

~ The Big Game ~

“BALL! Take your base.”

The blue-clad plate umpire calmly clicked his ball/strike counter, clearing the count. The Old South batter dropped his lumber and swaggered off towards first base. Oh yeah, as if he were Reggie Jackson or somebody. Shoot! The cocky kid pushed two teammates ahead of him to load the bases here in the top of the ninth. The game was all knotted up at three apiece. The State Class A schoolboy championship was on the line. I glanced across the diamond. My counterpart old Floyd Favors, manning in the opposite dugout back of first, sneered at me as if he were Davey Crockett grinnin’ down a b’ar. Floyd had me by the short hairs. And he knew it.

Floyd knew I was out of arms. His club sensed the kill. His exuberant teens circled about their dugout, clapping heatedly, yelping and whooping it up. Floyd’s undefeated Old South was about to capture their fourth state title in six years and second in a row. Their clean-up hitter strode from the on-deck circle towards the batter’s box. His biceps bulged beneath his short wool uniform sleeves. The kid squeezed that big stick in his hands, looking like the grim reaper toting a scythe.

Our catcher Cary Geller tossed the baseball back to ‘Zak. Our round-shouldered, ace right-hander stood upon the mound like a beached hulk, disgusted with his bases-loaded, no out jam. The game had been tied at the end of the regulation seven. Thus far, the score had yet to change in extra innings. But here in the ninth, Old South had gotten to ‘Zak, my third pitcher of the game. The kid couldn’t throw a strike now to save his life. His arm was hanging by a thread. Like the rest of my meager staff, ‘Zak was plum worn out. It was nobody’s fault. Shoot! You could blame it on the weather as much as anything. I’d worked with only four arms all year, real pitchers that is. We had two pretty good senior starters in ‘Zak and Lanier, a capable senior reliever in Amoré and an often wild middle reliever in Russell Marks. But after all rain-out make-up games had bunched the end of the season and the state play-offs into a week, I had no rested arms left.

‘Zak was gassed. He knew it. I knew it. So did everyone else in the tiny university stadium, including Floyd and his primping club salivating for the kill over in the first base dugout. Really Zak was gassed before I had put him out there in the seventh. They all were. My bespectacled, pimple-faced, ace right hander couldn’t throw a strike now underhanded. Yeah my entire staff was shot. The two extra play-off games we’d played to break the county’s three-way, first place logjam just to get us into the state tourney hadn’t helped either. Never did have much luck with coin tosses, except for today. We’d won one and chose to bat last. The powers-that-be had forced us to scrunch five games into seven days just to make it here to the big game. With virtually no rest for my dangerously thin bullpen, we’d screwed the pooch just to get this far. My Pocomoke Warriors were staring defeat in the face in the first ever state championship of any kind for the three-year old school. The question now was who could I throw?

‘Zak had pitched his heart out for me down the stretch. Shoot! They all had, Amore and Kenny, too, even Russell Marks, who had thrown his arm out just the other day in the playoff against Northern. Each of my three healthy arms had pitched three innings for me already today. Only ‘Zak couldn’t make it through this last one. If I still had some eligibility left, maybe I could get us out of this extra-inning jam, but I had used up my schoolboy time ten years ago. On the mound now, a slumping ‘Zak stood, listing to his right with his back to me, as if the weight of a dead arm pulled him in that direction. He knew that he was finished. His countenance looked like that of a man about to face the guillotine. The kid had nothing to be ashamed of. ‘Zak had already won three games for us this week. He had given me everything he had all year. This last outing was no exception and I wasn’t about to ask for more. After all that he’d given me this season, I couldn’t bear to leave the kid helpless out there now to be embarrassed with an inevitable licking; even though, with the sacks full, he stood to be the loser whether I pulled him now or not. The question was: *Who* would I throw in his place?

“Play ball,” directed Red, the home plate umpire.

“TIME!” I called, holding up a hand with one foot out of the dugout.

“TIME” cried Red, holding up his right hand and removing his mask.

With the bases full and nobody out, I was hurting for an arm to stop the bleeding. I stepped out of the third base dugout and onto the grassy field, emerald green from all the recent, heavy rains. Red maneuvered out in front of the plate. He mooned my fielders as he bent over to dust off the dish with his handy whisk broom. I glanced about the little university stadium. Maybe there was some help up in the stands, somebody among the 2,500 standing room only who could suit up at the last minute? Hey! Wouldn't that be nice?

The shirt-sleeved, capacity crowd on this balmy day in early June offered up no takers. They waited for my decision. With each school located no more than a half hour by car from the state university campus, both high schools were well represented. As the first state championship game of any kind for Pocomoke High, I guessed Warrior fans probably comprised over fifty per cent of the crowd. Old South supporters had been here many times before. The game was more like an annual pilgrimage for them. With my head bowed somberly, I crossed over the third base line, careful not to step on the lime, and wondered who should get the ball with the bases full and nobody out in the top of the ninth of a championship contest. My junior catcher Cary Geller met me at the mound. I stepped up behind my pitcher, standing on the first base side of the hill with his back to me.

“Zak. Ya did fine son. This ain't your fault. Might as well blame the rain that backed us up into this jam.”

I glanced at Cary, our solid, pug-nosed, six-foot bulldog of a receiver standing next to me. He nodded as he slid his catcher's mask upward, perching it atop his head. His hand, snug in his mitt, rested against his thigh. 'Zak turned around to stare at me as if I were a ghost. 'Zak was a senior. This was it for him. I held out my left palm. My bespectacled, boyish-looking senior ace gazed blankly at me from under a shock of black bangs, which squirted out from beneath the bill of his cap. He brooked no dispute, relinquishing the ball to me without even so much as a lingering glance my way. He plopped the pill down gently in my palm. Then, with a deep sigh of resignation, a slumping 'Zak stalked past me down off the hill like a condemned man heading for the guillotine. I patted him sharply on the rump as he passed me. His spent right arm seemingly hung down a foot below his left, causing him to list rightward as he strode toward the dugout. The standing-room-only crowd at Shipley Field gave him a polite round of applause.

Again, I glanced toward Cary who nodded, indicating that I had done the right thing. He spit onto the mound to seal his approval. Yet, I still had not answered my question. *Who* could I throw now?

There was no use looking to my bench for help. All three of my healthy hurlers had pitched today. Shoot! They'd pitched their butts off all week just to get us here. But now the bullpen in foul territory down the left field line was eerily empty. Could have used a rainout today, I thought wistfully. But the bright blue, high June skies and the sun-drenched stadium offered no relief. Painfully aware there were no rested arms on my bench, I glanced around the infield in search of help.

At third, Johnny Allein met my stare with a scowl and spat into the infield dirt, defying me to call upon him. An All-Region quarterback as a junior, Johnny had the arm but lacked the will or desire to pitch. He never wanted to chance looking bad by having an opponent take him deep. I had learned that lesson the hard way. At short, with his hands on his knees, the bandy-legged junior Hank Roulette refused my stare as well. He rose up and turned toward center, as if suddenly there was something exciting beyond the outfield fence. Behind Hank out in left, junior left fielder Fizzy Fitzsimmons stood arms akimbo; his wrists turned

inward pinching his sides as he faced towards center, blowing one of his ever present huge Double-Bubbles. When he sensed me looking his way, Fizzy immediately popped his bubble gum, turned his back to me and looked over the left field fence towards our national flag fluttering in the distance. Evidently, the kid was gazing at the same invisible phenomenon beyond the fence, which just as suddenly had caught Hank's eye a moment ago. I knew Fizzy had pitched some for the local Boy's Club team, but he never had pitched for me. Said he never wanted to for the same reasons as Johnny Allein. The kid had made that clear.

