

PHILIP GERARD



HARDBALL

AFTER COLLEGE, when I lived in Burlington, Vermont and tended bar at the Last Chance Saloon on Main Street, only a few rough blocks above Lake Champlain and the tank farms and barge docks that are gone now, replaced by a tourist pavilion and a yacht basin, I got recruited to join a baseball team in one of the small outlying towns. We played other town teams, usually on weekends. Our home field was built on the edge of a granite quarry; beyond the outfield fence lay oblivion. The first practice, as I trotted out to my position in left field, the center fielder warned me: “Don’t go diving over that fence after a ball—it’s a long way down.”

I leaned over the chain-link fence and stared down a hundred vertical feet onto solid rock, flat and smooth where the gray stone had been carved away in great square slabs. “No prob,” I said.

The infield was dangerous and fast, hardpan base paths and close-cropped grass. The pitcher’s mound was high and the batter’s box was a ditch. It was as if whoever had designed this baseball diamond had tried to make it as hard on everybody as possible.

It was a country of hardscrabble farms and bone-cracking winters, sunk deep in recession. Half the men on the team were out of work; the

others scrambled between two or three different jobs, trying to make ends meet. They stacked groceries or repaired cars all day and then spent their evenings splitting firewood for sale. In the winter they drove snowplows and repaired chainsaws. Their lives held little that was frivolous, and they loved the game with a fierce and serious intensity.

Our player-manager and catcher was a muscle-bound plumber who shaved his head and sharpened his cleats with a file before each game. He had a habit of firing the ball back sidearm to the pitcher after each pitch, daring him to catch it. That first day, as we loosened up, throwing and catching, he burned one into my glove so hard my palm stung. He grinned at me through missing front teeth. “We play hardball, son,” he said. “Got it?”

“Right.” I loped out to shag flies, wary of the low fence and the long drop.

Our outfield captain had come up through the Yankee farm system with Mickey Rivers. When Rivers went north to star in the Big Show, however, the Yankees gave him his release. After that, he roamed semi-pro outfields with an attitude and eventually found his way onto our team. He was a rangy, strong guy with remarkable instincts, good for at least one home run per game, and he could chase down any fly ball in the same county.

He played mad. He swung at pitches like a man murdering his wife’s lover with an ax. When he chased the ball into left field, I cleared out of his way. I always had the uneasy feeling that one day he was going to leap over that fence after a fly ball. That he wanted to do it. That one day he would just take a running leap and catch the ball on the way down.

The Pirates had drafted our pitching ace and his eighty-five-mile-an-hour fastball straight out of high school—then released him after a single season, claiming he was psychologically unstable and a menace. So we’d heard. He’d get that light in his eye, and he wouldn’t take signals from the catcher. He wouldn’t take signals from anybody.

He always pitched with a manic grin on his face. His control was erratic—or so he pretended. I think now he always knew exactly what he was doing, and the crazy act was just a way to psych-out the hitters. He’d wing pitches over the backstop just to keep the batters guessing.

The more furious the batter became, the bigger he grinned. He seemed to like keeping everything—his fastball, the batter, the fielders, the game—just on the verge of going out of control. If the other team got a rally going, he would knock down the next hitter, and no umpire ever called him on it.

In our league, you had to actually injure another player to get thrown out of the game, and then it was even money.

Our pitcher's brother was our second baseman, a spray hitter whose trademark was the headfirst slide—a dangerous play, since on a close throw your face winds up dueling with the baseman's knees, fists, and spikes. This was during Pete Rose's heyday, years before he disgraced himself gambling and wound up banned from the game for life. Rose had a way of never being satisfied—if he had a clean single, he hungered after a double, and he'd batter down anybody in his way to get it. Our second baseman showed that same hunger, tried to stretch every hit into a triple, and more often than he had any right to, he succeeded. His face and arms were always cut and bruised, as if he spent his time brawling in taverns and not hitting to the opposite field.

The other players were equally eccentric: aging jocks who had once had a shot at the big time and blown it, holding on, doing it the hard way, playing for keeps.

In that league, we slid high and threw low. No game was complete without a knock-down collision at home plate or a free-for-all at second base. More than once I came home with blood on my jersey.

I'd never been better than a mediocre player. I had no dreams of glory, but I've always enjoyed the game. When it is right, there is no better game, no better feeling than the smooth swing that connects with a fastball, no sound more thrilling than the crack of a line drive coming off the sweet spot of a wooden bat and already leaving the infield by the time you hear the sound. I could pound out doubles, hit a long ball once in awhile, and catch anything in the outfield that landed in front of me. But I couldn't hit a really slick curveball, and I couldn't make the over-the-shoulder catch going away.

