

Dixie had hoped to leave work in time to get some extra batting practice, but now he was lucky to arrive at the ball field on time. He changed into his uniform in the Bonneville, which he parked in the lot across the service road from the ball diamond. Over the last couple of weeks, Dixie had taken to warming up the starting pitchers, who, to return the favor, had been letting him take batting practice (BP) off them when they did their “between starts” throwing. That had given him a chance to hit off top flight, game-like pitching rather than the typical “grooved,” lollipop BP tosses. And he had been murdering the ball: curves, heaters, sliders, change-ups. It had not mattered what they threw any more. Dix had his timing back. He was seeing the ball real well, but he had lost the coach’s trust, just as she had lost Ryz’n’s and neither one would consent to give him a second chance.

Dixie was glad his parents had honored his request not to come to the games to watch him ride the pine. He knew his benching hurt them more than it did him. It only really bothered him if he knew they were sitting behind him, suffering quietly. Their neighbor up the street Mr. Gasch, who was helping with the team, kept Dixie’s folks informed of what little there was to say, because Dixie did not say much at all. He figured if he didn’t play, there was nothing *to* say. Mr. Gasch claimed he had always liked Dixie, since he was just a little fellow, playing in the Crest Hill Little League.

Some people just like for no reason.

Dixie had remembered that Mr. Gasch had tried to convince the manager Mr. Mullins to let Dixie play, as did several of the other players. In particular the pitchers, whom Dixie was clobbering before games, would like to have his hot bat in their lineup for offensive support. Tonight Dixie would be lucky to get any BP at all. As the last man off the bench, if he did not get to the park early, he was the last player to take regular batting practice and then only if time allowed.

However, Dixie had pitched BP for something to do. Mullins had allowed Dixie that much because he didn’t want to waste any arms from his pitching staff on BP. Dixie could strike out any batter on the team if he wanted to, but they loved him because he didn’t. He threw just what they wanted, at the speed they wanted, where they wanted. Some guys merely wanted to clobber the ball and had Dixie laid the pill in there for them to swat. Others took advantage of Dixie’s pitching skills to work on overcoming their weaknesses. The more they saw a particular pitch, the quicker they recognized it and the better they could hit it. If a guy had trouble covering the outside corner on off speed stuff, Dixie would pepper the outside corner for him with curves and change-ups. If he had trouble with high hard ones, well that’s what Dixie would serve him.

With the squad’s excellent pitching depth, coupled with the excellent batting practice Dixie was giving the hitters, one would have thought the Printers would have been dominating the league. Instead, they were stagnating, hovering just below five hundred. They had some very good amateur players, but they were not playing as a team. When they pitched well, they did not hit. When they hit well, their pitching faltered. When they had both pitched and hit well, their defense or a late inning, base-

running gaffe would cost them a game. They could overcome the bad teams alright, but they couldn't beat the better clubs.

The truth was that an unresolved dark cloud had hung over the team ever since Dix had joined them. Dixie felt it. And some of the guys had confessed as much to him. There were a couple of guys playing ahead of him who knew the second team All-American should be in the line-up playing instead of them. For sure, the pitchers wanted Dixie's bat in the lineup. All of the Printer's ballplayers had played with or against Dixie growing up: in high school, Boy's Club, Babe Ruth or American Legion ball. They knew he was not only a skilled player, but he was also the kind of guy who makes good things happen, when he was on the field. They told him that Little Nick always had had a unique knack of picking up a club when it was down for the count late in a game and then rallying them to victory. They knew also that he could save a tight game in the late innings with his pitching arm. The beauty of Little Nick, they claimed, was that he could do it with his arm, his bat, his glove, his feet or even his mouth.

They all related how the brash Little Nick had known how to shake up the opposition. He had done so to clinch the schoolboy state championship. His teammates had thrived on his arrogant, cocky play and rallied around him. However, the more people tried to convince the manager to put Dixie in the game now, the more Mullins resisted. Oh, he allowed Dixie to pinch-run late in the game or even pitch an inning if the game was out of reach one way or the other, but he never played him more than an inning or two at a stretch. And, most importantly, he never let Dixie bat, not after that four K performance in his first game.

Before tonight's contest, Dixie had warmed up the southpaw TC, who was slated to start that night. Clairton was the Printers' home park. When the club took the field to start the game, Dixie sat on the bench in his customary spot next to Lonny Sintmoyen, the only other non-pitching reserve. With the holiday weekend beginning tomorrow afternoon, some of the ballplayers had skipped out of town early, ignoring the ball game. Lonny was not that kind of guy, no matter that he was second string and had not had much of a fair chance to show his stuff.

