

TEAMMATES 2020

OLD MAN BASEBALL

BASEBALL EXISTS AS A TESTAMENT TO THE RELATIVELY OF SPACE AND TIME... A TESTIMONY TO BASEBALL'S PERFECTION. THE DISTANCE FROM HOME PLATE TO FIRST BASE - 90 FEET- DID NOT EVOLVE. IT ALWAYS HAS BEEN, AND EVER WILL BE. AS RED BARBER OBSERVED, 90 FEET IS AS CLOSE TO PERFECTION AS MAN HAS EVER COME.

SINCE WE WERE YOUNG, THE MEMBERS OF THE CECIL'S MARGIN SERVICE TEAM HAVE EAGERLY SET ASIDE THE OBLIGATIONS OF REAL LIFE FOR THOSE PRECIOUS WEEKS WE GET TO PLAY HOBBS BASEBALL. NOW THAT WE'RE OLD MEN, WITH FEWER OBLIGATIONS TO IGNORE, THE ONLY THING WE DON'T CARE FOR IS THE ANNUAL ARGUMENT CONCERNING RAYMOND FISHER

THAT'S WHERE HARLEY HUCKLEBY ENTERS OUR STORY...



Editor's note: Author Mike Murphey, a Roy Hobbs Hall of Fame member, and a fixture at the RHWS for some 20 years now, has written 5 books - the latest "Wasting Time" hit the bookstores October 1 - with 2-3 more in the word-mill. For his publisher at Acorn Publishing, he produced a short story about "Old Man Baseball" with figments of his imagination - one Raymond Fisher & a Harley Huckleby - as his rivals. Roy Hobbs is pleased to offer you their story ...

TEAMMATES 2020

BY MIKE MURPHEY

Special to Roy Hobbs Baseball

That guy, Jamie Sanchez said, “is living proof that just because you get old don’t mean you still ain’t a asshole.”

Jaime and I stared across a pristine baseball diamond in Fort Myers, Florida to find Harley Huckleby adjusting his cup and yelling at someone.

The Roy Hobbs World Series, held each fall in Fort Myers, offers adults from their 30s to 80s an opportunity to play baseball against folks their same age. Now, you might think guys in their 80s can’t still play. Baseball, however, exists as a testament to the relativity of space and time.

A routine ground ball offers proof.

Attend any Major League game. Watch a hitter of reasonable speed hit a routine grounder. The shortstop throws the hitter out by a step or two. Watch a game among guys in their 60s or 70s. The hitter hits a routine ground ball. The shortstop throws him out by a step or two. As players get older, the speed at which this occurs progressively declines. Teams use less and less of the outfield. The game, though, remains the game.

This marvelous congruency is testimony to baseball’s perfection. The distance from home plate to first base—ninety feet—did not evolve. It always has been, and ever will be.

As Red Barber observed, 90 feet is as close to perfection as man has ever come.

Since we were young, the members of our Cecil’s Margin Service team have eagerly set aside the obligations of real life for those precious weeks we get to play Hobbs baseball. Now that we’re old men, with fewer obligations to ignore, the only thing we don’t care for is

the annual argument concerning Raymond Fisher.

That’s where Harley enters our story.

At the start of each week Hobbs officials hold a meeting to go over rules and schedules and answer questions of eligibility. One team—the Wily Coots from Wily, Arkansas—never wants Raymond to play. Not all the Coots. Mostly just Harley, their manager.

Raymond has been a member of the Cecil’s squad for almost 15 years and during much of that time our best player. He signed a minor-league contract with the St. Louis Browns in 1950 as an 18-year-old high school senior from Cheney, Washington. A tall, all-elbows-and-knees pitcher, Raymond could throw a fastball with flames on it, a heart stopping slider, and a changeup—back then it was called a *change of pace* or a *let-up*—that was unfair.

He worked his way through the Browns’ system and when he turned 21, played 60 days with the big club—the final season before the Browns moved to Baltimore and became respectable. A knee injury derailed Raymond’s progress, but he kicked around professional baseball for another seven years until he woke up someplace in the Mexican League with an aching shoulder and a wounded spirit and decided time had come to go home.

Raymond became a teacher and a coach in his hometown, graduating several young men on professional baseball odysseys of their own.

‘Gave my heart to this game’

Only after he stopped coaching did Raymond play the game again.

