

Wild Pitches

Extra Innings from *Out of My League*

Dirk Hayhurst



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ONE

Peanuts Are Not Meant to Fly

In this chapter, I explored two conflicting sides of my life—being a writer and player—and how the struggle to balance them was affecting me. I wanted to go beyond simply telling the world I wasn't going to name names, as I did in the prologue of previous books. It was my intent to let readers see, and hopefully understand, what a stressor it is to write from inside the game. Frankly, writing a prologue that said I wouldn't spill the beans on player's IDs was hard, because there were plenty of times I wanted to! I was tempted to just drop-kick guys right under the bus and watch them get flattened.

*However, as things got going, the concept just didn't fit. If you name a player in connection with some negative incident, it turns the whole book into an attack. Besides, as the pages came together, it was plain to see that adding the writer/player dynamic would be one plot thread too many for the book to handle and still have a cohesive story. I scrapped it, and chose to plug some of the salvageable sections into other chapters. If you've read *Out of My League*, you may recognize a few passages in the rough prologue attempt below.*

Airplane peanuts are mysterious things. There's just something about eating them when you are thousands of feet above the earth that doesn't apply to pretzels or chemically enriched cheese crackers. It's an abomination of nature, I tell you, for a peanut to fly. God never intended it to do so and yet, here it is, soaring through the air on a cramped red-eye back to Ohio. It's a shame this package of peanuts won't make it there, I'm sure it would enjoy itself if it

could. Visit the Rock Hall, catch a Cavs game, get mugged in Cleveland . . . Too bad it's got a permanent, unplanned layover in my mouth. Sorry, peanuts, sucks to be at the bottom of the food chain, doesn't it?

Pushing aside the empty nut package, I pulled out my journal and opened it on the tray table. It was a cheap little thing, a Mead notebook bought for ninety-nine cents at some giant discount super center. Half the pages were already filled with sprawling longhand notes and tales of baseball. Just recently I recorded the party that my Double A team, the San Antonio Missions, threw after winning the Texas league championship. I also recorded downing my first beer at the party, how my friend Drew and I went to the top-floor balcony in a stupor and threw paper air planes down into the lobby fountain screaming "Banzai!" and how sick and hung-over everyone was for the bus ride home the next day. There were lots of timeless memories in that notebook, including one written in the margins about how this circus elephant took such a big piss on the Springfield Cardinal's warning track during pregame festivities that the grounds crew had to cover the puddle with Turface to get the game started. Oh, what memories.

All season long I kept a journal, chronicling events and experiences I would occasionally distill down to a tale worthy of being enshrined on something as monumental as an Internet blog. Funny, the whole reason I kept the journal in the first place was that I might write a book someday, a book that might make a few dollars out of all the blown bets that were my minor league career. Now, I was a Double A champion. My career still had some life in it after all—that is, if my writing didn't get me killed.

Turns out neither management nor teammates liked the idea of my making a side bet on writing, as the ensuing promises of ass-kickings, law suits, and getting fired, should anyone get mentioned unfavorably, made abundantly clear.

Call me crazy, but I kept it up. Why? Well, why worry about getting fired when you don't have much of a job left? Also, once I started, I realized that writing was therapeutic. It showed me a side of myself I never knew existed, and, if you can believe it, writing helped me put my career in perspective—which may be the reason I'm on this plane as Dirk the Champion and not one of the several other planes I could have been on as Dirk the Unemployed.

As I put pen to paper at 36,000 feet, there is a feeling of reverence. I had recorded a whole season that was never supposed to happen. In spring training my career numbers indicated I was headed the way of the dinosaurs. Then, when I started writing, it seemed I would instead head the way of a witch upon a fiery stake. There were even moments I thought I'd do both, like some flaming witchasaurus. Still, here I was, just like those peanuts, someplace I never expected to be. The team no longer wanted me dead, or fired, or burned to death. Plus, I'd earned the right to try to do it all again come next year.