Lonny was what the jock fraternity liked to call a "team player," which means he did all the bullspit junk nobody else wanted to do and received very little playing time in return. He (and now Dixie) took turns, keeping score, chasing foul balls, warming up pitchers, carrying the equipment, filling the water jug, etc. That kind of stuff wasn't so bad when you were a kid. However, as a married, twenty-something adult, those menial tasks were downright embarrassing. After all, they were amateurs. It wasn't as if he and Lonny were getting paid for this bull! Starters rarely undertook any of those lowly chores, although Dixie had always tried to carry his load at the Mount. Guys like Lonny, and now, guys like Dixie, who wanted to play so badly, would do any kind of humbling task, just for a chance to get in the game and Mullins knew that and played upon their weakness.

As they had become reacquainted with one another on the bench over the last few weeks, Dixie had learned much about his past from Lonny Sintmoyen. Lonny had

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graduated from Pocomoke High two years ahead of Dixie in '69. He had coached Dixie in Boy's Club basketball and helped coach him in baseball. Once, Lonny had knocked Dixie out during a Boy's Club infield practice. Lonny said he had launched a rocket practice grounder at Little Nick, when the ball had hit a pebble, took a bad hop and then struck Nick right in the mouth, putting him down for the count.

Dixie learned that Lonny had been one of those model citizens in high school. Lonny featured a rare combination of good looks: dark hair, blue eyes and a face full of freckles. (Lonny could have passed for Sherri's older brother.) A good student, Lonny was long-legged, handsome, tall and athletic. He had lettered in both football and baseball for the Warriors.

Lonny also related that he had dated Arletta "Lettie" Smithson back then. She was short, cute, with coffee-colored hair, like Ryz'n. *Only, Lettie was cut like a short girl, where Ryz'n was cut like a, a real girl, a real curvy one.* In high school, Lettie had been a real mover and a shaker, too. She had captained the varsity cheerleaders and presided over about every club in the school at one time or another, including, lastly but most importantly, the student body. She and Lonny had attended separate colleges but dated each other throughout school. After seven years of dating and patiently waiting throughout high school and college, Lonny and Lettie had married after they had graduated from their respective schools. Now Lettie taught senior English at Pocomoke High and came to the games to support her man, always sitting in the stands behind the Printers bench, not fifty feet from her husband. She watched him riding the pine through the chain length fence that separated the players from the fans in the stands behind third base. Lettie cheered for the team, but she never failed to give Lonny some props when she thought the coach might hear. Little Lettie could be quite vocal in support of her husband.

Tonight the Printers were playing the "Mercs," which was the University of Maryland Terrapin, unofficial, summer league team. The team featured All-ACC shortstop Robby Neff as the league's leading hitter. The bespectacled Robby, who had been two years behind Little Nick at Pocomoke but had played varsity ball with him, was a big fan of Nick's. He had sought Dixie out earlier in the season to tell him about some of their previous games together, hoping to spark Dixie's memory. During pre-game warm-ups tonight, Robby had fraternized with Dixie and the Printers. It was only natural, because Robby had played ball with many of them in the past. Robby expounded with gusto how he and Nick had won some dramatic, come-from-behind games together both in high school and in American Legion ball.

Like everyone else, Robby said he couldn't figure out why Dixie was riding the pine, either. Robby's high school sweetheart and soon-to-be bride Terri sat in the stands behind him on the first base side. He pointed her out to Dixie. Terri was a cute, petite brunette of Italian descent. Robby explained to Dixie that he had been a three-sport letterman two years behind Little Nick at Pocomoke and his fiancée Terri had been class president, like Ryz'n before her. For being an All-ACC player, Dixie thought Robby was a humble, down-to-earth guy. Dixie had seen him play earlier in the season and the guy sure could flat out hit a baseball. And Mann, could he fly!

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Sitting alone on the aluminum frame bench inside the chain-link fence dugout, Dixie watched as Lonny plopped down next to him with scorebook in hand. He handed the book and pencil to Dix. Lonny and Dixie had agreed to alternate the scorekeeping duties, with Lonny scoring the home team at bats and Dixie the visitors. Lonny had just come back from getting the Mercs' starting line-up. As their starter Tommy "TC" Clarkson warmed up on the mound for the first pitch, Lonny caught Dixie mumbling to himself. When Dixie had finished, Lonny asked him if he was repeating a mantra, something Dixie did maybe because of his amnesia. Dix explained that he prayed before every game. He thanked God for the ability to play, for the other players, for the game itself, even for the umpires, whom he might later curse under his breath. He always prayed for an injury-free game and for all the competitors to play to the best of their abilities. Lonny, a practicing Episcopalian, asked him to say a little prayer that they might get into the game that night. Dixie winked, confessing he already had.

