



Choppy Waters
Right-fielder

Chapter 2

The Perfect Throw

Summer, 1957

Boys, don't listen to bullies. They are insecure and pick on smaller, weaker people to make themselves feel big and important. Instead, listen to the people who believe in you and want to help. That's the lesson I learned in my first season playing little league baseball. Here's what happened.

As spring's warm days melted the snow, my father's thoughts turned to baseball. Not the Bears, Denver's AAA team, or even an adult softball team on which he could play, rather an introduction to the game for me. Believing that I was still too young to play on a local Little League team, he announced to Mom and me that I could get a good look into the game by serving as a batboy. He hoped he could find a place for me on a team of older kids; maybe cousin Paul or cousin Mike's team had a spot? While I didn't say it, I wasn't positive I needed an introduction to the game. I wasn't confident in my athletic skills and would just as soon build model cars.

Dad and I climbed into his '54 Pontiac Star Chief and headed for town to Little League registration. He had bought that car second-hand with low mileage and in very good condition. It was a two-tone, with a white top over a pinkish-beige body; the term "flesh-toned" comes to mind. The car's best feature was a chrome Indian head that served as the hood ornament. Facing into the wind, the stern-looking Indian tapered into a sleek flattened tube that split the entire hood. The same flesh-and-white color combination carried into the interior. The seats were leather with flesh-toned inserts surrounded by white. Dad spent weekends washing and waxing the car and preserving the leather seats with saddle soap. It was a beautiful car, the nicest car he ever owned, and he was rightfully proud of it.

Little League registration was held at the Public Service Company office on Washington Avenue. Dad had been the office manager there before being promoted to a management position for the same company in Denver. We arrived at the office and Dad said hello to the assembled Little League officials, all of whom he knew well as a result of growing up in town, managing the Public Service office, serving as a volunteer fireman, and being president of the Lions Club. Dad was well known, and well liked.

Dad inquired about the batboy position and the opportunities were discussed. Then, Mr. Johnson, one of the officials, asked my age and birthday. When I told him I was nine and my birthday was December 25, he consulted the rulebook and then told

Dad I was old enough to be on a team as a player, but just barely. The cutoff date was December 31. Dad couldn't have been happier. I, on the other hand, wasn't so sure. This turn of events meant I could play on a team, but with kids from third grade, not second. I would be the youngest on the team. I knew this was not a good thing. And to make matters worse, I was assigned to a team from Clear Creek, an area a few miles outside of town. None of the kids even went to my school. I kept my fears to myself; I didn't want to disappoint my father.

Several days later the team assembled for our first practice. As always, a few of the kids had some talent and were immediately assigned the skill positions: pitcher, shortstop, and catcher. Others, while not as talented as the pitcher and shortstop, proved they could throw and catch and were assigned first, second, and third bases. Kids with no infield skills, but strong arms and the ability to catch a fly ball, were assigned left- and center-field positions. Only right field remained. It was the position assigned to the weakest player on the team — me.

Not only could I not field, I could not hit. I was afraid of the ball and with good reason. Few third-grade pitchers had much control. They could, however, throw hard; they just weren't too sure where the ball was going. I was plunked by a pitch during my first batting practice and never recovered.

Being fat, wearing glasses, and the being the worst athlete on the team made me an easy target for a few of the older kids who teased and ridiculed me, especially Jack, the first baseman. Jack was a bully and always had something demeaning to say when I failed to make a catch or when I struck out, which was often. But my teammates weren't all mean. Jimmy, the catcher, always encouraged and tried to help me with my batting stance, and Marty, the pitcher, did his best to help me learn to field.

We practiced twice a week and after several weeks, our coach, Marty's dad declared us ready to play. He handed out uniforms that consisted of white wool pants, red stirrup socks, and red hats with a white G on the front. "Where are the jerseys?" we asked pretty much in unison. It turned out that the town didn't have the budget for jerseys, so we would make white T-shirts do. White embroidered oval patches with red trim and the team's sponsor, the Elks Lodge, were handed out with instructions to have mothers sew them onto the back of a white T-shirt. No one was happy about this situation, especially me. If I couldn't play well, could I at least look good?

