

The Coach

By H. W. Moss

Coach held the stop watch in his right hand at eye level and when the lead runner passed clicked. At least two seconds later as Robert ran past dead last, he clicked the second second hand on the watch.

Coach examined the time, looked to be suitably impressed with the one. From the expression on his face he was obviously not so impressed with the other.

The runners were gathered in a cluster nearby breathing hard. A couple were bent over, palms on knees, heads bowed. A few ran in place. Robert paced in a small circle lifting his legs high like a trotting horse.

“Good sprint Joey,” Coach said singling out the first to cross. He did not comment further.

Robert asked, “How bad was I, Coach?”

“Let’s just say you’re not cut out for short hops.”

Last year Robert’s endurance in the mile run won him first position at 5:02:27. Today, he could not place.

“All right youse guys,” Coach shouted in his best Brooklynese. He was not from the East Coast. “Let’s play ball.” He pocketed the watch and hefted a wood bat to his shoulder and tossed a ball in the air and swung a high pop fly to the scattering group of high school juniors. Each picked up a mitt and ran, but none was fast enough to reach the pop up which landed before anyone could get under it. Another high fly came toward earth, but Bobby Pimm managed to pick it out of the air and returned it to Tim Stanton who was the only one of the twenty young men who had not fled to the field and now

stood beside Coach as catcher collecting the incoming, tossing these gradually and carefully to Coach who plucked them from the air and threw them up one-by-one and swung with a rhythm and pace that kept everyone in the outfield moving.

“Coming at you Waters, look alive,” and the ball went out to right field. “This one’s for you Thompson,” Coach said selecting a fielder by pointing out where he wanted the ball to go Babe Ruth style. Coach elected to send the next ball to center. “Think fast!” and sent another to Waters who fumbled, chased, picked up the grounder, threw it awkwardly toward Stanton who had to lean left to catch it, one foot on home plate.

“There’s a art to fielding a ground ball Waters, and you ain’t got a paint brush!”

This time the fly was short and Waters ran toward the ball as it bounced once and disappeared into his glove. His return to second was right on.

“Atta boy.” Coach continued popping them up. Mike Jenson was quick on his feet as Coach belted one his way.

By now each boy assumed their true positions. Paul Orr relayed the ball home from the pitcher’s mound. Ted Maschal and Dave Barkman dove together in right field; Ted came up with the ball. Short stop Kirby Whitehead was fast, got under the ball, threw it to third baseman Gene Ober. Coach singled out Robert who had the presence of mind to step back and under the fly but instead of relaying to second, he threw it home where the ball hit the ground and rolled.

“That would be considered an error!” Coach shouted even as he swung and sent another ball to left field.

Fielding morphed into batting practice. There was a lot of swinging but little hitting as Coach encouraged each boy in his stance. Wind sprints followed and Robert heard his

name called several times as he turned and sprinted, turned and ran, turned and ran. It was said that if Coach singled you out like that, it meant he liked you.

Robert was not so sure of that.

Practice ended and the team was sent to the showers, all except Robert whom Coach pulled aside. One arm over the boy's shoulder, Coach sought to give counsel. Robert was almost as tall as he would be later in life, half the weight, nearly Coach's height. It looked like two pals, not leader and follower, teacher/student.

Robert did not feel intimidated. He respected his coach and sometimes thought how Coach could act, if not exactly fatherly toward him, at least as an adult friend who only wanted to help Robert become successful. This made Robert want to excel, to make the man proud as Robert was proud to be on the team with the other players, out in the field with Jenson who everyone said was headed for the Big Show, professional baseball on television, or Barkman who had already won a football scholarship, or any of the other guys who, coach said in the avuncular, "are destined because they are athletic."

"But Bobby, I gotta tell you like it is. You can't field for crapola. I mean, it's not that you're the slowest on the team, but you're the slowest on the team and you can't seem to field for crap either. That's what you gotta work on. I mean, you got endurance up the ying-yang. You're like a Faulkner character, you're like Dilsey: You endure." Coach taught English literature in addition to P E. English had been his minor. He majored in Physical Education. "But you can't field a freaking ball. That's what you gotta work on, fielding to first. Fielding to second. Heck, fielding to center field when you're way out in left and you get a grounder, but you don't field home. You get me boy? You gotta work in your fielding."

Robert said, "Right Coach. I will."

The words stuck as Coach let him go, gave him a pat on the butt and said take your shower. Robert ran as fast as he could toward the locker room hoping this demonstrated how important he took the words to be.