Dix had learned that tonight's opponents the Mercs' were essentially the University of Maryland's summer league team. As such, they wore Maryland's red, white and black colors, patterned after the Orioles' uniforms. However, NCAA rules prevented Terp coaches from coaching their kids in a summer league. Thus, the head of the local American Legion umpire's association managed the Mercs. They, along with the Printers, were two of ten teams in a league that encompassed the greater DC metropolitan area, giving rise to the league name of the Metropolitan Baseball League or the Metro League, for short. The Printers were also part of the Greater Unified Printers Baseball Association (GUPBA), which had been spawned just after the turn of the century. Each year other Printer's baseball teams, mostly from cities in the eastern half of the country, played their local ball season and afterward met in St. Louis for a national championship tournament, held around the end of July and first of August. As far as Dixie knew the DC Printers had never won the championship, at least there was no one around old enough to recall such a grand event. It sure did not look as if this year's club would break that losing streak.

The Printers' wore their home uniforms with Navy Blue jerseys and red trim, with red lettering, numerals and navy blue socks. Their white knickers were blue pin-striped; their caps blue with red bills. They looked sharp, yeah, better than they played. Dix wore number 13. Normally, he was not superstitious, but he was beginning to reconsider his position on that one. Their opponents wore the Maryland black over red with gray visitors pants. Robby Neff, batting third for the Mercs, came up with two on and no one out in the top of the first. TC had been wild, putting the first two Mercs on base, walking one guy and hitting the other. He tried to get ahead of Robby on the first pitch with a fastball. That was a mistake. The short but mighty Terp connected with TC's first pitch heat, turning it right around and deposited the ball over the left field fence out onto Drift road, where the ball short-hopped the hubcap of a passing car with a thunderous crack. Robby circled the bases quickly—head down, almost as if he were embarrassed by what he had done. Keeping score next to Dixie, Lonny noted approvingly that Robby had never been one to show up an opponent. Dixie marked the three-run homer down in the book next to Neff's name.

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TC stalked down off the back of the mound, picked up the rosin bag, took a couple steps more towards second and fired the rosin bag to the ground. He was obviously angry with himself, for grooving one like that to the league's best hitter. He pushed his cap back on the crown of his ruddy head. Clearly, he was flustered. His facial expression lay somewhere between a severe grimace and apoplexy. The poor guy couldn't even cleanly handle the umpire's toss of a new baseball. Three batters into the game and he was down three-zip! That, thought Dixie, was what sportscasters liked to refer to as an "inauspicious start."

Carrying the scorebook and brushing the outer, protective chain-link fence with his shoulder, Dixie ambled down along the front of the bench toward their catcher. As Robby crossed the plate with the third run, Dixie whispered hoarsely, "Nice shot Robby Neff. I marked it down here." Dixie pointed to the scorebook and grinned. The dark haired, heavily tanned Neff turned and tipped his cap to Dixie. With his free right hand, Dixie gripped the protective chain-link fence at the end of the bench and called to his catcher.

"Hey Bladesy! What's up?" Blades turned to him. Dixie beckoned their receiver Benny Blades towards the protective fence, separating the bench from the area in front of the backstop. Blades trotted over red dirt, as TC had not yet resumed the mound.

"Ah! He's pretty pumped up out there right now Dix, being as this is the Terps and all. He can't bring it down, 'cept that last one he grooved." Blades rolled his eyes. When the catcher got close enough to where Dixie could speak to him and be heard without raising his voice, Dixie advised.

"Hey Bladesy! Look Mann, tell Tommy to throw change-ups low and away. It will help get him into his groove, regain his rhythm."

"OK, Nick!" The catcher trotted out to the mound to talk with his flustered pitcher.

As Dixie walked back to take his seat next to Lonny, Mr. Mullins stopped him.

"Who's running this club son, me or you?" Mr. Gasch, who was sitting nearby, heard the exchange. He spit disgustedly into the dirt in front of the bench.

"You are, Coach," answered Dixie.

"Damn right, I am. Your job is to do what I tell ya, when I tell ya. And I didn't tell ya to give TC no pitchin' lesson."

"Yes sir."