It's tough to compress months of your existence into a few pithy statements that make life seem black and white, since so much of living is what happens in the gray. The 2007 season was an extremely fruitful one for me on the field, but some of the most memorable things were what happened off of it. For example, my brother got sober. That didn't have much to do with baseball, but it did mean one roaring fire in my family life was finally out. Dad was still struggling mentally and physically, and money was always going to be tight, but we Hayhursts know to take blessings when they come. A man beating a lifetime addiction that resulted in hospital stays and jail visits is far above and beyond a minor league championship, and nothing short of divine.

Speaking of divine, there had to be a higher power in play this year because I had a girl waiting to meet me when I got home. I say divine not because I'm the type that believes in celestial matchmaking, but because overcoming the bumbling stupidity that is my normal volley of pickup lines for long enough to get a girl interested is something even Moses, staff in hand, would have trouble executing. We met on the Internet, and our first flesh-and-blood date was scheduled a few days after my arrival.

Maybe my biggest realization this season was how the fantasy of being a professional athlete doesn't mean a whole heck of a lot when it slams into the sober demands of reality. Life has a funny way of showing you what your priorities are, even when you live in a dream world. It also has a wonderful way of teaching you that your dreams, no matter how wonderful, can be blinding.

Yes, there were many good things worth reflecting on during a long plane ride. I'll never forget rushing the field in victory, jumping on the pile of jubilant teammates, watching Ox try to shove a

bottle of champagne up Manrique's gassy Mexican ass. The face of that little boy with liver cancer, finding a tarantula in my locker, or watching a mascot try to get that pungent turd flavor from his costume's helmet. It was a season that I thought I'd never be a part of, but now knew I'd never forget.

I was coming home a champion, and I felt good. Now I just had to figure out what the hell it meant. Was there going to be a limo at the airport to pick me up? No. Was there going to be a huge bonus check coming from the Padres? No. An immediate call to the Bigs? No. A ticker-tape parade in my honor, floats, confetti, seventy-six trombones? No, no, no, and hell no. What was there going to be? Grandma, that's what.

Minor league championships sure are fun when they happen, but they don't mean much for the immediate future. I was on a third-class flight back to the split level of doom, with the shaman of evil herself waiting for me with outstretched talons. She probably had the caldron fired up with a fresh bowl of shrunken heads and squirrel meat waiting for me. Sure, she told my parents she didn't want me back while I was gone, but she didn't mean it. She says that every time I escape her. Having someone around to criticize, ridicule, and condemn is just too enjoyable for her. It gives her a reason to live, to keep hoarding groceries, to continue her chats with lawyers about how best to sue relatives. I was an asset to her existence just as much as she was an asset to mine, and a championship didn't change any of it. For all the insight and numerical improvement that happened this season, it was now over.

And I was unemployed. Gloriously unemployed, I grant you, but unemployed nonetheless. I'd been dreading the day I would meet a girl under these conditions. It's bad enough telling a lady I don't really have any career goals other than the big leagues or a book about how I didn't make it there. I mean, Oprah isn't exactly lining up to chat with no-name minor league washouts about how they escaped the terminal swirl around the minor league toilet bowl. Now I had to explain that not only was my roommate a mummified Egyptian queen from the back hills of West Virginia, but also that I was a longshot for anything financially stable.

Oh, and I needed a car. Mine mysteriously died while I was gone. Jesus, was this really my life? Just a second ago I was covered in champagne—now I got no ride, no income, and the undead as a

roommate. To grandmother's house I would go, just like someone walking the green mile to the electric chair. I had half a mind to ring my call button and ask the flight attendant if it was too late to turn the plane around, or at least send it careening into the nearest mountainside.