We’d invited him to join us for years. His refusals were polite. Only once did he offer an explanation. “I gave my heart to this game,” he told me, “and the game took it, along

with everything else. I don’t think I could bear to climb onto a pitching mound again.”

A couple of summers into his retirement, though, we found him sitting on metal bleachers behind a chain link backstop at Cheney’s high school field, watching us take our ragged version of infield practice.

“I won’t pitch,” Raymond said, “but I think I’d like to play.”

We put him at first base where he immediately became our best hitter. People don’t understand how much ability is required to get even a sniff of the Major Leagues, how much beyond mere mortals professional players really are.

Against pitchers and defenders twenty-five years younger, Raymond put up astounding numbers, although his performance was often negated by our collective limitations. Though he never seemed to allow himself the careless joy most of us felt as we played, he applied himself with grace and tolerance and was a good teammate.

Most other teams in the local league appreciated that we were old guys still doing our best to play the game we loved. While they didn’t take it easy on us, they were respectful of our effort. One team, though, didn’t get it. They were a bunch of 35s who hadn’t yet understood they were only good enough to play baseball at high school fields on Saturday mornings—and we were all good enough to do that.

They demeaned opponents by running up the score when they could and were particularly amused by *our* efforts. We played them late one season and they were at their most obnoxious. Finally, Raymond walked from first base to the pitching mound.

“Give me the ball,” he told me.

Raymond took seven warm-up pitches. All fastballs giving off a

see OLD MAN BASEBALL on page 24

TEAMMATES 2020

OLD MAN BASEBALL

continued from page 19

sound like bacon frying as seams cut through the air. By the time he was ready, our opponents team stood along their dugout fence, mesmerized by white blurs emanating from an old man's arm.

"Batter up," the umpire said.

When he swaggered into the box, the would-be hitter sneered down to our catcher, Bob Cooper, "You'd better be sure this old fart doesn't hit anyone."

"Well," Bob answered after Raymond buried his first pitch deep in the guy's ribs, "you have to cut him some slack. His last outing was 40 years ago."

Grimacing and glaring, the batter limped to first base.

Their next hitter stepped to the plate. Raymond threw a little harder, resulting in another rib injury.

As he helped his wounded comrade to his feet, the on-deck batter's enthusiasm seemed to waver.

Bob trotted to the mound. I walked over from our dugout.

"You okay?" I asked Raymond.

"Never better."

"There's a league rule. You hit three guys you can't pitch any more that game."

"Okay."

The plate ump joined us.

"Looks like you're having a little trouble with your control," he said.

"No," Raymond said. "My control is dead on."

"Oh, well, okay," said the ump, who himself had been suffering abuse from our opponents all day. "But I won't let things get out of hand."

"No problem."

The next hitter managed a weak ground ball to second.

Raymond stuck out the last five.

Enforcing the baseball code

Raymond didn't seek confrontation. But, like Larry McMurtry's Capt. Woodrow Call in *Lonesome Dove*, Raymond *would not tolerate rude behavior*. He represented an era when baseball was art framed within a strict set of ethics. This involved playing hard while observing unwritten rules that did not allow *showing up* your opponents.

During Raymond's era, pitchers enforced this code. At the level we played, Raymond's tools of enforcement usually overmatched any other teams' ability to retaliate.

Mostly Raymond got along fine with everyone. Other players were, after all, guys who cared about the game just as he did. Getting crosswise with some folks is inevitable, though. And some of them nurture grudges for years.

Harley Huckleby, for instance.

Bad blood between Harley and Raymond took root the first time Cecil's and the Coots played against each other at the World Series. Harley is a stocky man with a barrel chest that has slipped to his middle regions. Even though he carries a prodigious gut, he can still hit a baseball with authority. Harley fancies himself an intimidator. He's fond of focusing a glare on opponents which threatens retaliation for whatever slight Harley might imagine he or the Coots have suffered. He blusters and blows, insults and smirks.

At that first meeting, Raymond relieved our starter to protect a slim seventh inning lead. Harley was the first hitter he'd face. Raymond typically takes a leisurely warm-up, focusing on mechanics rather than power. As he did so, Harley shouldered his bat and positioned himself halfway between the backstop and home plate, directly behind the right-handed batter's box.

"Hey, Blue," Raymond called to the umpire standing along the first base foul line, "move that guy out of there. He can't park there and watch me warm up."

"Out from behind the plate," the ump ordered, making a flicking motion with his fingers.