"Take a seat, Sheeboom."

"Yes sir."

For Dixie, this was akin to being back in the Corps. Dixie's polyester-knit uniform suddenly became scratchier and more uncomfortable, as it did each time he spoke with that jerk-for-a-manager. The usually upbeat Mr. Gasch patted Dixie on the butt as Dix walked by the assistant coach back to his spot on the bench. When Dixie sat down next to Lonny Sintmoyen, his bench-sitting compatriot merely rolled his eyes and threw his head back against the chain-link fence, which braced the backside of the aluminum bench. Dixie nodded. The funny thing was: TC did throw change-ups away, got his rhythm, settled down and struck out the side.

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As dusk came on in the top half of the third, the field lights also came on and Miss Sweet Sixteen showed up with her boyfriend. They sat in the stands behind Dixie on the third base bench. Soon, the vocal couple got into a loud argument. Dixie never turned around to look. He didn't have to. He knew who they were, why they were there and why they were arguing. By the fifth, things began to look up for the home team. Night had fallen and the tall shade trees loomed like shadowy giants behind the light stanchions down the right field line. The temperature had dropped some ten degrees and the Printers had scratched out a couple of runs. Dixie noted that, behind him, Sherri had managed to drive Gary off, leaving her all alone in the stands behind third, where peace reigned once more.

With each pitcher having hit his stride, the pace of the game moved rapidly and the contest turned largely into a defensive struggle. Unfortunately, the Printers could never overcome the lead Robby Neff had given the Mercs to start the contest. The Printers were still down three to two going into the bottom of the ninth. The Mercs big right-hander had reached down for something extra whenever he had incurred the least bit of trouble in the late innings and shut the Printers down hard. TC had pitched a complete game, a heckuva game actually, thought Dixie, considering that rough first inning, when TC had spotted the Mercs a three-run cushion.

Mullins pinch-hit Sintmoyen for TC to lead off the bottom of the ninth, with Lettie yelling her approval from behind the bench. With Lonny in the game, Dixie had to take the scorebook and pencil down to the first base coaching box, where he would serve double duty, as base coach and scorekeeper. From the coaching box, Dixie cheered for his compatriot Lonny, who produced by topping one towards third. Far from the swiftest runner on the club, the long-legged Lonny hustled down to first for all he was worth. He reached safely when the Mercs third sacker failed to come up with a clean, barehanded pickup of Lonny's swinging bunt. Lonny asked, if Dixie had given him a hit. Dixie said, "What do you think?" With the tie run on first and no one out, the Printers' bench stirred. However, the home team's optimism faded, when the next two batters fanned and popped out, respectively. It looked to Dixie as if the club was going to let another one slip through their collective fingers. Then, Mullins surprised Dix by inserting him as a pinch-runner for Sintmoyen, making Dixie the potential, tying tally for the Printers. While he and Lonny had alternated coaching first or sitting the bench and keeping score all game, mostly to escape Mullins cold fish personality and dictatorial ways, Lonny was not too pleased to be taken out so soon, even to coach first. Yet, Lonny knew that he could not touch Dixie's speed.

Dixie exchanged the scorebook and pencil with Lonny for his buddy's protective helmet. Lonny glanced at the book.

"Hey! You did give me a hit!" Dixie winked.

"You earned it!"

Dixie pulled off his own cap, folded it in upon itself and stuck it in lengthwise inside his right, back pocket.

"Pushes my average up to two-eighty-five now, Nick."

"Yeah? That's great Lonny."

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Nick pulled the helmet down over his head. He could feel Lonny's sweat left on the protective foam inside the head band. Dix asked for and received permission from the base umpire to stretch and run along the right field foul line to get loose. After sitting all game, he did not want to pull a muscle, no matter that the temperature still hung above eighty degrees. The grassy ground down in foul territory beside the right field line looked OK; however, he found it to be uneven. Dixie ran, rather gingerly, a couple of bent-legged, thirty-yard striders. He could ill afford a twisted ankle now. The tall shade trees behind the nearby chain-link fence loomed like a pantheon of baseball gods against the muggy, black, Southern Maryland, night sky. Those gods stood aloof, waiting to judge his performance. As Dixie casually approached first base, he seemed to notice for the first time the white-yellow brightness emanating from the lights atop the field stanchions, which held at bay the black, country night.