Boys, Here's What Happened

As the season wore on, Coach drilled us with the basics of the game: Never throw behind the runner. Use two hands to catch a fly. Always hit the pick off man. Keep your eye on the ball. Get your glove on the ground to field a grounder.

We played five games that season, and while we were improving, we lost the first four to Arvada, Wheatridge, Alameda, and Bear Creek; all of these teams, I should add, had complete uniforms. While not the deciding factor in any loss, my performance was dismal. I ran in on fly balls only to watch them sail over my head for home runs. I couldn't get my glove down on grounders, allowing the ball to roll between my legs for more home runs. And, I was zero for 12 at-bats, striking out every time. Jack was sure to point out each of these failures in loud and hurtful language. "Can't you hit?" or "Can't you catch?" he would scream, depending on my failure of the moment. The coach, Marty, or Jimmy would tell him to knock it off, but truth was, I couldn't hit or catch. Dad encouraged me. "At least you're swinging instead of just standing there," he told me. "Sooner or later you'll get a hit." I imagine he was thinking the law of averages would catch up with me eventually.

Finally, it was the last game of the season. As the visiting team, we were the first to bat on a sunny Sunday afternoon against a team from Lakewood, a town a few miles east, and the powerhouse of the league. Their uniforms were better than any other. Grey wool pants and shirts with black and orange trim. They wore black hats with an orange L on the front, and black socks. They were undefeated and confident that we were not their match.

As it turns out they were wrong. Golden scored three in the top of the first. Their pitcher was wild and walked in two of the three runs. The other came on an error as their center fielder misplayed a ball that Marty hit hard and deep. Not to be outdone and living up to their reputation as sluggers, Lakewood scored five in the bottom of the inning to take a two-run lead.

We weren't going down without a fight. We scored two in the top of the third but Lakewood came back with two of their own in the bottom of the third. Neither team could get a run across in the fourth.

After four innings of a five-inning game, the score was Lakewood 7, Golden 5, nothing like the massacre that everyone had predicted. Golden's parents, usually somber at this point in a game since we normally trailed by a wide margin, were on their feet yelling encouragement. Lakewood's parents were doing the same.

It was the top of the fifth, the last inning, and our first hitter and number eight batter struck out on three called strikes, never swinging once. I was up. As the number nine hitter and only second-grader on a third-grade team, no one had high hopes that I would get a hit, let alone get on base. Dad kept his hopes alive, yelling for me to keep swinging. The first pitch was a fastball down the middle. I swung late and missed. The next pitch was low and inside. I swung and was shocked when the ball hit the bat. It was a high foul, arching over the backstop and into the parking lot where it came to rest on the windshield of Dad's '54 Pontiac, shattering the glass. Dad looked back at the car for several long seconds and his shoulders sagged. He turned his attention back to me. "Great contact!" he yelled, "Keep swinging!" The count was two strikes, no balls. The next pitch was a ball low and outside and for the first time in my life I didn't swing. The pitcher was getting tired and was losing control.

The next pitch was high and inside. The words "quick and nimble" and "Choppy Waters" were never used in the same sentence. The pitch hit me on the left shoulder before I could even think about ducking or stepping back. Immediately, a cheer went up from the Golden team and assembled parents. "You're on first!" coach yelled. I rubbed my shoulder, choked back a few nine-year-old tears, and started down the base path. I was on base for the first time ever.

Jimmy, our lead-off hitter, was up next. He ran the count to two strikes, three balls before drawing a walk. I trotted down to second and Jimmy took first. Our next hitter struck out, bringing Marty to the plate. Marty hit another shot to center. Jimmy was nearly to second before I started running. He yelled at me to run and I headed for third. Right behind me, Jimmy kept yelling, "Run, head for home!" I followed his orders, rounded third, and crossed home plate with Jimmy only a step behind me. The score was tied. Marty was on third and there were two outs.

Jack, our clean up hitter, was waiting in the on-deck circle. He looked at me as I headed for the bench and with a sneer said that was the most pathetic base running he had ever seen. Jimmy looked at him menacingly and told him, "Shut up, Jack. Let's see what you can do with your bat."