Over at second, sophomore Jerry Justice stood calmly. Staring down, Jerry slowly swiped the infield dirt in front of him with his spikes, using his big toe as if it were a giant windshield wiper, leaving spike marks in a smooth arc across the infield dirt. He never looked up. Why should he? Jerry was just a sophomore with no worries except for how soon he could get his driver's license. I never had asked him to pitch and I was not about to ask him now.

At first, the left-handed Stump, so called for his thick breadth and short stature was an unusual choice for a first sacker, but his ability and desire more than made up for his lack of height. Stump was our senior leader. I had selected him as team captain and for good reason. The kid had a great team attitude and his big left-handed bat in the heart of our line-up was one of the chief reasons we were in this state championship game. Despite his short stature, the blue-eyed, curly dark-haired Stump could climb the ladder above first incredibly well to snag high throws or do the splits to pick up errant low tosses to nail a runner. Stump played the first-third situation better than any schoolboy first baseman I had seen and he swung that big bat, too. Surely, without his clutch hitting, we would not be here now. An All-County, two-way guard on our league-winning football team, the Stumper had proved he had a heart as big as the gridiron. Stump stood in defensive position now a few yards off first base, hand and glove, on his knees. He spit between his teeth into the dirt. He looked up, briefly holding my stare before he gazed down at the infield grass again. I knew if I asked him, Stump would take this ball out of my hand. I knew he'd give me everything he had. And while he was a clutch hitter with a huge heart, his pitching experience was limited to infrequent batting practice tosses. He had never assumed the rubber during a game. Knew nothing of pitching etiquette. Besides, Old South had nothing but right handed hitters due up in the four-five-six positions.

I squinted through my eyeglasses beyond Stump and Jerry to check right field. Senior, three-sport letterman Matt Yikes stood tugging at the rawhide laces on his glove. Yikes had lost his starting QB role on the football team last fall to Allein and he had lost his starting catching spot to junior Geller this spring. Yikes's senior year had not mapped out as he had planned. His gruff disposition reflected his discontent in the dugout. His poor attitude early on had infected some of his teammates before I put a stop to it and put our season back on track. Yes, the red-headed, be-freckled Yikes was a scoring machine on a terrible varsity basketball team. As a two-guard, he'd averaged twenty points a game, good enough to get him a scholarship to Commonwealth U down in Richmond. Yep, basketball was his game, not baseball. He was lucky I kept him in the line-up. Without finding an answer to my question, I turned reluctantly back to Cary.

"Well, whaddaya think Catch?"

Cary shook his head. He spit onto the mound to his right, away from me. Then he looked straight out to center, the one position I had avoided intentionally.

"Dunno Coach. But the only guy who's been starin' in at us the whole time is out in center."

I knew whom Cary meant. I had purposefully avoided looking out to center. Though I had felt the little centerfielder's eyes following me like a hawk the entire time.

"Little Nick's the craziest bastard I ever knew Coach and I've known him since kindergarten." Carey half chuckled. "Shoot! He probably thinks he can come in here and strike out the side."

“Yeah, I just bet he does, too. Well, that’s half the battle, now ain’t it? Wantin’ to?”

“Sure Coach, I guess it is.” Cary shrugged half-heartedly, but the junior’s smile faded as quickly as it had appeared. He understood the pickle we were in.

But that’s exactly what I need right now, someone with a little confidence. The little guy may not have much of an arm, but he has plenty of pluck. And he knows how to handle himself on the mound. With the bases full, I needed that as much as a rested arm. I’d thrown him in mop-up roles a couple games this year.

Red approached the mound. “What’s it gonna be Charlie? *You* gonna warm up?” He chuckled. Red knew I had pitched here at the university not too many years ago. His humorous remark sprung a weak smile across my lips. Sliding around Geller, with his back to first, Red gave me a minute to consider my options.

“Well, shoot Red. I used up all my arms in them extra play-offs and rain make-ups and here we are in extra innings. Now, just what am I supposed to do? What would you do Red?”

Red stepped further up on the mound, assuming ‘Zak’s vacated spot to form a triangle now on the hill with Cary and me.

“Hey Charlie, That ain’t in my purview. It’s your club. You know your kids better’n me. I jes’ call ‘em as I see ‘em.”

“And you’re doin’ a dang fine job of that, too, Red.”

In mild disgust, Geller spit down at the rubber directly between us. Evidently, he didn’t agree with my assessment. But it never hurt to grease an umpire a bit when you got the chance.

“Glad you like my work Charlie. But flattery will get you nowhere. Why, that and four bits will buy me a beer. So let’s go. Or I’ll hefta award this batter first base. And that’ll be the old ball game, as they say.”

“Aw Red, you wouldn’t stoop so low as to forfeit me, forfeit these kids who’ve worked so hard to get here to the big game?”

“Old South worked hard too, Charlie. And they’re ready to play ball. So let’s get your pitcher in here.”

“Hey Red! What’s the hold up? Let’s go now.”

We turned towards Floyd Favors, Old South’s manager, who echoed Red’s sentiments from out in front of his first base dugout. “Let’s play ball and don’t let Charlie talk you into letting him pitch any. He used up his eligibility a long time ago.” A brief chuckle ensued at my expense. Everybody’s a comedian I thought. With the same joke, no less. I shook my head.

Red: “All right. Come on Charlie, you heard the man. Quit stallin’.”

“Stallin’? I got nobody to stall for, Red. Do ya see anybody warming up in my bullpen?” I pointed down the left field line at my empty pen for emphasis.

“Hey, Charlie, make a decision.” Red tilted his pleading, stone face to one side. Clearly, he wasn’t buying my poor mouth act. I turned to Carey for support but he returned only a blank stare.

“OK, Red, OK. But don’t give up on this next kid’s pitch, OK? That’s all I ask. His ball ain’t got much heat on it. Tends to drop off a might. So jes’ don’t anticipate it ‘til it’s in the glove. That’s all I’m askin.” Cary chortled into his mitt. *Yeah, his pitch drops at the end because it gets overcome by gravity.* I turned to center and patted my right forearm for Little Nick.

The little guy jumped up, starting to sprint in to the mound. Just as suddenly, he stopped, catching himself in mid-stride. The kid settled down into a dignified, slow trot, as if he suddenly realized it wasn’t cool to tip his eager excitement. By the time he reached the infield dirt behind second base, Nick had slowed down into a saucy but purposeful stride, rising up jauntily on the balls of his feet with each step. All eyes were on him. And the little ham knew it. He took his glove off his left hand, carrying the mitt in his right, using his left hand to tug dramatically at his navy blue inner sleeve above his right elbow. Cary laughed at Little Nick’s antics. Red left the mound to return to the plate.

“I bet Nick saw some big league pitcher do that.” Cary chuckled; referring to the way Little Nick uncharacteristically carried his mitt in his throwing hand and tugged down on his sleeve. I shot my catcher a no-nonsense look. He throttled down his chortling to assume my sober mood. I didn’t have to remind him the state championship was on the line. And I wanted Little Nick to understand that fact, too. He could be a little flakey. Even though our chances were slim and none, we still had half a chance. If you called the pint-sized, seldom-pitched right-hander much of a chance at all.