Before he assumed the bag at first, Dixie squatted down near the bag just inside foul territory, close enough to where he could smell the bitter scent from the white lime of the foul line. He scooped up some of the infield dirt in his hand and poured the dirt back and forth from one hand into the other, as if he were weighing it in the balance. He was thinking that he had been watching this pitcher's moves both to first and to home all game from the first base coach's box. He had this guy figured out. The dude didn't throw over to first for show. He only threw over if he thought he had a decent chance at a pick-off. If Dix could steal, he'd be the tying run in *scoring* position with their number three hitter at the plate. Dix dropped the dirt and stood up, brushing the dirt off his hands. After Dix stepped between the lines to assume the bag, the home plate umpire yelled.

"Play ball!"

And a confidence settled over Dixie, like the calm before a thunderstorm. It felt good, real good. Suddenly, the formerly muggy, oppressive night assumed a different, refreshing aura, teeming with life. As Dixie stepped on first, the powerful, right-handed-hitting Jimmy D stepped into the batter's box. He waved his pine tar-stained, wooden bat towards the pitcher. The Printer's best batter, big, strong, blond, bespectacled Jim Downey, was up to bat. The Printers had a chance, to beat these guys, a good chance. The Merc hurler assumed the rubber as he leaned forward and peered in for the catcher's sign. The big right-hander held his glove folded over his heart. He gripped the baseball behind his large rump, where he spun the ball nervously using his thumb, index and middle fingers.

As Dix stepped off first, out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed the middle infielders, who edged closer to second after they, too, had picked up the catcher's pitch signal. The Mercs double play combo turned their heads toward one another and shielded their faces with open gloves. Dix knew they were signaling each other with the time-honored, open mouth-close mouth sign, to indicate which of them would cover the bag on a throw down to second. He chuckled inwardly, knowing that the second baseman would cover the bag with the right-handed, power-hitting, number three hitter at the plate. Of course, they could pitch out, but Dixie found that unlikely. This pitcher and manager were old school. They had gone right after the hitter anytime

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the pitcher had gotten in trouble, pretty much ignoring the runners and, of course, they did not know how fast Dix was. Oh, they may have heard something about his speed, but hearing and knowing are two entirely different animals. Dixie figured they would do the same now, go after the hitter, try and get ahead in the count. After all, they didn't want to walk Downey and put the tie run in scoring position and the potential game-winner on base with the clean-up hitter coming to the plate. All these things flashed through his mind instantaneously as he sidled off the bag to take his lead, watching the pitcher the whole time like a hawk.

The Merc right-hander got the sign and went into his stretch. The catcher squatted halfway down with his mitt out, ready to receive the pitch in a manner that would enable him to step and throw quickly down to second. Dixie lengthened his lead cautiously, stepping sideways with his arms hanging down between his widespread feet, almost to the ground, like a chimpanzee. Hawking the pitcher, Dix's right foot grazed across the orange-red dirt of the base path as he edged further away from first. He took a long lead, so that his right foot reached just past the point of the far corner cut into the infield grass, which was the demarcation point for "getting a good lead."

"This guy's got wheels. He's got wheels," warned Bobby Neff from short, loud enough to wake the dead. Dix was inside the shine of the lights now. He was between the lines now and it felt good. He was on the field and in the game. He was comfortably in his element. *Gee, don't it feel good? Strange but good. Jes' like old times, again. The pitcher's cockin' his head down, lookin' this way. Left shoulder, watch his left shoulder. Take a little more lead and make him come over here.* Dixie took another half-step. Dixie passed the demarcation. He took a long, one-way lead off first base to draw a throw. Dix had no intention of stealing. He merely wanted to draw the throw. Dix did not check with Mullins across the diamond, behind third. Why should he? He never had to check with Coach Trahorn at the Mount. Coach Horny, as the guys liked to tease him, had granted Dix the green light from the get-go.

This pitcher's left shoulder and left foot jerked quickly as he made his move over to first. Darn near simultaneously but just a split second later, a cat-like Dixie took three quick steps and jumped back onto the bag safely with his left foot, just ahead of the tag, as the ball whistled into the southpaw, first baseman's mitt. Dixie kept his left foot on the bag as he watched the lefty return the ball to the pitcher. Dix never took his eye off the ball. He wasn't going to be fooled by any korny, trick little league plays.

Yes, he was safe. He always felt safe and comfortable between the lines of the baseball diamond. This was his game, not tennis or golf or bowling or any of them sissy sports. No, he *knew* this game as he knew the back of his hand and he had studied this pitcher. Long-term memory loss, difficulty in reading and writing, embarrassing stutters and slurred speech did not count for squat now. On the next offering, the pitcher repeated his ritual, except Dixie had shaved a nearly a step off his former lead. After glancing at Dixie's abbreviated lead, the Merc hurler, fired home—once more, just as Dixie figured he would

"Ball One!"