I could feel the peanut wrapper looking at me, laughing to itself. *Sucks to be at the bottom of the food chain doesn't it, Hayhurst?* Indeed it does, peanuts, indeed it does. But, there was one thing I had that those peanuts didn't—hope. I may have nothing waiting for me when I get off this plane, but next season I had a real chance at making something of my six-year crucible in the minors. I'd done just about everything a player could do to resurrect himself from the ashes of the sport. Come next year I'd keep pushing, full speed ahead. I'd step off this plane to no fanfare, photographers, or autograph hunters. No one would recognize me walking down the concourse. But I knew the score. A player can do a lot on hope, and I knew that first step to becoming a big leaguer was the one I would take off this plane.

The 2008 season starts today.

Fun Fact: Since I brought it up, I might as well show you some of the pages from my paper journals. I had about seven or eight of them when at the end of the 2007.

THREE

BLACK FRIDAY

I loved writing this next set of chapters and I was sad to see them go. I rewrote them numerous times, shortening, lengthening, rearranging, and politically correcting . . . I tried every variation I could to get it into the book, but, seeing as how I turned in an original manuscript stretching just over 600 pages but could only keep 400, I had to cut someplace. Sadly, this section came out of the book in a clean slice, which made it easy for my editors to mark the deletion, even when I pitched a fit about my artistic license. Damn editors . . .

*This first bit takes place at Circuit City. I alluded to my job there in *Out of My League*, but it was my intent to take the reader to a day at the office with me to show the full spectrum of life as a minor leaguer, and the danger of treating people according to their job title. And not just any day, mind you, but *Black Friday*, the best retail day of the year for the economy, and the worst day of the year for everyone who has to work it.*

I stood next to Anthony as team Circuit City gathered to do last-minute checks before all hell broke loose. The ravenous horde of Black Friday shoppers watched us from beyond the store's glass doors like hungry lions gazing at a cluster of baby antelope. They'd been up all night waiting for this moment, and now it was almost here. Soon they would be on us, trampling innocent salesmen, devouring savings like zebra flesh, and forming long, wagging lines that stretched from cash registers and tangled in angry clumps near the horizon. Armed as we might be with credit card readers, check routers, scanners, headsets, and land-line phones with major banks

on speed dial, our ability to take money would not keep up with the demand to buy discount merchandise. Our point of sale equipment would inevitably jam, freeze, or forget how to read bar codes. We'd run out of change, register tape, ink, and patience. Credit cards would have to be called in and the use of a check, which was practically Amish these days, would require a complete stop of a system that already teetered on the edge of catastrophe.

Every person working a cash register was assigned a sidekick responsible for resupply and crowd control. My battery mate was a high school kid named Anthony. At age eighteen he'd already worked at the place for over a year. He knew our Atari-powered computer system as if he had helped build it, and, currently, he was so geeked up on Red Bull that his acne twinkled. I was his personal bodyguard and advance scout responsible for making sure people who got TVs had the proper cables, people who bought cables had the proper TVs, and people who bought both were ready to sign up for a credit card. The perfect combination of speed and strength, together we were: Television Man and the Cash Register Kid.

As predicted, when the doors split open, we found ourselves in a rising sea of consumer chaos. We followed our survival training to the letter and stopped only for caffeine, sugar, or to explain that the reason the line was moving so slowly was because Cujo at the front insisted on buying copies of *Dogg the Bounty Hunter* for each of his friends at the trailer park on a separate gift receipt.

With our super powers combined, things moved smoothly for The Kid and me, until about three hours in when the shit hit the fan, or, in this case, the shit hit a television box. While trying to pull a television off a top shelf in the warehouse, the crewman working the stock picker—a sort of automated lift that elevated its driver to the stock in need of picking—struck a fire sprinkler pipe at a joint. Water gushed out onto stacks of expensive television sets.