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Robert loved baseball. For the last year, his first waking thought every morning was to jump into his clothes and get outside with his mitt and ball where he threw against the garage door in the driveway -- throw and catch, throw and catch -- in the hour before he had to be at school. He reluctantly went inside when his mother called him to breakfast insisting first he shower and put the cap and ball and glove away and eat, now get out of here.

After school instead of taking the bus, he would run home. Then he and his golden Labrador retriever named Killer -- a completely ironic name for such a sweet tempered creature -- would run for hours together along the abandoned Pumpkin Vine railroad tracks between his house and Shipshiwana Lake and back again. In the evening if there was a game on he listened to the radio play-by-play and afterwards sifted through his baseball cards singling out players he had just heard announced.

In those days baseball cards came five to a pack of gum for five cents. He assiduously and faithfully chewed every square pink piece of bubble gum and joined a card trading club comprised of ten boys and one girl all equally fanatical about obtaining the entire major league, filling in the gaps with two for one trades of big names for lesser ones. He had cards for Chicago short stops Ernie Banks and Luis Aparicio. That was the

player Robert most modeled himself on because Aparecio was small and Robert thought of himself as small at the time.

He was in the dugout at the first home game of the season and cheered his team. He stood and applauded and shouted and learned to whistle with two fingers in his mouth, a loud piercing screech which he emitted when someone stole a base, hit a single, made a high flying pop up or slid home.

He rode the bus to away games and sat on the bench or hung on the wire mesh with his nose pressing through as the score was tied and then in the ninth Jenson came through and sent one over the heads of everyone in the outfield.

Coach played his first string and Robert was not at all unhappy to be considered second or even third string because he had made the team.

He waited to be called but it never happened. The entire season he sat on the bench benched. He did not realize this at first, chalked it up to Coach wanting the best men out on the field at all times, his best batters in the line up because he wanted to win. And the players wanted to win. And Robert wanted to win. And then the season came to an end.

Sitting in the back of the bus after their last away game, Robert watched fields of corn roll past, the road an open highway with occasional trucks roaring by and rocking their bus.

He was bitter. He realized he had sat out the entire season. The team trophied, but he never contributed except to cheer from the sidelines, outside the foul line, close enough to appreciate the maneuvers of play, the grace with which the third baseman caught a line drive, threw to second to prevent a stolen base or ran the runner out after he tagged up and got caught between second and third or got him in a squeeze play. But that

was it. He came no closer to actually being in the game than from watching from the dugout and every game was strong and well played.

Coach was meandering down the aisle slowly coming towards Robert. He held on to the back of a seat and leaned in toward one of the players saying what a good job he'd done, nice catch, we came in first in the league, we'll be as strong or stronger next year. He finally arrived at the seat in front of Robert who looked up quizzically.

"Got a plaque for you Robert. Come on by my office tomorrow and pick it up."

Robert said, "Why?"

"It's your trophy for the season. You get a plaque to hang on your wall like everybody else."

"Trophy? Why would I get a trophy?"

"Everyone on the team gets a commemorative award for our winning season."

Coach was expansive, his smile wide, pleased with himself.

"But I didn't do nothing to win no trophy." Robert was indignant. Coach just stood there eyes blinking astounded. "I don't want no damn trophy. I didn't do nothing to earn it."

Coach caught his breath after this rather astonishing statement. He had never heard such a thing. "Sure you did. You came to the practices and to every game, you rode the bus to all the away games."

Robert was steadfast in his refusal and said, "All I ever wanted to do, Coach, was play baseball."

That night when he got home Robert collected his ball and mitt and cap and went down to the Elkhart River and threw them in.

EPILOGUE

Robert never played baseball again. He still loved sports, watched football every Monday night, but he never joined a team. He lost interest in the World Series and stopped collecting baseball cards. His collection went into a shoe box which drifted up into the attic and was never retrieved. Decades later he wished he knew where it was because it was probably worth a fortune.

The next season a friend asked if he would be an assistant coach for a girls' softball team.

"You want me to stand at third and tell 'em to stick or run home or slide, is that it?"

"Yes."

"OK. But on one condition."

"What's that?"

"Every one of 'em who makes the team gets to play."

The team was lousy in the beginning. They lost 23 - 3, 20 - 2 and then they began to improve and then they got good and everyone said it was a great season even if they didn't trophy.

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In Memoriam: Robert Dean Fields (October 22, 1944 – July 13, 2012)