In that league, though, pitchers preferred to smoke the ball right down the middle of the plate—mano a mano—and I could hit a fastball

all day long. Defensively, I played with my back to the fence, out of pure terror. I charged in on everything. So I had the season of my life. That summer I was power-lifting, and I handled a thirty-five-ounce Louisville Slugger easily. I rapped out vicious grounders that sent shortstops sprawling. I ricocheted frozen ropes off the center-field fence. That troubled crew made me believe I was better than I was, and I played harder than I ever had.

We played under summer skies choked with thunderheads that scraped open their black bellies on the craggy rims of the mountains and doused us with hard rain, in golden afternoon light cooled by the deep verdure of swaying evergreen trees, into the sudden chilly twilight that carries voices for miles and years and calls children home to their suppers. We played forever, that summer.

We slugged our way to the playoffs, in which I doubled in the winning run, and now it came down to a final game.

Like every contest in which winning carries virtually no reward, we fought the championship game out hard and for keeps. At long last, the classic moment arrived—how could it not, that season? Two out, bottom of the ninth, down by a run, two men on base. I stepped up to the plate. The pitcher winged a fastball down the alley, and I nicked it up over the backstop. He came right back at me with another fastball on the corner, and I slammed it down the third base line, just foul. The thin crowd in the bleachers was going nuts. I stepped out of the box to whack the mud off my cleats, took a breath, then stepped in.

I remember even now the quality of the light—that clear Vermont light, crisp as green apples, the field of vision opening beyond the scowling pitcher and the crouching infielders and the outfielders kicking at the grass like horses, beyond the silver top rail of the fence into absolute blue sky.

My wrists were loose and the bat felt weightless. Everybody was shouting—my teammates, the other players, the wives and girlfriends and younger brothers in the stands—and their voices blended into a kind of surfy incomprehensible murmur. I had a clear vision of what was about to happen. The pitcher was rattled. His next fastball would sail in a little too high. I would get around on it quick and sock it into left center field.

Watch it arc over the fence.

Not start my home-run trot toward first base until the white ball disappeared into the quarry.

The pitcher wound up. His arm whipped past his ear in a blur. The ball came in high and fast, just as I had predicted. I dug in my back foot, took a short step with the front one, and swung from the heels. The power came out of my thighs and up my back and down from my shoulders into my thick arms and the wrists snapped around quick and the bat sang through a perfect arc.

But it was a curveball. It tailed magnificently toward my knees. I missed it by a country mile. I swung so hard, I cracked the thin handle of the barrel-heavy bat. When I swatted it against the ground in disgust, it busted clean in two.

A few months later, I left Vermont. I played one last season with a town team in Delaware—a young, careless bunch who played not hardball, but baseball. I never again played under such low skies, never again played with such desperate men, never again hit so hard or wanted to win so badly that the night before a game my stomach hurt.

Whenever I watch a big-league game on TV now, I can't help but think of all the guys who didn't make it. Who almost made it. Who couldn't hit the slick curveball. Whose defensive game was one step too slow, or whose character had some hairline fracture that revealed itself under the public stress of pro competition as under an x-ray. Whose timing was flawed, who guessed wrong just once too often, whose luck came up just one swing short of stardom. Whose imagined future never came true, leaving them baffled, bereft of any idea of how to live out their adult lives.

Who had been the boys with the high expectations, the heroes of their high schools, the older brothers whom their parents always bragged about, the boys all the other boys wanted to be like, who ached for glory, who never learned properly how to be men—how to take from disappointment hope, and from failure the dignity of their secret character.

That was the point of the game, of playing hard, of winning in that golden crisp light when you felt you could hit and run and throw forever—and also of striking out so wildly your neck stung with shame

and losing a game that stuck like a pill in the throat. It was only a game, but it was a game that could teach you all you ever needed to learn about heartbreak and glory—provided you paid attention, and provided you let it go.

I imagine them out there still, roaming ugly hardscrabble fields in far-flung country places, throwing low and sliding high, inflicting as much pain on each other and themselves as they possibly can, season after season, waiting to take that last great flying leap over the fence and into oblivion. ☹

AFTER WORDS

An essay often comes together from two different directions, from two distinct experiences, sometimes years apart. Almost from the moment I played on that baseball team in Vermont, I knew the experience carried significance larger than just my own participation in a hard-played, hard-luck season. Yet it took many years to understand: years in which I abandoned certain dreams and embraced others, years in which my knee at last collapsed in right field and sent me three times under the surgeon's scalpel and out of baseball for good, years in which I watched Major League World Series games with increasing awareness of the professional skill required to play at that level, years in which I watched some of the most promising individuals of my childhood fail miserably at their lives, years in which I had the leisure to reflect on what that long-ago lost season had meant.

At last the story I had participated in all those years ago seemed both more vivid than ever and also larger than myself. It seemed a story that might resonate with the ambitious young and the disillusioned old alike—and all the ones in between—who had made peace with their lives, daring as much as they dared, learning how to handle success and come back stronger from defeat, and savoring the hard experiences that chiseled their lives into the shapes they now recognized, the defining moments in which they created the character they would live with for a lifetime.