Panic struck, garbled shouts about an emergency bombarded our company-issued headsets. The warehouse crew attempted to patch the mess by wrapping the leaking pipe in industrial plastic shrink-wrap. The plastic only served to spread the leak, causing water to shoot out wildly from the ends. Crewmen rushed to relocate stock while trying not to get peed on by the bulging plastic bladder hanging from the pipe. The end result was a rapidly forming puddle of water forming under dribbling plastic, surrounded by a perimeter of

soaked television boxes and warehouse crewmen convinced they'd be fired.

Up at our register, it soon became apparent to the Kid and me that something was wrong. Instead of leaving, customers were gagging in a new line by the warehouse doors. In addition to getting products to customers, the warehouse crew was supposed to be updating us on inventory. In the panic, they were doing neither.

Lack of sleep, lack of products, managerial emergencies, long lines, and a rainout in the warehouse—mix all these things and you'll discover how I found myself staring down the barrel of five loaded words no white employee ever wants to hear: "Is this because I'm black?"

It's not every day a professional baseball player wanders into a major electronics retailer and asks for a job, but, six weeks ago, that's exactly what I did. I didn't have a choice. Picking up odd off-season work is not uncommon for players in my position. I've done everything from helping out in the family business to laying carpet to smashing stuff with a sledgehammer and sweeping it up. Rarely, however, does the work include wearing a plastic nametag and uncomfortable dress shoes while getting screamed at by an angry black woman.

Years ago, I heard minors players were able to collect unemployment benefits during the off-season, which was the perfect solution. A savvy player could supplement that free income with a few under the table baseball lessons and coast through the winter carefree, watching daytime television. But the government's rules on seasonal work had changed. Now we're all out busting our humps to make ends meet while we wait for our real jobs to come out of hibernation. And, because employers willing to work with our special circumstances are usually in less than desirable fields, we find ourselves doing paradoxical jobs considering what we do for the other half of the year. In fact, the same people who pay to watch me play in the summer are now the ones pointing at me and telling their children, "See him, that's what happens when you don't have any ambition in life."

It's been asked if there's ever any dissention between the players who signed for slave wages and those who signed for small fortunes. Well, during the season, when we all deal with the same set

of unfavorable conditions, not really. But, during the off-season, when you know that bonus baby with the silver spoon isn't about to get locked up on discrimination charges in the unholy hours of the morning at some gadget retail store, hell yeah there's some fucking dissension.

I stared at the woman. The only time I'd ever heard language like that was on television, but this was real, and she was both black and very upset.

"No, ma'am, not at all," I said, throwing up my arms as if to plead innocent, "Your blackness has nothing to do with this—I mean, your race has nothing to do with this." I was suddenly in a racial minefield.

"Well I know something's not right, 'cause you telling me I can't get what I paid for after I paid for it!"

"No! Yes! No, uh you can totally get what you paid for, it's just that . . . uh . . ."

"It's just what?" Her eyes clamped down on me like vices.

"Your television isn't dry yet." I cringed at how pathetic the words sounded.

"Their television looks just fine to me!" The angry woman pointed at a white couple wheeling out the exact same television box.

"Yeah, they must have got one of the last dry ones."

"What do I look like, a dummy? You think you can just take my money and then be out of televisions; making up excuses about televisions being wet and mine ain't dry. You better get a manager up here because I am not going to take this!"

I felt stupid. All I could say was, "Our manager is trying to fix the flooding."

"Who's your manager? Moses?"

"No ma'am, Steve."

Anthony looked at me helplessly as he continued to ring out the deluge of customers before him. My face screamed out to him for help. *The neck, Anthony, go for the neck!*

"What are you looking at? Don't look away when I'm talking to you!"

"I'm sorry, our manager really is trying his best to fix the water problem."

"Well, you tell him he needs to fix this problem."

As commanded, I pinched my Circuit City issued headset's call button. "I'm dealing with an emergency issue. We have a lady who bought one of the wet televisions."

"Tell her we'll special order it," came the response.

"No good, she wants it now. She's already paid."

"Did you tell her it's raining shit water back here?"