Little Nick Sheeboom, with all these hot shot athletes—big varsity football and basketball players, all these lettermen— and I’m gonna pin our state championship hopes on this over-sized, letterless, midget Nicky Sheeboom? Shoot! He’s a Rock’N’ Roller, not a pitcher. I hadn’t thought he was much of a ball player. Almost cut him after try-outs. He’d sprained his right thumb wrestling, so I gave him a chance. Glad now I did. The little guy sure proved me wrong. He’s had a heck of a year for us on both offense and defense. Yep, glad I kept him. He’s made a difference.

Li’l Nick Sheeboom. He was our wild card all right, a real maverick. Leader of a local teenage Rock’N’Roll band, Li’l Nick considered himself to be the next Jackie Wilson. The next “Mr. Excitement.” His band had garnered some success, achieving local radio air time for a jingle he’d written and performed to pump a local area car dealership. The flip-side of the jingle contained a catchy tune, a Little Nick original the local deejays felt had merit. The station had played it. The darn tune had broken the metro area top ten for a couple weeks last winter. I even caught myself humming it once or twice. If Nick had been confident before his musical success, he had become nothing short of cocky after it. For sure, there was one thing about Little Nick Sheeboom. What he lacked in stature, he more than made up for in confidence.

Little Nick walked up to the mound, rising up on the balls of his feet with each step. Like a cock of the walk banty rooster. I motioned towards the bench for Steinmetz to replace Nick in center. I called to our scorekeeper Allena to report the change to the plate umpire and the Old South bench. I yelled that Steinmetz would hit in the pitcher’s place in the line-up, which meant he’d be on deck in our half of the frame, if we could ever get to it. As Nick approached the mound, he reached for the ball. But I held it back. I motioned Cary in closer to keep from raising my voice. I turned to Nick, placing my left arm with the ball in my left hand over Nick’s right—pitching s—shoulder, out of his view to give him my instructions. Steinmetz jogged by us headed towards the vacant spot in center.

“OK, Nick. You’ve done this before, right?” He nodded. “You can do it again. Throw STRIKES! Don’t OVER throw. No curve ball crap! Stick with your change-ups away and then throw the number one inside, when you get ’em off balance. Concentrate on Cary’s glove and your mechanics Nicky. Keep it DOWN! Forget about the hitter—Nicky?”

Nick's eyes had wandered to the concrete risers behind the first base dugout where the large Old South contingent was laughing and whooping it up. The little guy bobbed his head toward the fans in fun, playing to their jeers.

"Hey! Are you listening to me, Nicholas?"

"Sure Coach," replied the little guy cheerily. But he kept his focus on the crowd.

"Well, look at me when I'm talkin' to you, son."

Nick's smile evaporated. He turned his head to gaze amiably at me with those goofy, close-set, two-toned peepers of his. He looked me square in the eye, innocently giving me all his attention. Beside me, Geller shook with barely restrained convulsions, burying his face in his mitt. How many times had I seen those goofy lookin' eyes of Nick's disarming a female teacher after some Little Nick screw-up? The kid melted your heart. I could see why he was popular with the coeds. Nicky looked at me now like that, like a little kid listening to his Dad telling him how to ride a bike for the first time, totally sincere and vulnerable. But which eye was listenin', I wondered—the angelic, electric blue right eye or the demonic, black left one?

"OK Nick, that's better. Now Cary knows the hitters. He'll set up away from their strengths. Throw to his glove, all right? Don't try to throw off the hitter, for Pete's sake! This ain't battin' practice."

"We hope," blurted Cary, who started laughing. Nicky laughed too and playfully slapped at Cary's chest protector with the backside webbing of his glove. I didn't think Cary's remarks were so humorous. Standing between them, I squeezed the shoulders of my Mutt and Jeff battery to get their attention. They quieted right down, looking as before, like lambs before the slaughter.

"Listen up, now! You can do this, Nick, just like you did against F.D. and Central. That's why I picked you for this job."

Geller spit away at this last comment. I could read his thoughts. He hoped Little Nick was buyin' this line of bull, because he sure wasn't. F.D. and Central Highs were one thing, but their clubs were no match for these undefeated, reigning state champ Old South boys.

Nicky replied amiably, "It's OK, Coach, I can do it." The kid seemed not to have a care in the world.

"I know you can Nick. All right then, here." I handed him the ball. "You get eight warm-ups Big Fella. Use 'em wisely. I'm gonna stand right here and watch ya." I offered up the baseball.

The little guy took the ball, stepped behind the rubber and massaged the horsehide. I stepped down the shortstop's side of the mound. I nodded solemnly to Geller, who returned to his place behind the plate.

"What should I do, Coach? Full wind-up? Or from the stretch?"

"Whatever feels best for ya, Big Boy," I winked to show my confidence.

I observed Little Nick assume the stretch position on the home plate side of the rubber. He liked to imitate Luis Tiant's stretch motion, which was long and exaggerated, filled with herks and jerks. The object of the motion was to keep the hitter off balance while the pitcher prevented the base runner from getting a good jump to steal. With no outs, the bases full and Old South's clean-up hitter batting, there was no real threat of a risky steal of home. But El Tiante's theatrical pitching style suited this little natural ham of a performer to a "T." Besides, the drawn out, exaggerated motion was made to order for the little guy's change-up—his

*out* pitch. Hell. Truth be told, it was his *only* pitch. That's why I had permitted him to copy Tiant's motion. That and the fact that he had never committed a balk. The stretch was just one more way for Nick to dawdle and annoy the batter, making the hitter impatient and over anxious, which, let's face it, was our only hope of escaping this none-out, bases-loaded jam. I shuddered to think what would happen if the opposition just relaxed to treat the little guy's meager offerings like batting practice.

"Look, Nick. I know you like El Tiante but the sacks are loaded here. We can't afford any balks, so make sure of what you are doing, OK?"

"Coach?" I raised my chin and focused in on the little guy's eyes. "What arm do you want me to use?" His deadpan delivery didn't amuse me.

"The one with the strikes in it Nicholas," I replied, perturbed. Just because he was a switch hitter, Little Nick fancied himself as a switch pitcher, too. I shook my head. "Don't even joke about that now Nick. Get serious!"

Nicky grinned before taking his warm-ups. I watched his mechanics scrupulously, reminding him to bend his back and follow through straight to the glove.

"Don't leave that change-up up, out over the plate, Nick. The knees, Nicky, keep it at the knees and below." Nick nodded.

He threw five change-ups and three fastballs—well, that's what Nick called them, anyway. I doubt there was a mile per hour difference between all eight tosses, but he threw to the glove and kept them all low. The chief difference was in his grip and the corresponding ball movement. The fast ball gripped across the seams was basically straight. Any rise was imaginary. But the change-up he threw with the seams. It dropped down and in toward right-handed batters, when he was on. His change was doing just that. For the first time, I felt we just might get out of this mess. A double play ball would be ideal. I told him to throw it away at the knees, so it would break back over the corner.