Harley smirked, bent to find his feet under that belly, and took three mincing steps backwards.

Raymond turned again to the ump who stared down the right field line. Raymond shrugged and unleashed a fastball which came screaming at Harley's gut.

Caught completely unaware by sheer velocity, Harley gave a squeaky little "aaaagggghhhhhh." His batting helmet remained suspended in mid-air as



he dove from underneath it. His bat pinwheeled, then bounded off toward the Coots' dugout. Harley landed on his ass with a puff of red dust and laid there, stomach protruding like an Everest from the perspective of any ants that might have crawled by.

Raymond asked for another ball.

Harley struggled to his feet, bellowing and pointing. The umpire met his complaints with indifference and said, "Batter up."

Harley stepped to the plate, murder in his eyes. He pointed his bat straight at Raymond, who answered with two fastballs and a slider that put Harley on his back again as the ump called strike three.

During the post-game handshake ritual, Harley aimed a finger at Raymond's chest and started to say something. Raymond is bigger up close than he appears from 60 feet away, and his look of malevolence stymied whatever insult or threat waited on Harley's lips.

The eligibility issue we argued every year had to do with Raymond's dementia which began to weave its tendrils through him during his middle 70s. His condition initially amounted to moments of simple confusion that Raymond laughed about. Then one Saturday during a league game he delivered a knee-buckling slider for a third out, and just stood there, unsure of which dugout was his. Paula took him home.

He returned the next week, hitting and throwing as well as ever, but his deterioration came rapidly. By the time he was 78, he mostly just sat on our bench and smiled.

see OLD MAN BASEBALL on page 26

TEAMMATES 2020

OLD MAN BASEBALL

*continued from page 24***'Can he keep coming out?'**

"Please," Paula asked me, "can he keep coming out? It's the one thing I think he looks forward to. I think he knows where he is when he's on a baseball field with you guys."

I said, "Of course, he can."

For the same reason, Paula brought Raymond to Florida. She dressed him in his uniform and drove him to the ballpark where the spark would return to his eyes and he'd greet each of us over and over as if he hadn't seen us for years.

Nobody minded.

Our pitchers were each having a bullpen session at the end of our Fort Myers pre-tournament workout two years later. We threw to Bob, just to get a feel for the hard, unrutted spring training pitching mounds so unlike the sand piles we threw from at home. Each pitcher waited off to the side for his turn to throw simulated counts to a couple of batters.

I hadn't noticed Raymond until I turned and saw him waiting with the others, that blank smile shining. As each pitcher finished his turn, Raymond shuffled one step closer to the big red bump on which he had invested so much of himself.

Finally, he stood at the back of the slope, his eyes displaying uncertainty.

"Hey, buddy," Jaime Sanchez said to him, "you want to stand on the mound?"

Jaime and Dean LaMont each took one of his elbows and guided him to the pitching rubber, where he glanced to his empty right hand.

"You think he wants a baseball?" Jaime asked me.

I handed him a ball. Raymond offered a hard stare to the catcher.

By now everyone had gathered around.

"Go ahead, Raymond," one guy said. "Throw one if you want."

"No, don't let him do that. He might fall and hurt himself."

"Aw, we'll catch him. Let him try."

"Okay, Raymond," I said, helping him put my baseball glove on his left hand.



He leaned forward a little and his gaze became more intense.

"I think he's waiting for a sign," I said to Jaime. "Hey, Bob, give him a sign."

Bob squatted, extending his index finger.

Raymond brought both hands and the ball to his chest. He tucked his left knee under his chin, balance steady as a post. He kicked toward the plate, keeping his head and torso poised above the pitching rubber as his left leg cast its long stride. His right arm traced a smooth, arc, deceptive in its effortlessness. The arc reached its apex above his shoulder. He drove off his back leg, landing with his head extended over his front foot as his arm finished its path, his hand almost striking the ground.

The ball exploded into Bob's mitt with a sound like a firecracker.

Raymond turned and wobbled on uncertain legs back to the pitching rubber.

"My God," I said to Jaime, "I think he can still pitch. Bob, throw the ball back."

Bob cocked his arm for his usual crisp return toss, then apparently thought better of it. Instead, he made a soft, looping lob that bounced off Raymond's chest.

"Well, that's a bit of a problem," Jaime said.