Jack took his spot in the batter's box and looked at a called strike. Slamming his bat to the ground, he looked at the umpire and yelled, "No way that was a strike!" The ump told him one more outburst like that and he would sit him down for bad sportsmanship.

Boys, Here's What Happened

Jack turned to face the batter, and once again looked at another called strike. Jack turned and opened his mouth to say something, but before he could, Coach called time out. "Jack, don't say a word," Coach said walking to home plate and putting an arm around Jack's shoulder. Walking Jack away from the plate Coach continued. "Settle down. Take a deep breath." Jack fumed.

"He's blind. Those were no strikes. What an idiot," Jack shot back in frustration. Jack's shrill voice carried back to home plate and into the stands.

Coach hoped to give Jack a few more minutes to regain his composure, but the ump, tired of the display called, "Play ball!" It was a miracle Jack was still in the game.

"Jack, we need a hit!" Coach yelled encouragingly as Jack headed back to the batter's box.

Jack took his spot in the box then looked at the pitcher as he delivered. The pitch was high. Jack swung and missed. Jack walked back to the dugout, threw his helmet, and hit Gil, our second baseman, bringing tears, and a harsh reprimand from Coach. Fortunately, the ump was in the restroom so he missed Jack's latest display of anger. We headed onto the field for the bottom of the last inning.

Marty was throwing hard, but five innings was more than he usually pitched, and he was tiring. In earlier games, we had been 10 runs behind after three innings, which invoked the "mercy rule" to end the game and our misery so Marty hadn't had to pitch this many innings. And, as luck would have it, he was facing the top of Lakewood's order.

The lead-off hitter punched a grounder to Gil, our second baseman. Still hurting from the impact of Jack's thrown helmet, Gil fielded the ball, but promptly threw it over Jack's head and into the Lakewood dugout. "What are you doing?" Jack screamed at Gil as the runner stopped at second.

Glaring at Jack, Marty bore down and fanned the next two batters, bringing Lakewood's clean-up hitter to the plate. He was a lefty, which meant he pulled the ball to right field, where I stood with growing apprehension. When Lakewood scored five in the first, he had hit a two-run homer. It was hit so hard; I didn't even have to run in for it to fly over my head.

"Throw's to home!" our shortstop yelled to everyone, in case the batter didn't hit it out of the park.

“Throw’s to home!” we yelled in reply.

Marty got him to swing and miss on the first pitch then ran the count to three balls, one strike. The batter knew the next pitch would be a strike and he swung mightily, but topped the ball. It bounced through the infield, a hard grounder headed straight at me. The Lakewood player on second, running on the pitch, headed for third. The batter, sensing he had just won the game, started for first at a leisurely pace. The runner rounded third and, knowing the game was in hand, slowed as well. After all, their clean-up hitter had just sent a hard ground ball to right field and it was headed to the weakest athlete on the field.

Somehow I fielded the ball cleanly. I threw as hard as I could for home, but my weak arm meant that the throw would never get there. Jack, thinking the game was over, had thrown his glove to the ground, and was kicking dirt. “Jack!!!” I screamed as the ball left my hand headed right at him. Jack looked up just in time for the ball to hit him square on the forehead. Down he went, spread-eagled in front of first base, and the ball rolled toward Marty on the mound. The hitter picked up speed, jumped over Jack, and landed on first with both feet. The runner scored. We lost.

Thanks to my weak arm, Jack wasn’t seriously injured. He was quickly on his feet, a red lump growing on his forehead, and characteristically, he blamed me for losing the game. “You jerk!” he screamed at me. By this time, Jimmy and Marty had had enough of Jack. One on either side, they grabbed him by the front of his T-shirt, told him to “Shut his trap,” then pushed him hard. As he stepped back, he stumbled over first and ended up flat on his back again. A cheer went up from our team, and even a few parents clapped.

As I walked back to the dugout, Jimmy and Marty waited for me near the mound. “Hey,” Marty said, “That was the wrong base.”

I was looking at the ground feeling bad about my weak arm and throwing to first when I heard Jimmy add, “But it was a perfect throw!”