All the weight-lifting and "long-throwing" the kid claimed to have done over the last year apparently had combined with his slight natural growth to increase his arm strength a great deal since his jayvee season last year. His arm from the outfield now actually was decent. However, blowing a fast ball past the cleanup hitter of what appeared about to be the next state 'A' championship team was something else. Little Nick's "fastball" was just fast enough for these guys to tee off on. Our only hope was to keep his change-ups down and away from the batter and pray the hitter would become overanxious. Otherwise, those Old South boys would eat Nick's so-called fastball up, using their bats as the spoon.

When Nicky had finished his warm-ups, Cary came back out to join us. Red was giving us a little leeway because this was *the* big game, after all. I had a final word for our last and only hurling hope.

"OK, Nick. There's no outs and the bases are loaded. Got a runner on second, so go with the third signal Carey puts down after the flap. OK?" They both nodded. "Actually, you should only be throwin' your change-up anyway. No need to signal Carey unless it's something different—Carey?" He looked up, nodded and spit again. "Third sign, Nick." Nick nodded.

"Now there's a force at any base. Home to first would be ideal, so keep it down. Throw some grounders." I turned to the infielders and instructed: "Middle: Double play depth! Corners: Look home to first!" My infielders nodded and assumed their positions. I turned back to my diminutive reliever.

“You, too, Nick, home to first.” Nick said “OK, Coach!” like it was a piece of cake. He turned confidently to the infield to repeat those instructions so all could hear him. He was letting them know he was in charge now. Jerry and Hank, at second and short, agreed on who would cover the bag on the ball hit back to the mound if Nick had to come that way. But I reminded Nick home to first was the play for him. Placing my left hand on Nick’s right shoulder and squeezing, I turned back to both Geller and Nick.

“OK, Numma One. Throw STRIKES and BE READY ta FIELD YOUR POSITON! Hell knows. That ball can come back at ya in a hurry. Trust me, I know—and NO BALKS! You can do it, Keed!”

I looked Nicky confidently in the eye then rapped him smartly with my left hand on his small, tight right buttock. I jogged ran off the field in synch with Geller, who returned to his position behind the plate.

“Keep him down, Cary, Keep him down,” I pleaded. Cary nodded, spitting as he reached the plate, pulled on his mask and slapped his mitt dutifully.

“Play ball!” The Old South batter stepped into the box.

The strapping right-hander, who batted fourth in Old South’s line-up, waved a cocky but menacing bat. I recalled the kid also played a mean two-way combo at middle linebacker and fullback in the fall.

Nick straddled the rubber with the ball behind his rump and checked the runners. Back in the dugout now, the rest of the club stepped up next to me along the front edge, cheering encouragement to Nick. Even ‘Zak, who by nature was not much of a cheerleader, joined in. He stood to lose the game if Nick failed to hold off Old South now. I took a deep breath and crossed my fingers. My heart was pounding.

Although Nick sure acted the role, Old South didn’t know he wasn’t really a pitcher. I wasn’t about to tell them. The little guy placed his right foot up against the rubber and bent over to look in for the sign—the waggle with any number of fingers for the change-up. Nick checked the runners again. Then he became El Tiante.

Nick brought his hands together, raising them high above his head and then, like his idol Luis Tiant, with hand and ball hidden in his glove, Nick lowered his hands together slowly by fits and starts. Tantalizingly, he brought the ball down almost to his belt. Then Nick pushed his hands back up to his chest and let both hands plop back down to his belt. Letting his shoulders slump, he checked the runners again, before he looked skyward, high-kicked and threw. The pitch floated through the air as if it were riding a puffy, white cloud. The ball wafted in belt high, but wide of the plate. The batter stepped forward straining, scarcely able to hold back from offering at that soft outside pitch.

Red whispered, “Ball One!” The hitter pivoted, placed his left foot back outside of the batter’s box and looked down third for the coach’s signal. I could see the kid salivating, already tasting a slammer. I could read his mind—*This little punk on the mound was just like BP. This is going to be a piece of cake.* Probably he could read tomorrow’s headlines, placing himself as the championship game-winning hero. The Old South dugout was going wild, hooting and hollering. They knew a soft touch when they saw one. Yet, Little Nick merely laughed at them as he received Geller’s return toss.

“Too high Nicky. Too high. Bring it down Keed,” I yelled. Cary motioned downward with his mitt.

Nicky removed his glove and rubbed up the pill with both hands, nodding to me as he walked over the hill. The little guy bent over to pick up the rosin bag in his throwing hand, bouncing the bag on the back of his wrist a couple times before letting it fall nonchalantly to earth. A puff of white smoke rose from the bag



when it stuck the back of the mound. No doubt, Nick had seen some Big Leaguer do as much on TV. I wanted to strangle him but only could offer vocal encouragement.

On Little Nick's next offering, the Old South runners danced off their respective bags and the scene repeated. But this time, just after Nick had imitated the great Tiant and come set, the little guy stepped back off the rubber to call for time. Red granted him time. Nick motioned for Cary to come out to the mound. Geller obliged. The batter stepped out of the box grinding the bat in his fists.

When Cary arrived on the hill, Nicky turned and walked beside him up to the rubber, their backs to the plate. Together they faced out towards center field with Nick doing all the talking. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but soon Nick waved Steinmetz a few steps toward right. Then he changed his mind and waved him back to his original position. Cary patted Nick on the rear and started to hustle back to his place behind the plate. But Nick stopped him and, with his eyebrows pursed and a dark look over his face, said something to Cary in a serious tone.

Cary hesitated, then nodded and trotted slowly back to his position, but halfway to home plate, again Nicky called to him. "Cary!" Again, Cary stopped and turned around. Nicky strolled down off the mound. Then, in a voice loud enough for me and the batter to hear, Nick asked, "D'ya think I should go out with Ry now? Ya know, now that Baby's gone?" The batter steamed. His face turned crimson. Even Red behind the plate had had enough of Nick's shenanigans.

"Play Ball Pitch! Or I'm awarding the batter ball two!"

Cary reset himself behind the plate to issue the signals. Nicky heeded the umpire's warning. He assumed the rubber to repeat his earlier El Tiant pitching sequence. Only this time, Nick threw slower and lower, at the hitter's knees and, more importantly, he threw for a strike over the outside corner.

The overanxious, right handed slugger tried to hold his hands and weight back long enough before unloading, but he just couldn't wait long enough. Lunging forward impatiently, Old South's potential, game-winning hero swung hard at Nick's floater, but the batter was out in front of the pitch. Swinging over the top half of the plummeting ball, he spun a solid one-hopper right back at Nicky.

Nick fielded the ball cleanly, took a short crow hop to throw home to Cary. Cary received the ball as he stepped onto then in front of the plate for one out and side-stepped toward third to clear the batter-runner from his throwing path. Pivoting to his right, Cary fired a strike down to Stump at first to double up the batter, deftly avoiding the runner from third, crossing home behind him. Nick had drifted towards the first base line as he had watched the play unfold right in front of him. It was textbook stuff.

Someone from our third base bench yelled "HOME! HOME! He's comin'! He's comin'."

The runner from second, who had advanced to third, was trying to score on the fielder's choice. Little Nick scrunched to the ground like a catcher as Stump wheeled to fire left-handed over Nick's head back to Cary. Geller caught the ball chest-high and went down on his left knee to block the sliding runner off the plate, tagging him out cleanly. Just as we had practiced the tag-out time and again.