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Again, the Merc's shortstop Robby Neff blared a note of caution towards his battery. "Hey now! Hey now! This guy's got wheels. He can motor." From the coaching box, Lonny nagged Dixie to check with Mullins in the coaching box across the diamond behind third. Dix gave the jerk-for-a-manger a cursory glance, but mentally blew the Printers' skipper off. On the second pitch, Dixie kept his shorter lead. Then, guessing that the Merc hurler was going home, at the first inkling of the pitcher's move to the plate, Dix crossed left foot over right, pivoted and exploded towards second. In two steps, he was at full stride. A few strides further, he glanced over his shoulder, glimpsing the Merc catcher positioning himself for the throw to nail Dix at second. Dix would really have to bust it!

He dug his metal spikes hard into the dry, dusty baseline. Second base got real big in his windshield real fast. With a bent left leg, Dixie threw both fists skyward and skipped his lower left side (not his war-scarred right) down and off the hard infield dirt in one swift motion as if he were a stone skipping off the surface of a pond. In a much-practiced maneuver, Dix popped up onto the bag with plenty to spare. He had gotten an excellent jump and stolen off the pitcher, not the catcher, as is usually the case. Satisfied, Dix perched casually upon the bag as the second baseman applied the perfunctory, late tag. The baseball gods bowed to Dix, feting him with a rising cloud of orange-red dust which covered his person in glory. He acknowledged the traditional honor by asking for time from the base ump and, upon receiving time, knocked the dirt from his left pant leg with his left hand. Walking back from his spot on the outfield grass, where he had backed up the catcher's throw to second, Robby Neff congratulated Dixie on his theft. Then the swarthy shortstop shook his head, turned towards the heavens and bandied loudly for anyone to hear.

"I tole ya. This guy's got wheels!"

Grinning at Robby Neff, as he retook his normal defensive position, Dixie pointed to himself and asked innocently, "Who me?"

"Yeah you." Neff just smiled and shook his head again.

Dixie pinched the slack of his blouse just beneath his breastbone and tugged at it rapidly back and forth to fan the perspiration, forming on his chest and neck.

It feels good to sweat in a ballgame for a change. It feels darn good.

Dixie's steal was the first sign of any bombastic derring-do the team had shown all game. Mullins always played it close to the vest. Dix's teammates rose to their feet as one, clutching the links in the protective chain-link fence in front of the bench, shouting their approval as if they were back in little league again. They now felt what Dixie had felt when he had taken first base just a few minutes ago. The Printers had a chance to beat these University of Maryland hotshots for the first time this year and they could taste it! Most of the Printers had played ball either at small colleges on the East Coast or at the local county community college. A few had never even attended college. While the University of Maryland had never been a collegiate baseball power, they did play in a big time baseball league, the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC). Even so, the Terps were the big, bad, amateur baseball dogs around the DC metropolitan area and, what's more, every swinging guy on the Printers knew that, too. Dixie

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acknowledged his teammates' appreciation with a tug of his cap. He always had the ability to excite his teammates, wherever he had played the game.

However, surprised, Dix watched their exhilaration give way to tentative murmurings. From the first base coaching box, Sintmoyen spread his arms wide apart, shrugged his shoulders and mouthed down to Dixie, perched on second, asking "Why?" Neither Lonny nor anyone else on the club had seen Mullins give Dixie the steal sign. That's because Mullins hadn't given the steal sign. Mullins himself ignored Dixie, as he quietly but angrily kicked at the blue-grey cinders in the third base coaching box. The manager paced, head down, hiding beneath the bill of his baseball cap, arms folded tightly across his chest. He was not smiling. His square, lantern jaw was clenched. Still, Sherri was cheering wildly in the stands, calling Dixie's name loud enough so that Dixie could hear her plainly from his roost on the second base sack. Embarrassed at her inordinate vocal support, Dix tugged the bill of his cap down low over his eyebrows, copying Mullins. However, Dixie wasn't done just yet.

When the Merc right-hander assumed the rubber to face Jimmy D, Dixie sidled off the second base bag, checking the Merc middle infielders, behind and beside him. After his racing efforts on this muggy night, sweat rolled from inside his hat band, trickling over his temple down along his cheek. Nervously, he swiped the sweat with his forefinger. When Mullins said nothing, Dixie took charge and called out the customary check-down to Mullins in the third base coaching box.