I picked up the ball and handed it to Raymond. "Call another one, Bob"

Bob showed three fingers. Raymond responded with a slider darting sharp and low as it nipped the plate.

Raymond threw for fifteen minutes

that day. Bob put down a sign. Raymond threw whatever pitch Bob called to wherever Bob located his glove.

We never saw the belligerent side of Raymond's disease.

Around us, Raymond always had that smile. At home as months passed, though, Paula dealt more and more with Raymond's stubborn refusals to cooperate. Her biggest concern about bringing him to Florida was that she wouldn't be able to handle him during his moments of obstinacy. The morning following his throwing session, though, she was thrilled. The experience, she said, seemed to have calmed him.

So, we had him throw a little when each day's game ended.

Pitching in a game ...

At Fort Myers we play on pristine spring training practice fields, most of which have a bullpen mound adjacent to the dugout. Raymond sat during much of a typical game, then at some point during late innings, he'd stand atop the bullpen mound and watch.

Finally, Jaime said, "We ought to let him pitch in a game."

"How can we?" I asked. "He might get hurt. He might hurt someone else."

"Hell, we're 80 years old," Jaime said. "We all might get hurt. And I haven't seen any sign of him being wild. He's on the roster, isn't he? Why can't he pitch?"

Bob leaned into the conversation.

"Okay, what about getting the baseball back to him?" I said. "He doesn't catch it."

"Have him throw to a couple of

see OLD MAN BASEBALL on page 27

TEAMMATES 2020

OLD MAN BASEBALL

continued from page 26

batters," Bob said. "I'll run the ball out to him."

"I don't know. Let me talk to Paula."

"Do you think he could do it?" Paula asked me.

"If we help him, sure. He throws the ball hard enough that guys our age can't hit it right back at him."

An opportunity came the next afternoon. We couldn't do anything right and the other team was up by 12 runs in the fifth inning. The game would most likely end according to the 10-run mercy after two more innings. I went to the opposing manager and explained the situation.

"You think he'll be all right out there?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. Getting on the mound really seems to calm him. Makes things easier for his wife."

The manager said okay, and I waved to Jaime who guided Raymond from our dugout and placed a baseball in his glove. The umpire joined us to see what was happening.

"I'm not sure about this," he said.

"The other manager says it's okay."

"But what if he gets hurt?"

"What if any of us get hurt?"

"Well, I'm gonna have to check with someone."

"Come on," Jaime said. "Let him throw to a hitter. If it doesn't work, we'll shut him down."

The umpire frowned. I patted Raymond's butt and said, "Go get 'em big guy."

The umpire took his place behind Bob. In the silence of the empty stadium, we could hear the conversation.

"Just making it clear to everyone," the umpire said, "I think this is a bad idea."

The hitter looked at Raymond, standing awkwardly with his blank smile, and said, "Give the guy a break. If he throws one at me, I'll get out of the way."

Bob squatted and extended his index finger.

Transformation

A shambling, awkward old man became transformed. His windup flawless. He kicked into an elegant stride and the ball streaked from his hand, hissing as it came, snapping into Bob's glove positioned on the outside corner at the batter's knees.

"Holy shit," said the umpire. "Um . . . that's a strike."

"Maybe we *should* rethink this thing," the hitter said as he backed away.

"Hey, he hit my glove," Bob said. "You'll be all right."

Bob trotted to Raymond, returned the ball, then trotted back. The hitter remained uncertain.

"Look, I'll tell you what's coming, okay?" we heard Bob say. "We'll throw another fastball same spot."

"Strike two!"

"Anything wrong with that?" Bob asked.

"Yeah. I don't think I can hit it."

Bob ran the ball out to Raymond.

"You up for a slider?" Bob asked upon his return. "We'll just put it right down the middle."

The hitter squibbed a popup to our shortstop.

Raymond gave up a couple of weak grounders, struck out one, then allowed a single to their leadoff hitter in the seventh.

Raymond's two innings became a tradition. We'd pick a time we were either way ahead or way behind. Tournament officials gave their blessing.

Harley became the only sticking point. Back when Raymond was himself, the Coots never had any luck against him. And now, every year, Harley objected to Raymond's mound appearance.

'... just let the guy play'

"Geeze, Harley," another manager said, "why don't you just let the guy play?"

"Because he doesn't have any idea where he is or what he's doing," Harley said. "He's a statue out there. He's gonna get hurt . . ."