"Of course I did!"

"Tell her she's going to have to wait a second," said the management.

I let go of the mic and looked at the lady, then swallowed. "Our manager said you're going to have to wait a second."

"Oh hell no!" She spun and made a bee-line to the warehouse doors huffing out a long protesting complaint. "Trying to tell me I have to wait after I waited all night in this ridiculous crowd. Missin' my bed, missin' my breakfast, boy mussa lost his mind if he think I'm gonna wait on account o' flooding in the warehouse."

"Ma'am. Ma'am! Ma'am, you can't go back there, it's employees only." I reached out and placed my hand on her shoulder and when I made contact heaven and earth stopped, along with my heart. She wheeled around and looked at me like I had changed my Circuit City uniform in for a Confederate Army coat.

"Now I know you *did not* just go and lay your hand on me."

"I'm sorry ma'am, I can't let you go back there."

"So you gonna grab me?"

"I didn't grab you."

"Oh you didn't? You didn't just put your hands on me? You didn't just do that?"

"No, I did just do that, but I didn't *grab* you. I just kinda, you know, *stopped* you." I pantomimed the action to her again and she threw her hands out wide and shouted, "Don't you grab me!"

People were looking at us now and I think she knew this. She was much louder, as if we were standing on stage together and she had to reach the people in the back row. "Oh, I s'pose you don't remember grabbing me? What else don't you remember? I suppose you don't remember telling me about what color people can have television sets, do you?"

On that, I felt as if the whole event of Black Friday came to a screeching halt. Aside from everyone in this store, I was certain customers in television stores all around the world were somehow

watching this scene unfold as they stood in line. There was probably a graphical bar on the screen, underneath my confused and shamed face, that read *Racist television salesman and minor league bigot, Dirk Hayhurst*. It didn't matter what I said now, the audience heard all they needed to.

"Ma'am," I began to back pedal, "I don't know anything about anybody's people."

"Oh, so my people don't exist to you? Is that why you can just rob us?"

I dropped my head. Jesus, how did it come to this? Why didn't I tell Adam yes [about winter ball]? I'm going to go to jail now. I'll probably get bunked with a guy named Sword Fish who likes to cut himself for fun and wants me to be his teddy bear. I only had one last chance to get out of this. It was time for me to reveal my secret identity.

"Look, ma'am," I said, turning on the puppy dog eyes. "I'm just a poor minor league baseball player trying to make ends meet doing this stupid off-season job. My girl lives an hour away and gas isn't cheap. I don't want to be in this situation any more than you do, but I'm just trying not to go broke while I live my life and chase down my dream of the big leagues." I flashed a pouty face to finish the act. It was a performance so flawless it almost brought a tear to my own eye.

She stopped and looked me over curiously. "You a baseball player?"

"Yes ma'am, I am."

"Who do you play for?"

"The San Diego Padres."

"The Padres?" She repeated.

"Yes, indeed."

Her face changed back to attack mode, "You play for the Padres? Then what's your broke ass doing here? You better quit lying, boy. You must be a sorry athlete because no pro ball player is going to be working at a television store in the middle of winter unless he just plain terrible."

"Miss, is there something I can help you with?" Steve hit the scene, and not a moment too soon because I was about to do some serious, job-ending grabbing if he hadn't.

Her tone changed to a very respectful one, almost sugary sweet.

The aggressive body language disappeared and the volume lowered. “Well hello, Mr. Manager.”

“Please, call me Steve.”

“I’m sorry, thank you, Steve,” said the lady.

I explained the situation, to which Steve said, “I understand your issue, ma’am, but it’s our store policy not to take any chances with possibly damaged products.”

“Well, then I’ll let you mark the television down for me since you’ve been so gracious by telling me it’s considered damaged. Then I’ll go ahead and take my refund and the television and be on my way. If there is anything wrong, don’t worry,” she looked at us both as serious as a snake, “I’ll be back.”

