.

"Let's get something straight right now. I took this job of coaching you because no one else would. I am the manager of this ball club. If you want to play ball, you'll follow my direction. If you don't, then that's fine, I've got plenty other things I could be doing. And you won't have a team. But if you want to play baseball, you'll have to do as I say, because we can only have one manager and that's me.

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“Now, I’m not going to constantly be battling you to do what you should be doing. I’m not here for that. I’m here to coach and teach baseball. So, what I’m going to do is assign a team captain to keep you in line. You got that?”

The boys were listening now. They were serious. They looked at each other to see who might volunteer to be team captain. When no one spoke up, Nick’s dad said, “Mickey M., you’re the captain of this club. It’s up to you to keep the team in line.”

Mickey said, “Aw, I don’ wanna be no team captain. You got the wrong guy.”

“What’s the matter,” said Nick’s Dad, “you can’t handle these guys? You can’t keep them in line? Is that it?” The other boys looked back at Mickey.

Mick bristled. “Who says I can’t?”

“Well, you do, if you won’t be the captain.”

One of Mick’s buddies, a muscular, tough kid wearing black frame glasses named Carl said, “Yeah, what’s the matter Mick, you can’t handle us?” Another tall lanky lefty, name of Danny J., standing beside Mickey smirked. Mick slugged him in the chest with the back of his hand. The smirk vanished. He turned to Nick’s Dad and said, “Yeah, I can do it. I’ll be the captain.”

Nick’s dad said, “Great. Then it’s your responsibility to keep these guys in line, not mine. And I expect you to do it.” Grim-faced, Mick nodded. But one of the guys laughed, saying “That’s like puttin’ the fox in charge of the chicken coop.” When the others cackled, Mick stood up to say.

“I’m capt’n. Now, what I say, goes.”

One kid guffawed. Mick took a swipe at him knocking his ball cap to the ground. He said, “That goes for you, too, Lester. You don’t like it, we can settle it any time you want.” As Mick glared, Lester stooped over to pick up his cap, saying “Damn Mick, I’s only kiddin’. You don’t gotta take it so big.”

Nick’s dad turned to little Billy’s dad Mr. B and winked. He said, “All right, now that we got that settled. Mr. B here is going to be helping us out. And I expect you to show him the same respect you do me and Mick as your captain. You got that?”

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When there was no or little response, Mick said, “Yeah, we got that Mr. S.” Then he turned to the other boys, saying “Right?” There were some nods and “yeahs.” Then Mick turned to Lester.

“What about you Lester. I din’t hear nothin’ come outta your mouth.”

All eyes turned to Lester, who realizing he had become the center of attention, looked around and said, “Yeah-sure. Whaddaya pickin’ on me for Mick?”

Mickey said, “Cuz you didn’t speak up when the coach asked ya a question. From now on, you answer the Coach if he asks ya somethin’. And the rest of you guys, too. Ya’ll got that.” The boys shook their heads and answered in the affirmative.

Under the leadership of the coaches and their captain Mick, the ball club fell into shape. Mick demonstrated his leadership in positive ways both on and off the field. One curious incident is typical and worthy of note.

Billy B. was not only the youngest team member, but he was also the runt of the team, skinny, small and shy, and he really wasn’t much of a baseball player, though he tried very hard. A lefty, Billy played right field for a couple innings late in the game. Whenever he batted, he struck out. The bats were too big for him and he could barely heft the lightest one the team had, but he always helped out gathering and storing equipment and chasing foul balls. During one of the first games, some of his teammates ragged on Billy when he got his ups.

After the game, Nick’s dad lectured the boys on what it meant to be a team. He said, “No team is stronger than its weakest link and it was up to each link to make the other stronger.” He didn’t mention Billy by name, but Mick got the point and after that, Mick made sure no one ragged on Little Billy. In fact, he kind of adopted Billy like a kid brother and Billy became like a team mascot. Guys would rub his head for good luck and Billy would smile wide, glad to be accepted and have a special role as part of the team. And when Billy struck out as he so often did, Mick and the other guys would pat Billy’s back and tell him, “You’ll get ‘em next time, Billy.” And once, when Billy actually hit a swinging bunt, even though he was thrown out at first base, his teammates howled and congratulated him as if he had hit a homer.

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Early in the season, it was clear Mick's club the Senators were the class of the league. The league commissioner, who coached his own club—the Yankees— whom he had picked to win the league, was sorely displeased. He and some of the other coaches felt the Senators had too great a share of the league's talent and demanded a modified draft to spread the talent more evenly across all teams. Nick's dad agreed and the lottery was held. After the new draft, to the surprise of all, the Senators—Mick, Kenny F., Paul M., Danny J., Carl and little Billy—remained virtually intact. All but one of the key players remained with the club. It was a minor miracle, almost as if the team roster had been pre-ordained.

As the season played out, the pitching and defense of Kenny F. and Paul M. and Mick, who threw out any opposing runner bold enough to try to steal a base and whose timely hitting from clean-up spot in the middle of the line-up, propelled the Senators to win the league championship. One particularly close game stood out.

It was near the end of the season and the Senators held a slim lead in the standings over the league commissioner's team—the Yankees. Contrary to the rules, the league commissioner brought a southpaw pitcher down from the Boy's Club's county league (read - the majors) team to pitch for his intramural (read - the minors) club the Yankees against the Senators. It was a tough, low-scoring pitcher's duel, won by the Senators in the bottom half of the last inning on a clutch, two-run homer by Mick to end the game 2-1 in favor of the Senators.

In early December, at the end of that year, the Boys Club held its annual awards banquet in the Knights of Columbus hall. Mick and his teammates sat around the table, dressed in suits and ties, clothes Nick didn't even know they had and may have been acquired specifically for the banquet. They had come to collect their first place championship trophies for winning the Boys Club's Baseball Intramural League. When Nick's Dad announced to the packed hall, filled with boys who had participated in all of the club's various sports activities over the year, that Mick was the Senators Most Valuable Player (MVP), Mick was shocked. His jaw dropped. Mick could scarcely believe his good fortune because most of the winning pitching

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had been thrown by Kenny F. But Mick, as team captain, spark plug, catcher, and clutch hitter extraordinaire deserved the trophy. No one, not even Kenny F., begrudged Mick the award, because all knew who led them to be champions.

It was a memorable, misty-eyed moment when the tough Mick from the Heights accepted the MVP trophy in his newly acquired double-breasted, pin-striped suit. He returned to the banquet table with trophy in hand, amid much back-slapping and hearty congratulations from his teammates—his boys from the Heights—whom he had helped tame and take from a team nobody wanted to coach to be the best club in the league.

Moral of the story: Don't judge a book by its cover.

If you give people respect and let them know you have faith in them, you can bring out their best to the wonder and surprise of all, even themselves. Each of us has both good and bad in us, we need to help each other bring out the good and sublimate the bad.

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