TRIPLE PLAY! *How rare is that?*

Behind home and third, our grandstands erupted with applause as the first base stands groaned. Behind first, down the right field foul line, the Old South batter, angry with his impatience, ripped off his batting helmet in disgust. He threw it, skittering the hard plastic hat down the right field line, spinning the headgear

on its crown. Floyd charged into home from the third base coach's box screaming, justifiably, at his bone-headed runner who had just tried to score the go-ahead run from second on a double play ball.

Having just escaped the guillotine, my Pocomoke nine jumped up in the air as one. They charged into the third base dugout, resurrected, all revved up. All except Little Nick that is, who, suddenly had become aloof. The little guy folded his glove over his left breast, stuck his nose in the air and serenely sauntered off the field, rising up on the balls of his feet with each stride, as befitted his newly acquired closer's status. As if his extra-inning heroics were an everyday occurrence. Meanwhile my boys were slapping Nicky on the back, congratulating him as he entered the dugout. Nick tried to retain his aloof reserve, but his dirt-eating grin showed how he ate up their attention with a spoon.

In the dugout, I calmed the boys down.

"OK gang, it ain't over it yet. But we can make it over real quick. Now. Let's rattle 'em bats! Let's get some base runners and see what we can do."

I called the team to huddle around me to look them in the eye. They listened as if I were Moses giving them the Ten Commandments. Then, much softer, I said 'Ok, listen up. We're takin' the first pitch until we get a man on. *Not the first strike* now, but the *first pitch*. Right? Got it?" They responded affirmatively. Then I shouted. "OK, OK men, let's go Warriors! Let's go!" I got halfway out to the third base coach's box, when I stopped suddenly to turn around.

"SHEBOOM!" I cried loud enough for all to hear.

"Yeah, Coach?" Little Nick had grabbed a bat for he was hittin' in the hole this inning.

"Why'd Stump have to throw over your head?"

"Uh ... Cuz I was in his way?"

"That's right, and where were you supposed to be?"

"Uh, backin' up the plate?"

"That's RIGHT! So don't let it happen again!" But I had difficulty maintaining a hard glare at the kid who, thus far, was the hero of the game.

"Sure Coach. Hey, Coach?" I halted in my path towards the third base coaching box and raised my chin to listen. "How'd ya like my change-up? Pretty tricky, hunh?"

"Well, it sure did the job, Numma One! Yes, it did." I grinned for a split second and then frowned. "Now let's go, let's go! This thing ain't over yet. Hubba! Hubba!"

I clapped my hands and bounded towards the third base coach's box. I was a little revved up myself. *Triple play! How cool was that? Damn, I had not seen one in a couple years. That Little Nick! Geeze, wouldn't ya know?*

Old South brought in a new hurler for the bottom of the ninth, a big strapping southpaw. He threw right over the top, a classic motion, just like mine. That would be good news for my hitters who saw me everyday in batting practice. From his warm-up tosses, the lefty showed some heat with good movement. His curve

broke sharply and straight down from twelve to six. If he had a third pitch, he didn't show it. We were batting eight-nine-one in our half of the ninth.

Yikes came up and fouled out to first. Steinmetz followed him with a strikeout. This was it: the bottom half of the ninth, the second extra inning of the Class 'A' State championship game. With two down now in the tie game, our leadoff hitter approached the plate. Who else? But the little man himself. Yep, Little Nick.

Using his speed, Nick had batted over .400 on the year for us. He had bunted for a base hit and scored our first run in the first inning. In the third, he had struck out unable to catch up to a high heater. In the sixth with the winning run on third, he had lined into an inning-ending double play when he had scorched a smoking low-liner down the line. The third baseman had dived to his right and snagged the hot, low drive, landing with his glove on the base before Justice could get back to the bag, ending the inning. I thought we had the game won when the ball left Nicky's bat, but the third baseman had made a sensational reaction play. You had to give the kid credit.

Aside from Stump's drive to the fence in the eighth with a man on, we hadn't had a sharply hit ball since. Though we'd filled the bases afterwards on an error and a hit batsman, we failed to score when Justice had struck out on a foul tip. The Old South staff bore down and took the bats right out of our hands. But now, Little Nick had another chance.

Because the first pitcher had been right-handed, Nick, a switch hitter, had batted lefty the whole game. Now he made sure to take plenty of practice swings right handed before he walked up to the batter's box to face the southpaw. From the on-deck circle, Nick had watched this lefty, trying to time his delivery.

"Just like me, Nick," I hollered. "Throws right over the top, same ball movement. Don't be overanxious." Nick nodded my way as he squeezed the bat in his hands,

I clapped for him, "Let's go Numma One. We need a runner. Be smart now. Be smart Nick!"

Nick had to take the first pitch. He knew that. He stepped into the box and took a deep breath, trying to relax. The first pitch was a fastball, high and wide of the plate for ball one. This kid does have some heat, I thought. He can bring it. Nick must have thought the same as I watched him choke up on the bat an inch more than usual. Then he stepped out of the box, turning his head to check with me for the sign. Now that he had taken a pitch, I let him hit away, going through my dummy signals. I stepped forward in the coaching box. Nick was a dead cripple hitter and I wanted to give him a chance to do his thing. He also appeared to open up his stance a bit more, so he could clear his hips for the inside heater.

The lefty wound up, kicked and delivered a curve that dropped straight down but outside the plate. Ball two! Little Nick didn't bite. Nicky always had a good eye up there. That was another reason I let him hit away. Occasionally, he'd offer at a high fast ball as he had done back in the third to fan. Heck! They all did that. But, for the most part, I didn't have to worry about Nicky swinging at bad pitches. He would not be my lead-off hitter if he did.

Nicky stepped out of the box to check with me. I ran through my signs, letting him hit away again. Two and oh was a great hitter's count. May not have been the percentage move, but after that triple play, thought I'd roll the dice with the little man by letting him swing. After all, Nick was on a roll.

Not giving into the hitter, the southpaw delivered another curve and it bounced on the plate. The catcher did a heck of job just to keep the ball in front of him. He asked the umpire for time and trotted out to the mound with the ball. Floyd, the Old South manager, asked for time. He left his dugout to follow his receiver out to the hill to speak with his ace. I called Nick down to me. We met halfway between third and home.

“Alright, Nick. The take is automatic here, right?”

“Yup,” said Nick sort of matter of fact.

“But take it with a purpose now kid. Do everything, just like you were gonna hit it. Take your stride and everything but don’t swing! Gauge the rise on that fast ball, because I’m sure you’ll see the exact same pitch in the exact same spot on three and one. Don’t think you’ll have to worry with anything other than the heat, not the way he missed with that curve and they sure don’t want to put the winning run on base. So he’s gonna come into ya. You’re the guy they wanna get Nick. They don’t want the heart of the order comin’ up. OK?” I looked him in the eye.

“Yup.” With his goofy-looking two-toned peepers, Nick nodded at me wide-eyed, completely and innocently unflappable, as if he were listening to me giving him a weather report that he had heard a million times before.

“Nicky?”

“Yeah, Coach?”

I grabbed his shoulder. “Just relax and hit him like you do me in practice. But it’s gotta be right there now.” I held my left hand out in front of my belt buckle. “Otherwise, layoff. You can do it, Big Fella.”