“Umm,” Steve vacillated over what to do. I nodded my head vigorously indicating he should go with it. “All right,” Steve consented. “Let’s head back to your register.” Steve made to put his hand on the lady’s back so he might gently direct her to the register but I grabbed it before he connected or we’d be giving away our jobs, along with that television.

“Black Friday”—Oh, the irony!

TWELVE

BEAR PUNCHING

Looking back, I'm not even sure why I thought this would go in the book. Where was it supposed to fit, exactly? I guess something like coaches hanging out in the dark, alone, uncomfortably close to each other, and a bear getting punched in the face deserve to be written about, though how they fit into any story is a complicated matter . . . Hell, just read it.

I didn't sleep well last night. I'm not sure if it was the cold air blowing in from the single-pane, unrenovated, and thus cheaper, apartment windows; dehydration; or the fact that every sound heard in the dark sounded like two dudes squealing. Whatever it was, just before 8:45 A.M. I was wide awake, and I had to pee.

Other than a six-pack of beer and a gallon of milk, we had no food in the house. It was a Sunday day game though, which meant there would be breakfast at the field. Not just a bowl of Mini-Wheats, but a real breakfast of eggs and waffles and bacon. There are two great things about playing in Triple A. First, it's not Double A. Second, the fantastic breakfasts. At roughly 9:15, Chip and I made our way to the field. Luke kept sleeping. Chip and I attributed Luke's ability to sleep through the hunger pangs to his military roots. Chip and I, however, agreed we would be powerless if an army of bacon invaded the country.

When we arrived at the field, Chip's cell phone rang, forcing him to stay outside the concrete bunker housing the lockers. I took the elevator down to the clubhouse alone, and when I got there, I walked into a pitch-dark room save for one television humming in the corner. It gave off enough light by its broadcast to illuminate the heads of Ready and Abby sitting next to one another on a couch. Walking

in on them, sitting next to each other with the lights off, made me feel horribly awkward.

“Don’t mind us,” said Ready, casually looking over at me. “Just two dudes watching television in the dark.” Then he looked back to the screen, unconcerned with me.

The rule of thumb is, if coaches are together in a space a player shows up at unannounced, the player finds another space. But this was *the* player’s space. Coaches usually don’t hang out in the locker room, let alone in the dark.

I felt the need to justify my presence, and so barfed out some unasked-for information. “We’ve got nothing at our apartment,” I said, tripping on a chair in an effort to find my locker. Why weren’t the lights on for God’s sake and where was our clubby, Shane? “No furniture, no food. Might as well come down here and hang out where there’s free Internet and, uh, television, right?”

Ready looked at me. He always had that way of making me feel like I was up to some ulterior motive. I think that’s a manager prerequisite. They say so much in what they don’t say. “Who you living with?” he asked.

“Chip and Luke.”

He didn’t say anything to that, just kind of collected the fact and let his gaze slowly slip back to the television.

“Yeah,” I continued, nervously, “Chip’s sleeping in a sleeping bag on the floor.” I thought that little factoid would help paint a more complete picture. “He hit two home runs sleeping in it so he’s not going to change it up.”

“So he’s still in the bag, huh?” said Ready. Abby hadn’t looked away from the TV yet. I think they were watching some hunting show, or car show, or car hunting show.

“Yeah. Have to ride it out, huh?”

“Absolutely,” said Ready.

I tried changing into my uniform clothes but it was too dark to see and I didn’t feel like walking over to the couch and squeezing in between my manager and my pitching coach. Luckily, the show cut to a commercial break and Abby got up and went to the door of his office and pounded. A moment later, a frazzled Shane answered it wearing a bath towel with a toothbrush sticking out of his mouth.

“Well good morning, sunshine,” said Abby.

“Oh, hey, I didn’t know you were here.”

“Don’t know how you couldn’t, I just about beat the hell out this door about fifteen minutes ago.”