"You got short. I got second."

"Don't worry, I got *you*, kid." Mullins replied tersely, through clenched teeth.

Having established his fleet feet as an honest threat to steal again, Dixie bluffed towards third, slightly distracting the Merc's big right-hander, as the pitcher kicked and dealt home.

The hurler rushed his delivery a little, allowing Downey to climb way ahead in the count at three and oh. Again, Dix checked the middle infielders, walked off second and lengthened his lead. The pitcher came set and stepped back off the rubber, bluffing Dixie back towards the bag and the pre-pitch ritual was repeated. On the next delivery, Dixie felt some dirt spray the back of his heel. Dixie retreated a step back to the bag. Behind him, Neff had kicked some dirt at Dix and Dix had fallen for that old trick. JD took a fast ball for a strike, following Mullins' signal to take. At three and one, not wanting to put the winning run on base, the Merc pitcher set himself, ignoring Dixie, bowed his back, rocked and fired a fast ball, thigh-high and away. From his perch near the middle of the diamond, Dixie watched Downey's eyes light up. That was JD's pitch and he didn't miss it. The kid got his powerful arms extended out over the plate and drilled the pill over the right center field fence and onto the lighted soft ball field, holding up that game temporarily while the baseball was retrieved. Ecstatic, the Printers jumped out of their dugout to greet Dixie as he crossed the plate with the tying run and shortly after, Jimmy D, as he scored the game winner with a rare, walk-off homer. Jimmy hugged Dixie as he crossed the plate. Their exuberant teammates were jumping on the two of them so wildly; it was difficult for the run-scoring duo to make their way back to the dugout.

Stealing Second

Dixie's former Pocomoke teammate Jimmy D told him that Dix had changed the momentum of the game with his daring steal, because the Mercs' catcher had the best "throw 'em out" percentage in the ACC. Dixie chuckled and reminded the grinning center fielder, *he* had been the one to knock the ball out of the park. The team was ecstatic. Mr. Gasch congratulated both of them, but Mullins held back. It was the first time they had beaten the league-leading Mercs all summer. The opposing teams shook hands as they crossed in front of home plate, a tradition these young men had shared since their days in Little League. The Mercs' Robby Neff, glove in hand, joined his former high school and Legion teammates on the Printers and strolled back with them to their bench. Like Robby, all of the Printers were from the south county.

A sober-faced Mullins ordered the players to sit down on the bench, while he stood outside the protective chain-link fence, with his back to the field, waiting for them to calm down so he could address them. Curtly, he asked Neff to leave the Printers' bench area. Robby walked nonchalantly over to get a drink at the water fountain, outside the third base fence.

"Well, men, we pulled out a tough one tonight: Congratulations! Tommy Clarkson: That was the gutsiest pitching performance I've seen this year. Good job back there Blades! Lonny: that shot of yours wasn't exactly heard 'round the world, but it sure did get the job done. Good hustle, son! Jimmy: That was some clutch hitting, boy. Great job! Great job! That's the first loss for that kid (the Mercs' pitcher) this summer." As he spoke, the club echoed the skipper's kudos to each player named. There was a general feel-good atmosphere brewing, but then Mullins shattered it.

"SHEEBOOM!"

"Yes sir."

"You know what the steal sign is, son?"

"Yes sir."

"Did you see me give you the steal sign?"

"No sir."

"So, why did you steal?"

I never had to get a steal sign from Coach Trahorn at the Mount. I always had the green light.

"I d-d-don't know. I thought I c-c-could make it. Thought I had a g-g-good ju-ump and it, it seemed like a g-g-good thing to do at the ta-ta-time. I though it m-m-might sp-ssp-spark us." Dixie was embarrassed that the jerk had provoked his stuttering, just as Ryz'n had last night.

"Spa-ssp-sp-spark us, hunh?" Mullins used his position of authority cruelly to mock his personal scapegoat. "Spark us? That stunt could have backfired in our face, boy. That kid has a terrific pick-off move and that's the premier throwing catcher in the ACC over there. Now Jimmy's the best hitter we've got. (*No, I'm the best hitter we've got.*) Now son, everyone tells me you should be getting more playing time. I let you play one game and you strike out four times, leave six guys on base, four of them in scoring position and you cost us a run with a boot in the field, too. So tonight, I put you in to pinch run with the game on the line and how do you repay me? By ignoring me

Out at Home

and doing whatever you please? Why the hell am I even here, son? Just to haul the bats and balls to the field?"