Nicky nodded vigorously. He was a great table-setter for our heavy-hitting two through six line-up. I trusted him. He needed to get on base now, which is what he did best. I patted him confidently on the behind and sent him back to the plate while I returned to third base coach’s box with my heart in my throat. We had to make it happen now, I didn’t want to have to send the little guy back out to pitch the tenth. I harbored no illusions that lightening would strike twice in our favor.

Everyone had returned to their respective positions. Nicky stepped in and waited. Just like I told him, a fastball came in thigh high over the outside third of the plate. Nick strode forward as if to swing and gauged the rise on the ball. Strike one. Three balls and one strike. Nick had all the advantage and he knew it. The lefty had to come into him now or risk putting the championship run on base. I was sure Floyd had told his ace that Nick was the guy they wanted to get. And “no curve ball crap!” Cuz that’s what I would have said.

I thought of changing my mind and giving him the take. But I didn’t. I had a hunch rolling the dice with the little guy would save us. I called down to Nick. “OK big boy. Top of the ball. Be ready. Be loose. You can do it Numma One!” I clapped my hands in encouragement. Nicky nodded and stepped back into the box. The boys in the dugout backed me up, cheering wildly for their diminutive teammate. The Old South infield talked it up for their southpaw on the hill.

The little guy assumed his stance, slightly open with the front left foot pointed towards the left side of second base. Back right foot just behind the back of the plate, pointed toward the first base dugout. His spiked shoes were almost directly under the points of his respective shoulders. Nick held his hands just in front and above his right shoulder, choked up a couple inches on his thirty-two ounce wooden Louisville Slugger. He held the bat off his right shoulder about at a thirty degree angle to the ground, leaning back slightly on his barely bent rear leg. He lowered his front, left shoulder to insure he would get on top of the rising fastball. His front left leg was almost straight. Nick’s defiant stance was like him, cocky, compact and cunning. His stance seemed to say, “Try and throw it by me. I dare ya.”

The outfield was shallow, playing Nick to pull. The corner infielders cheated in on the grass, sensing another Little Nick bunt. The Old South nine were chatting it up big time. Actually, both dugouts, as well as the stands behind them, were going crazy, fomenting quite a din all around the little stadium. But silence had fallen on the little guy and me with our concentration totally upon the pitcher. Nicky swayed his hips ever so slightly back and forth, awaiting the pitch. I couldn't help but do the same, living vicariously through my leadoff hitter.

*Don't be overanxious, Nick. Keep the left shoulder down. Make it be right there, right where you're looking. Just relax and kiss it sweetly. It will feel sooooo good, if you time it right. We got the heart of the order coming up behind ya, so don't over swing, kid. Make it be right there!*

The hefty Old South hurler swung into his motion, kicked high and followed through with a fast ball just like the previous pitch, just as I figured. Nicky swung quickly without over-swinging, letting his bat do the work—

CRRRRACKKKKK! The pitch sailed right into the sweet spot of Nick's Louisville Slugger.

There is nothing like the sound of a precisely placed wooden bat on a horsehide baseball. Nothing!

At first, I thought Nick had hit it too good, that the ball would carry too far, long enough for the outfielders to get under it and end the inning. However, Old South had been playing Nick slightly to pull and too shallow with two outs in extra innings. They should have played deeper to preclude the extra base hit to prevent the winning run from gaining scoring position. Floyd had screwed up. Nicky had really tagged it. The ball headed on a low line, rising over the second baseman's head towards the spacious emerald green gap in right center.

Both outfielders took a false step in towards the infield, fooled by the small stature of my lead-off hitter. But then, in tandem, they quickly turned their backs to the plate and jumped on their horses. I watched incredulously as the rising ball carried and carried. It fell toward the earth, striking at the base of the eight foot high chain link fence in right center, sticking between the fence bottom and the cinder warning track, about three hundred and fifty feet away. *My Gosh! He's never hit one so far before—not even in BP! He rally smacked it!* The extreme velocity of the fast pitch and all those pull ups, pushup, curls and French curls that Nick claimed he had put in over the last couple years had paid off in a huge dividend. Thankfully, the ball did not rebound off the fence but slumbered on the cinder track, taking a siesta.

Little Nick had rounded first hard. He was flat out flying as he came off the second base bag, showcasing his sprinter's speed. His helmet flew off, trailing in his wake. I signaled him to hold up at third, but he wanted to head for home, even though the play was now behind him and he couldn't see what the defense was doing. I almost tackled him to stop him. After rounding third with a head of steam, Nick obeyed my signal. Applying the brakes, Nick skidded to a stop as his legs went out from under him. He fell on his butt in the baseline only to scramble up, back to the base well ahead of the relay throw from right center. For the second time in the space of a few minutes, Pocomoke fans behind home and down third roared with approval at the stellar play of the little guy.

Nick called time to dust himself off. The base ump granted him time. Nick stepped off the base to tidy up after his ignominious fall. For an instant, I had had visions of Johnny Allein, who had led off a game with a similar hit across a fenceless outfield earlier in the year against our rival Surrettsdale. Johnny had made third easily and probably could have scored if I had not stopped him. I had reasoned that Allein, who was our leadoff hitter at the time, had hit it so well, there would be plenty more opportunities to score and there was no sense to chance his scoring then. However, as fortune would have it, there were no more scoring opportunities that day. Surrettsdale's southpaw hurler buckled down, pitched magnificently and held us scoreless into extra innings until the ninth when we had managed to break through with two runs to steal

one late. However, my error in holding Allein at third had caused the boys to doubt my judgment. It took some doing to restore their faith in me after that one.

I could not dwell on that now. We had just risen from the grave on the supernatural power of Little Nick's suddenly mighty bat and somewhat less than mighty arm. The score stood tied at three with two down and the heart of the order due up. I congratulated the little guy on his mighty blast by patting him on the rear. I told him he had been just a little shy of a homer.

"Story of my life," chirped Nick, chuckling easily at himself. Then, a starry-eyed Little Nick became conscious of the tremendous cheering that was swelling from the Pocomoke fans behind home and third. I saw the awe of their appreciation creep over his countenance as he lifted his face to the cheering fans. Showman that he was, Nick doffed his cap to the faithful and the cheers grew louder. Nick was grinning from ear to ear, as a bead of sweat rolled slowly down his dust-stained face.

I had to keep his head in the game. I grabbed him sharply by the shoulders near his collar bones and got into his face.

"Hey, Big Boy. We ain't done yet. **YOU ARE THE CHAMPIONSHIP RUN.** Hey, Nicky! You gotta focus. Nicky?"

"Yeah Coach, sure, I know."

"Well, act like it then, darn it! Forget about them fans. Concentrate on what you're doin'. There's over fifty feet of grass and cinder from home plate to that brick wall backstop, but a fast ball can rebound off that wall pretty dang hard. Be ready to go if the pitch gets by the catcher, but you gotta **BE READY, NICK.** And come back to third if the thing rebounds directly to the catcher. Got it?"

"Got it, Coach," said Nicky smiling as he retook the base.

Red yelled "Play ball."

Nick watched the lefty take the rubber and peer in for the sign. The little guy sidled off the bag with his back to me, but I stayed in his head as I signaled our number two batter Hank Roulette.

"OK Nick. Stay well off the line. You don't wanna be out on a ball hit down here, OK? And don't get cute!" I was as forceful as I could be but I could sense the cheering crowd assuming control of his adolescent brain once again.