"In case you haven't noticed, Harley," someone else said. "most of us are statues out there. Let 'em play."

A chorus of voices agreed. And for another year, Raymond's status was safe.

This last year, during the playoffs portion of the week, we won Thursday's game, so the Friday game would determine who went to Saturday's division championship. And, of course,

see OLD MAN BASEBALL on page 28



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TEAMMATES 2020

OLD MAN BASEBALL

continued from page 27

the Friday game was against the Coots.

I pitched and we were doing okay, but we suffered a couple of injuries. We were down by only a run in the seventh when our right fielder pulled both his hamstrings. Then our second baseman, Stevie Culver, hit a gapper and tried to stretch it into a double. He knocked his artificial hip out of place sliding into second and couldn't continue.

Before the game, Craig Derrick, our best hitter, called me and told me he would be late. He said his wife Rachel—who herself was beginning to have mental lapses—had gotten upset with him and hidden his teeth. Even at 80, Craig was a vein SOB and said he wouldn't play without his teeth. He said he would come as soon as he found them. So far, he hadn't showed up.

That left us with just 10 players, including Raymond.

Now I wasn't about to have Raymond pitch in a game like this. I had no doubt he could shut out the Coots for a couple of innings. But that might give Harley the ammunition he needed to disqualify Raymond from future participation.

I was still throwing okay. We had nine guys to play defense and were only down by a score of 2-1.

Things moved along to the bottom of the ninth. Our leadoff hitter walked, then the second guy hit a single. We had runners at first and second. I was up next and put down a sacrifice bunt, moving the runners to second and third. A base hit could win it, but our next hitter struck out.

That brought up Stevie, who had gone to the emergency room. According to the rules for the 80-plus division when a man is injured you don't have to take an out when you get to his spot in the order if no one is available to replace him. You just skip to the next hitter. When Ken Keeson, the hitter after Stevie, went to the plate, though, Harley Huckleby came unglued.

"He's not up yet," Harley yelled at plate umpire Shiner Jones, as he charged from his dugout.

"They had an injury. They're skipping

that spot," Shiner said.

"If they do that, this guy will be batting out of order," Harley said.

I joined the discussion. "Harley, we had an injury . . ."

"And you've got a man on your roster sitting on the bench. You can't just skip the spot if you've got a man to fill it."

"Wait a minute. Raymond can't ..."

'Cain't have it both ways'

"If he can stand on the mound, he can stand in the batters' box. Every time I argue he shouldn't be out there cause he might get hurt, you say any of us might get hurt. Well, you can't have it both ways."

Shiner conferred with his partner, then returned. "I think Raymond has to hit or we've got an out and the game's over."

Harley expected me to accept the third out and hand the Coots their win. I probably should have. Now, though, I was pissed. I walked to the stands and asked Paula if we should let Raymond bat. She said Raymond always loved to bat.

So, Jaime and I led Raymond to the left-handed batters' box. Maybe, I hoped, the Coot's pitcher, Wayne Pervis, would walk him, and we'd have one more shot at scoring the tying run from third.

Jaime positioned Raymond's hands and wrapped his fingers around a bat handle. We propped the bat on his shoulder.

Raymond stared off toward left field.

Shiner called, "Play ball."

Wayne delivered a careful strike.

Raymond took no notice—until the ball made its distinctive pop into the catcher's mitt. I watched as Raymond's smile faded to a thin-lipped slit. His eyes became aware.

"Go right after him!" Harley called to Wayne.

As Wayne began his windup, Raymond's stiff-legged stance resolved into bent-kneed purpose. The bat ticked off his shoulder. His grip softened, fingers caressing the thick wooden handle.

Although a warning signal might have flashed through Wayne's brain, he was already committed to another fastball, fat and inviting.

Raymond struck like a snake.

The sound rang through an empty stadium as Coot centerfielder Abner Deckland watched as the ball rolled to a stop near the warning track, that distant horizon that guys our age don't visit anymore.

Both runs crossed the plate.

Abner and the other Coot outfielders didn't even try to retrieve the ball. They just started trotting toward the dugout in acceptance of their loss.

I guess Harley and I both noticed at the same time that Raymond hadn't moved from home plate. Everybody had been looking to the outfield, admiring the sheer distance of Raymond's blast. Raymond, though, shouldered his bat and stared toward right-center field like everybody else. Our two baserunners maneuvered around him to touch the plate.