Dixie looked at the ground and swallowed his tongue.

"Well? Look at me son, when I'm talking to you."

The bastard had not even had the decency to take the team down the left field line to undress Dixie privately. Shoot! All the parents, wives and girlfriends in the nearby stands, even the opposing players could hear the jerk, including Robby Neff, who was yet close by at the water fountain. Dixie was totally embarrassed.

"Sheeboom, I'm talking to you!" Dixie looked up to face his accuser.

"Ye-Ye-Yes sir."

"Son, you seem to have a problem with authority figures. I understand you were kicked out of the service, too. Now if you want to remain on this ball club, you'll do what I say when I say it. Got that?"

Where does he come off quoting my service record here like that and he didn't even get it right! Dixie tightened his jaw and clenched his fists.

"Ye-Yes sir."

"When I say jump, I expect you to say how high. Do you understand me, boy?"

"Ye-Yes sir!"

"Jump!"

Dixie stood up. "Ha-ha-how ha-ha-high, Sir?"

"Good, then we understand each other. Now collect the equipment and bring it over to my car. And get a haircut. I won't have my ballplayers looking like sheepdogs."

"Ye-ye-yess s-sir." That frozen breach brewing in Dixie's gut just widened a bit more. *Get a haircut? Shoot! There were two other guys on the team with long hair and the jerk never said anything to them.*

Then Mullins informed the team that, due to the impending holiday, and a following scheduled bye, their next game was not scheduled for another week. That would be next Wednesday at Wheaton Regional Park in Montgomery County. *That was the field Ryz'n had described to me as the place where I had played right before our near fatal car accident on the Beltway. The one I still can't recall yet.* They were to be at that park at six-thirty for a game that would start an hour later. Mullins also had arranged to use the Glynn Park High School field for pitchers' soft toss an optional batting practice next Monday at six p.m. Then the mush-for-brains-manager dismissed the team without further fanfare.

Dixie was mortified. He felt one of those old, monster headaches coming on. The previously upbeat mood of the team now matched Dixie's downer. Some of his teammates patted him on the back. Mr. Gasch told him not to worry about what Mullins had said. The assistant coach promised Dixie that he would speak with the manager on Dixie's behalf and "not to worry." He advised Dix to "enjoy the week off." By then, the affable coach promised he would have straightened out the surly Mullins. As usual, Dixie and Lonny Sintmoyen collected the equipment and carried it over to Mr. Mullins' car. And, as usual, the manager didn't thank them for their help. He was too busy arguing out of their earshot with Mr. Gasch.

Stealing Second

Lettie Sintmoyen, Sherri, Robby Neff and Terri Sunrise (Neff's girl) had followed Dixie and Lonny to the parking lot. Lettie congratulated her man for getting things started in the ninth. Sherri congratulated Dixie with an unexpected peck on the cheek, too, which irked Dixie a bit. The others seemed to look upon her as an intruder and he kind of agreed. Miss Sweet Sixteen knew none of them; had no Pocomoke connections and her teen age did not fit in with these young adults. Then Dixie stopped and thought about the spontaneous sincerity of Sherri's act just now and he thought better of her. Shoot! She was the only one who had been on his side lately. He didn't see anyone else here, who cared enough about him to congratulate him with a kiss. He merely nodded coolly in return however. Everyone seemed to be talking at once. Jimmy D joined them, carrying his athletic bag, having already stripped down to his inner shirt, sliding shorts and sandals, the post game fashion du jour. Sherri told Dixie she needed a ride home, but first she was looking forward to that root beer he had promised her.

As he leaned against his car, knocking the dirt from his spikes, Ronnie Millison, the lanky, sunburned right fielder and sometimes first baseman, called from across the parking lot.

"Hey Nick! Some of us are headin' over to the 'Do Drop'. You and Lonny comin'?"

Sherri seized Nick's arm with both hands, rising up and down on the balls of her feet, gleefully hopeful. Lonny and Lettie said they'd go. Robby and Terri agreed also. Stump, the first basemen, yelled from his car that he and MaryBeth would be there, too. TC said he was going home to ice his arm down. And Jimmy D threw in his lot with the postgame Do Droppers.

"Yeah, we'll be there," cried Dixie.

A few beers with a few friends should be just the cure for his pounding head. Sherri jumped up and kissed him on the cheek again. In fact, she could hardly keep from bobbing up and down. Her joy bubbled over onto him, but the best he could manage was a wan smile her way. It always starts this way, he mused, only to wind up ugly as it had between her and Gary earlier in the third base stands.