Hank was a pretty fair, disciplined hitter. He led our team in batting average. I was confident as he stepped up to the plate to win the game for us. I wiped off the take of the first pitch, hoping their lefty would groove one for him, trying to get ahead. Any contact of bat on ball could score the fleet Nick. Hank was very fleet on the bases, too. Hank dragged his hand across the letters of his jersey, acknowledging that he had understood my sign. He stepped up to the plate and assumed his wide-spread, closed stance.

"Just put in play, Hank Keed," yelled Nick in front of me. A crescendo rose from the teeming crowd.

Old South's southpaw did not dally. He was pissed for surrendering that cripple triple to Nicky. The kid went into a full wind-up, checking Nick at third as he went into his delivery. With two down, the third baseman played behind the bag at normal depth, as did the other infielders. Nicky decided to take advantage of the lefty's full wind-up. He did his best Jackie Robinson imitation, scampering far down the line pretending, as if he were going to steal home. I screamed at him, trying to rein him in. Old South cheated in

at the corners suspecting a squeeze. The pitcher completed his windup and fired a strike at Roulette, who took the pitch and I wondered if Hank had understood that, with Nicky in scoring position, he did not have to take that pitch. Hank stepped out of the box and perfunctorily checked for my signal. I went through a series of dummy signals, which might induce Old South to keep thinking squeeze. I clapped for Hank and told him he could do it. Then I returned my attention to the little guy, as he nonchalantly returned to third base bag. I was nearly boiling.

“That’s too much, Nick, too much! If you get picked, I’ll brain ya!” Rather matter of fact, he countered, “Ya can’t do that Coach. I’m pitchin’ next innin’.” I just rolled my eyes and pleaded “Let’s hope not. Jesus, Mary and Joseph! Let’s hope not! We need to end it right here!” Confidently perched atop the third base bag, Nicky winked his blue eye at me and grinned like an imp. The kid possessed a sort of disarming charm that made you smile in spite of yourself.

“Well, watch out now Nicky, they might put something on here.”

I should have been named Moses instead of Shaughnessy, because surely I was a prophet. On the very next offering, Old South pitched out as the third baseman cheated up the line even with Nick, giving Nicky leading off behind the kid, the impression no one was covering the bag but Nick was wrong. That damned Floyd wasn’t worried about any squeeze. He had pitched out, putting on a pickoff play. The shortstop had sneaked into third behind Nick with the pitcher’s delivery and the third sacker dived to the grass, allowing the catcher to throw over his head to the shortstop covering the bag. I saw it all right away. I yelled at Nick to get back, but Nick had taken one step too many. He pivoted to scramble back to third late, diving headfirst at the near corner on the foul side of the bag, eating dirt all the way. The catcher’s throw beat him to the bag, but Providence was surely shining down on the little guy. The throw was high and wide toward the infield side of the bag. The shortstop had to jump high and to his left to retrieve it. By the time he had corralled the ball and gotten the pill down in front of the base, Nicky had gotten his hand down on the bag, barely ahead of the tag.

“Safe,” cried the base umpire as he motioned the signal with his hands from behind the pitcher’s mound. Dust rising up from the little guy’s slide, choked all of us. The shortstop grouched to the base ump that he had made the tag in time, but the umpire turned and walked away, ignoring the kid. I was beside myself.

“Nicky, Nicky! What did I just say, son!?!” I removed my eyeglasses to glare at him.

A sheepish Little Nick asked for time to dust himself off again. He got it. He was one hugely embarrassed little guy. As Nick knocked the dirt from his uniform, I heard a collective sigh of relief escape from our third base dugout and the stands behind it.

“Nick,” I pleaded, exasperated, “What in the world were you thinking son?” A shame-faced Little Nick turned to me before he stepped back onto the bag, quoting the irascible Rocky Graziano.

“That Somebody, up there, likes me.” Smirking, Nick arched one brow and jerked his right thumb upward.

I waved my dark frame spectacles and got right in his face. “Well, somebody down here is gonna kick your butt, if you don’t play smarter and listen to me. Dammit!”

Frowning sheepishly, he nodded that he understood. I put my glasses back on as time came in and Nick took his lead, a much more conservative lead, for the next pitch.

The next offering to Hank was up and in and it caught him leaning in. As he dived back out of the way from his overly closed stance, the ball glanced sideways off the trademark of his bat and ricocheted into the first base dugout: One ball, two strikes.

“Come on Hank, You can do it baby. Battle ‘im now, battle ‘im,” yelled Nick from the safety of the third base bag, shaking his fist towards Roulette. The rest of the team, which had fallen silent after the near fatal pickoff, followed Nick’s cue, yelling encouragement to Hank who’d stepped out of the box to collect himself.

“Be ready, Nicky,” I implored. Nick bobbed his head at me and turned back to the field to take his lead. “Good time for a curve. Might be in the dirt. So just be ready.” More of a hope and prayer than fact.

The southpaw got the sign and went into his full wind-up. Nick led off cautiously in foul territory down the line towards home. The lefty’s hard-snapping curve bit down sharply, badly fooling Roulette. But it was a half foot shy of the plate. Way out in front of the pitch, Hank swung over the ball, missing by a mile. The pitch bit the dirt in front of the plate. Heavy with topspin, the baseball bounced high and hard off the packed dirt, bounding to the catcher’s right. The beleaguered receiver fell to his right knee to block the pitch. But the ball skipped past him. Little Nick took off like a jack rabbit. Propelled by his walking lead, he accelerated with sprinter’s speed down the baseline. Old South’s catcher snatched off his mask as he hurled himself after the wild pitch. The baseball caromed off the brick wall back of the plate. The catcher pounced on it. He spun about off balance to throw wildly toward the pitcher covering the plate. Little Nick crossed the dish standing up as the ball zoomed past the pitcher’s outstretched glove into the infield. Not hanging his head over his missed strike three, Hank had hustled down the line through first base. The Old South shortstop knocked down the scooting ball but had no time to make a play on Hank. The respective umpires judged both runners “Safe.”

Just that quick, it was over. Our season was over. We were Champs! Incredible! I was shocked. Wasn’t it just a few minutes ago that Old South runners had loaded the bases with nobody out? And now, we were State Champs?

The team charged Little Nick, wrestling him to the ground behind the plate. A leaping Hank Roulette retraced his steps over the bag back down the first base line, hopping and skipping toward home, proclaiming that was the best strike out he had ever made. I asked the despondent Old South shortstop, who had retrieved his catcher’s desperate, late toss, for the game ball. As I rejoined the rest of my team in celebration, I couldn’t help but notice the hollow stares of the Old South players. Just like that, it was over for them, too. I felt for them. They’d played hard and well, only to come up a tad short on the last strike in the ninth.

Old South’s previously wildly vocal bench and their fans behind them sat in stunned silence, awash in vacant stares of disbelief, sadly watching my kids celebrate raucously around home plate. How could Old South have lost this game? They had had the victory all but clinched. A couple of their players wept. A few slumped to the ground, completely spent. Others pulled their hats down over their faces or buried their heads in their hands as their caps fell to the ground, unheeded.

I calmed my boys down, lining them up to shake our opponents hands at home plate in the traditional post game ritual. We crossed paths just in front of the plate. I brought up the rear of our club with Nicky just ahead of me. When Nick reached Old South’s starting pitcher, who was the last player in their line, Nick halted the procession. He took the pitcher’s hand in both of his and looking up to him said, “You pitched a great game, Mann. It was a tough one to lose.” The pitcher thanked him and moved on, dumbfounded. Behind the pitcher came the Old South coach. He took hold of Nick’s hand, saying, “We didn’t lose, kid.