The Coots' outfielders had reached the outskirts of first base on their journey toward the visitors' dugout.

'Somebody get the damn ball'

"The ball!" Harley yelled at them. "Somebody get the damn ball!"

The biggest challenge of playing outfield when you are 80 years old is that the outfield is so damned far away. Just the act of getting there and back nine times a game is exhausting. Because they assumed the game was over, and because they wouldn't have to return to the ballpark's nether regions, the Coot outfielders had trotted part way and were winded.

Abner turned and looked at the baseball, sitting alone across that infinite sea of grass. He bent over, put his hands to his knees and shook his head. "Damn, Harley," he called, "I don't know if I can make it."

"Ambrose! Amborse!" Harley called to his second baseman, "You're closest! You go get it!"

Ambrose turned to stare at the white dot. His shoulders slumped. He looked back at Harley.

"Go ahead on!" Harley screamed.

Ambrose shrugged and did his best to obey. His last dose of ibuprofen though,

see OLD MAN BASEBALL on page 29

TEAMMATES 2020

OLD MAN BASEBALL

continued from page 28

had been six innings ago. The four red pills had all but worn off. So, he moved with something between a shuffle and a limp that I judged would get him to the warning track a little before dark.

I stepped from our dugout and walked toward the batter's box.

"Raymond," I called. "Raymond?"

Neither his eyes nor his smile wavered.

I stepped closer.

"Raymond?"

This time, Raymond turned and looked at me. He seemed surprised. "Mike," he said. His grin broadened. "How have you been? How . . . how . . ."

The thread of thought eluded him. His eyes went blank again.

Encouraging the runner

"He cain't do that!" Harley screamed over my shoulder. "He cain't do that! He cain't go up and talk to the batter like that!"

"Why not?" I asked, turning to Shiner who stood off to the side, arms folded, mask in one hand, watching Wayne toddle along on his expedition to the far country.

"You cain't assist the runner—"

"I'm not assisting the runner," I said. "I'm encouraging him. I don't know any rule that says how far away from him I have to be. Just as long as I don't enter the field of play."

"He's right Harley," Shiner said. "He just can't touch him."

Shiner consulted his wristwatch, then checked on Ambrose.

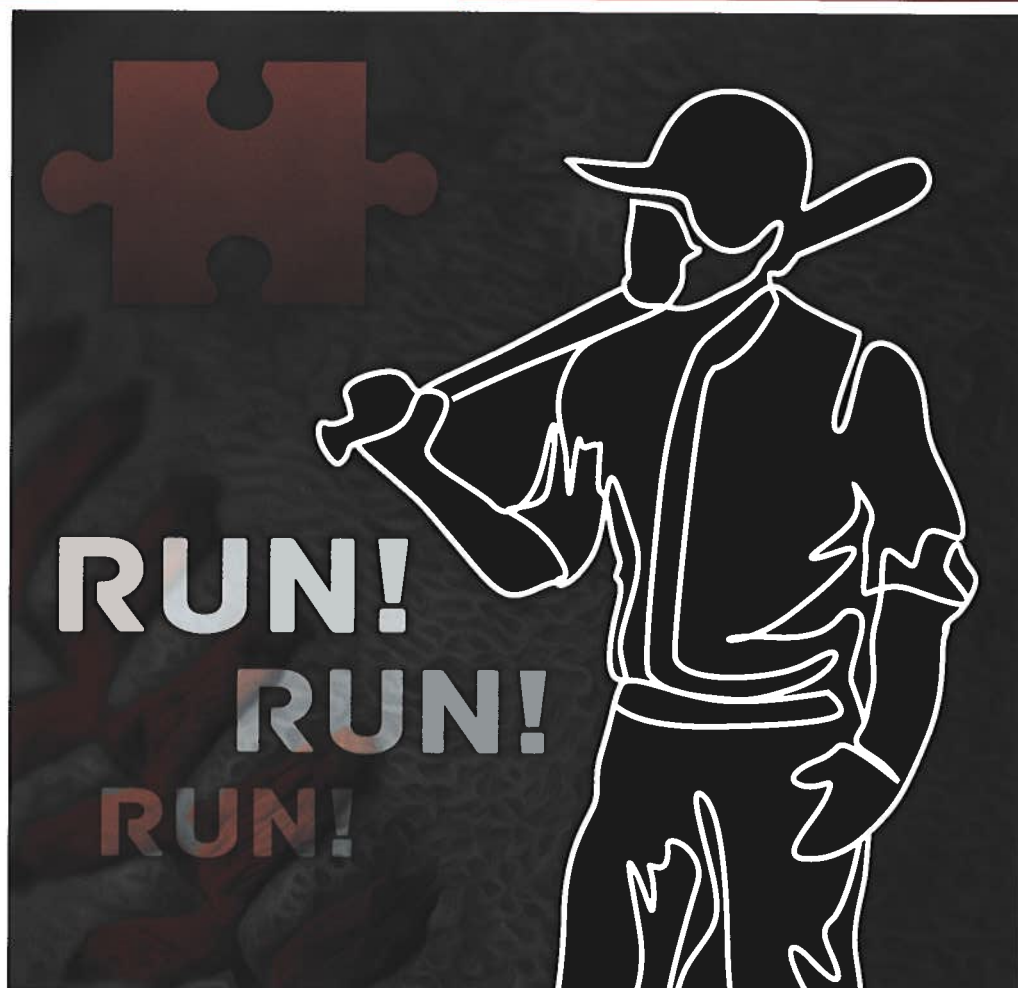
The base umpire came over along the foul line and joined him.