You won. You beat us fair and square. Didn't think you had that kind of power." I thought it was a great thing for Floyd to say. I told him so as I shook his hand.

A brief ceremony was held between the pitcher's mound and home plate, during which the State Commissioner of Interscholastic Athletics presented me with the state championship class "A" baseball trophy for 1970. There was polite applause as I accepted the award on behalf of our club, the first team championship award in Pocomoke's brief history. I shook the state commissioner's hand, hoping to hide the pride that swelled in my chest from all on-lookers. I held the trophy aloft briefly for the team and all present to admire. The Pocomoke section cheered loudly. Then I asked the team to bag the equipment in the dugout and meet me out in left field, halfway down the outfield foul line to the fence. I sought the outfield grass for privacy to escape the commotion of the fans around the dugout for our routine post-mortem. I wanted everyone there, including the equipment manager and the scorekeeper and statistician, which was unusual. After the kids had collected the equipment and received congratulations from some of the faithful leaning over the third base railing, I carted the trophy to meet the squad down the left field line.

These post game review sessions were nothing new. I held them after each game as a learning tool to discuss what we had done wrong, what we had done right and what we needed to work on in upcoming practices. Yet, I had broken a precedent today by including Allena and Vicky our female scorekeeper and statistician.

The season was over. There would be no more practices. Correcting mistakes would have to wait until next year. I heard some of the boys wondering aloud why the girls were included, when they had not been previously. With my back toward center field and the trophy in my hand, I motioned for them all to sit down on the grass in front of me. The clear June sky could not have been bluer. The dry air was a pleasant change after so much rain. The flag behind the outfield fence wafted sporadically in a gentle breeze. The team sat down, backs to the sun and the left field foul line, facing me in about three rows of crooked semi-circles. Most sat with their legs crossed, hands on knees or about their knees. Some, like Nick, reclined on one elbow. A few feet to my left, the girls sat sidesaddle in their short skirts as befitted young ladies. Our uniformed, chunky blond team manager Ronny Clawson stood a couple yards off to my right, arms folded across his chest facing towards the foul line. Being neither player nor coach, Ronny aligned himself with me as management so now he stood as I did. Yet, in his heart, Ronny thought of himself as just one of the boys. He also had served the added pivotal role of liaison or go-between, keeping the boys informed of my moods throughout our roller-coaster season.

I set the trophy down on the grass and shifted my weight uneasily. I looked down, slowly pawing the ground in front of me, sweeping my foot in an arc, first with one foot then the other. I folded my arms across my chest and waited for them to quiet down as I thought about what I should say. Then I unfolded my arms and slipped my hands into my back pants pockets, where I felt the game ball resting against my backside. I pawed the ground with my black coach's left shoe.

"Your effort today was outstanding ..."

From the corner of my eyes, I noticed the kids were straining to hear me. Nick stopped chewing on a blade of grass.

"... as it has been all year. It's been a long, tough year. Before the season started, we lost the use of our field and had to scramble just to find a place to practice. We didn't have one single truly home game. Early on, we had some internal, personality differences and I made some poor personnel decisions that cost us. As a result, we got down and had to fight uphill just to have a chance to reach the playoffs. You have displayed exceptional heart and courage to overcome all that, just as you did out here today." I looked up, pointed toward the diamond and surveyed my players. They honed in on my words. I spoke louder.

“You are champions because you have hearts of champions! You overcame every obstacle placed in your path. I’ve never been prouder of any team of which I’ve been a part, either as a player or as a coach. Each of you should feel proud of what we have achieved here, because each and every one of you has contributed to this championship.” I glanced at Ronny beside me and the girls down in front to let them know of my appreciation for their efforts.

They listened intently. It’s seldom a high school teacher has the rapt attention of eighteen adolescents. Yet, now each one hung on my every word. I reached into my back left pocket to pull out the game ball I had obtained from the Old South shortstop. I looked over the team and called out, “SHEEBOOM.” I tossed the ball to Nick who caught it in his left hand while he remained reclined on his right elbow.

“Game Ball! You earned it, son.”

The team razzed Nick. A couple of his neighbors knocked Nick off his perched elbow as they congratulated him. Before I could finish, Nick stood up.

“Coach, I’ve gotta problem with this ball.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“Well, it’s just an old ball. Don’t mean nothin’ much like this, Coach.”

Nick held the ball aloft with his fingers and twisted it around. I couldn’t believe he was throwing such a highly coveted, rarely bestowed honor back in my face. From the surprised looks on their faces, neither could the rest of the club.

“Yeah, it needs something.” Nick paused for effect. “D’ya suppose you could write on it: ‘State Champs 1970’ and then you and everyone else could sign it for me, the girls and Ronny too? Cuz then it really would mean a lot to me.” Nick grinned and I relaxed.

“Well, whaddaya say guys? Can we do that for Nick?”

Except for the typically sullen, surly Yikes, the consensus was unanimous in favor of Little Nick’s suggestion. Nick tossed the ball back to me. I began the autograph session by calling for a pen. Vicky, our stat girl, produced one. I took the pen in hand and wrote on the horsehide.

“1970 State Champs” and under that, “Pocomoke 4-3 in 9.” Then I signed my name and handed the ball and pen to Cary, who was now standing next to me. I yelled loudly so all could hear.

“Make sure you leave enough space so everyone can sign.” They all nodded they would.

As the ball and pen made their way around the team, some local reporters who had been covering the game asked to speak with Nick and me. We obliged them, saying all the right things and giving due credit to our worthy opponents. I chuckled when Nick unabashedly put in a plug for his band Good Rockin’ Tonight. The press photographers took some pictures and left. By then, everyone had autographed the ball and Vicky returned it to me. I held it aloft against the bright blue June sky and asked if anyone had not yet signed. No one spoke for a minute.

“Just me,” piped up Little Nick.

“Well then here, you had better sign it Numma One.” And a chorus of approval rang out from the rest. I looked the ball over. “If you can find a spot, that is.” I handed the little guy the baseball and the pen. He surveyed the horsehide. Finding a spot that suited him, I watched him sign: “Little Nick.” I chuckled as he finished.

“You know after today Numma One, I don’t think folks will be calling you ‘Little Nick’ much anymore.”

Nick looked at me, then down at his autograph. “I guess not Coach.” Then he looked up at me again with those close set, goofy, two-toned peepers of his. He flashed a broadly devilish, white gap-toothed grin. “I guess you’re right about that Coach. I figure they’ll be calling me ‘Champ’ instead.”

I couldn’t help but shake my head and laugh. I reached out to palm the little guy’s head through his baseball cap and rubbed vigorously. “I guess so ‘Champ,’ I guess so.”

I turned to my team for some final instructions. “You’ve got fifteen minutes to visit with your friends and family. Then I expect to meet all of you at the bus—WITH THE EQUIPMENT! Make sure you help Ronny with that.” I tapped Little Nick on the shoulder. He turned to me. “That goes for you too—Champ!”

Stifling a grin, the little guy saluted me playfully. With his two-toned eyes flashing approval, he said.

“Yes sir—Champ.”