"Well, what about . . . what about . . . delay of game? He's not runnin'. He's just standin' there. Call him out!"

Harley had made a little charge as he screamed.

Shiner pointed at Harley, poised to cross onto the field. "You're the designated hitter, Harley. We have a live ball. We have a play in progress. You cross that foul line, I'll call interference and award the runner first base."

Ambrose, halfway to the outfield



fence, had paused to rest.

"Keep a-goin!" Harley screamed, waving his arms.

Hard of hearing, Ambrose, waved back.

I stepped closer to Raymond.

"Raymond, we've got a baseball game going on here . . ."

Again, his eyes cleared. Recognition dawned.

"Mike. How've you been . . .?"

"I've been good Raymond. You got a hit."

I took a quick glance to check on Ambrose. He was back at it.

Raymond seemed to notice the bat he held. His grin widened. Still, he didn't move.

"Call him out for bein' out of the baseline!" screamed Harley.

"He's still the batter's box," Shiner said.

"The thing is, Raymond," I said, "when you got your hit, you drove in the tying

and winning runs. So, we'll win if you touch first base. If you don't, it'll be a force out and the runs won't count."

Ambrose reached the baseball, picked it up and fired it toward the infield. Ambrose, however, played second base because his arm was shot. His throw went about 20 yards and died.

The other Coot fielders were milling around the pitcher's mound, uncertain if they would be needed.

"Oh, for Christ's . . ." Harley said. "Hit the damn cutoff man!"

Coot shortstop Booger Keen realized that should probably be him and began jogging toward Ambrose.

"Relay!" Harley yelled. "Set up a relay!"

The remaining Coots creaked and groaned into the outfield.

"Not you, Ralph Wilbur!" screamed Harley. "You gotta' stay at first base!"

Bob came from our dugout with water for the umpires.

see OLD MAN BASEBALL on page 30

TEAMMATES 2020

OLD MAN BASEBALL

continued from page 29

The Coot defenders spread themselves on a line across the outfield, like a bucket brigade.

Ambrose reached the baseball again. Booger held both his arms high, signaling his purpose. Ambrose's throw was stronger than his first one but was wide of Booger by about 10 feet.

"Hit the damn cutoff man!" Harley looked apoplectic.

Booger dashed after Ambrose's errant throw. The relay line snaked along behind him.

Run Raymond, Run

With my attention on this defensive spectacle, I hadn't noticed that Raymond was finally moving.

Still holding the bat, he'd taken a couple of tentative steps toward first base.

"There!" Harley said. "There! He's goin'. Call him out!"

"What for?"

"Goddammit, we been standing here 15 minutes. How the goddamn long does he have to get to goddamn first?"

"He gets as long as it takes for you guys to throw him out."

Raymond took a staggering step to his right and almost went down.

"Now he's out of the baseline!" Harley said. "He stepped out. Right there!"

Shiner, spellbound by the relay effort, hadn't seen Raymond's stumble.

"I'm sorry, Harley. I missed it."

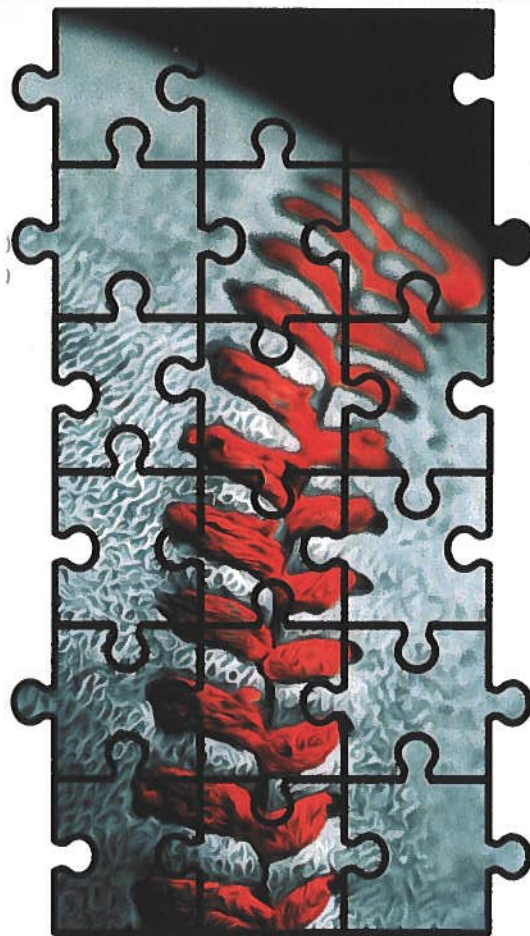
"Ask for help!" Harley foamed at the mouth. "Ask for help!"

Shiner looked back to the relay line, saw that a play was not imminent, and notioned to his partner.

They examined Raymond's progress from a couple of different angles, then huddled to confer.

"Nope, Harley," Shiner finally ruled. "He's still okay."

The Coots had finally reached the end of the relay line. In their care to see they didn't miss anymore cutoff men, though, the defenders had closed rank, and the final throw to first base occurred from about 80 feet away.



When the last Coot let it go, I figured the ball would reach first base—where Ralph Wilbur waited—on about 12 hops.

"Raymond," I said . . . but my voice was lost amid what had become a cacophony of shouting.

Next to me, Harley screamed, "That's why he's got no business out here. He turns the game into a travesty! A goddamn travesty . . ."

Our bench hollered encouragement to Raymond. The Coot players screamed for Ralph Wilbur to get the ball. A few fans watching from the stands bellowed for all they were worth. I'd never heard so much noise at the stadium for an old man's World Series game.

'A ##&^%\$#@# travesty?'

I think the noise of encouragement and derision brought Raymond back to himself. The sounds of baseball echoing through a stadium.

". . . a goddamn travesty . . ." Harley continued.

Raymond said the last three words I

might ever hear him say.

"Fuck you Harley."

He jogged stiff-legged toward first base.

Ralph Wilbur hadn't gone to get the ball. He had chosen to wait, all stretched out, his left foot on the bag, his glove on the ground.

"Oh, crap," the base umpire said, and ran after Raymond to make the call.

That play would have been close if the ball had gotten there. But it stopped rolling six inches short of Ralph Wilbur's reach.

Raymond crossed first base, his arms raised, his teammates swarming to surround him. He exhibited a joy I had not seen in him before. And I understood.

As insidious and cruel as Raymond's disease was, it granted a few rare concessions. At that moment reality could not bind Raymond. He wasn't an old man in an empty spring training stadium. I think he was 21, the year, 1953, Sportsman's Park, surrounded by other superb athletes celebrating with uninhibited delight their youth, their skill, their blessings, and a rare victory for the St. Louis Browns.

We got killed the next day. Lost the championship game 14-5. We didn't feel too bad, though. We had plenty to celebrate.

Raymond probably won't make the trip to Florida again. Paula said he was calm and content for weeks after they got home. That awful disease just kept sinking its claws deeper over the winter, though. She finally had to take him to an assisted living facility where he occupies a wheelchair and really doesn't notice much of anything anymore.

When I visit, though, I don't let myself get too distracted by the guy in the wheelchair. Before I leave, I always take Raymond's hand and close my eyes and see a magnificent athlete uncoil one last time to drive a baseball hard into the right-centerfield gap.

Like Raymond said, when he was young, he gave his heart to the game and the game took it, along with everything else.

When he was old, for just a moment, the game gave it all back.