“Sorry,” said Shane. He looked around the room and saw Ready and me. “Jesus, players are here already? What time is it?”

Shane flicked all the lights on and opened the office doors. Apparently he sleeps at the field in the manager’s office on nights when a day game is set for the following day. I was now fiercely paranoid about my early arrival. I started to wonder if the reason Ready didn’t say much more than what he did was a hint that I should follow the example set by the rest of the players and show up at a decent time.

Chip and Luke came in minutes later. By then, everyone was clothed, the lights were on, and Abby was in his office. Ready, however, was still hanging out on the couch. Chip greeted him with a nod and, “Mornin’, Skip.” Luke, however, actually called Ready by his first name, Randy, which might have been the most awkward thing I’d witnessed yet.

I would never call Ready by his name. He would kill me. Even if he came to my wedding I think I’d still call him Skipper. Luke, however, had played with Ready before, back in Oneonta, the NY Penn league affiliate of the Tigers. Luke was released that season and Ready was the manager who did it. Though Luke played well, he was involved in a scandalous player talent show in which he and a few other players worked together to perform a rap song that wasn’t appreciated by all the folks in attendance, especially Ready. I couldn’t picture Luke dressed up like rapper for the life of me, though sources say he does a mean Vanilla Ice. The looks weren’t the issue, however, it was, as with most rap songs, the lyrical content. The song made a comment about Ready’s wife. Not a bad one, more a compliment than anything, but coaches’ wives are definitely out of bounds, especially Ready’s.

I’m not sure of the particulars of how everything went down, but very soon after that lyric was sung, Luke was unemployed. Luke came to the Padres’ system after that season. Ironically, Ready followed shortly after.

It was rumored that the two hated each other, and having met them when they were both younger, I wouldn’t have been surprised if one ended up dead at their reunion. Ready was a hard-nosed, balls to the wall, fireball of a competitor, and he brought that mentality to managing. The A-ball version of Luke was an anal, militant catcher

who made mound visits feel like drill sergeant chew outs. Both were anything but weak willed.

Today's Ready had mellowed . . . well, mellow for Ready, that is. Luke had become compassionate and understanding. Maybe it was the addition of kids and marriage in Luke's life, or the realization that managing competitors and being one are different in Ready's mind, but, whatever it was, they both had grown and if there was any animosity between the two, it was well on its way to being buried.

"Who's throwing out the first pitch?" asked Luke.

"Someone pretty, I'm sure," said Ready.

"No bears?" asked Luke.

Ready started to smile and bob his head. "No bears, far as I know."

"Remember when they had that bear throw out the first pitch in Oneonta, and our pitching coach punched him in the face?"

"That was some shit, wasn't it?" said Ready.

I snapped out of my daze. "Wait, wait, a *bear* got punched in the face? I must hear more."

"We had this wild man of a pitching coach," said Luke. Ready made a blowing motion as if to imply that was an understatement.

"You'd have to know him," continued Luke. "Anyway, this group brought in a bear to throw out, or roll out, or whatever, the first pitch. They had the pitching coach come out to the mound and stand beside him. I'm still not sure why they needed to do that. Was he getting an award or something?"

Ready shrugged. "I don't know, but he was not feeling good being around that fucking bear."

"Anyway," said Luke, "the bear took a swipe at him while he was standing there. The coach dodged it, but then looked at the bear and said, 'Oh really, mother fucker?'"

Ready was laughing at this point.

"This dude talked shit to a bear?" I asked.

"Not only that, but when this the bear growled at him in response—"

Ready took over "—he wound up and full-fisted it in the snout—"

"—and the bear went down, and the trainers grabbed it," finished Luke.

"This guy knocked the bear out?"

“I don’t know if he knocked him out, but he knocked him the fuck down.”

“That’s good enough for me,” I said.

“Yeah, you can definitely put something like that on your résumé,” said Luke.

“Damn,” I said, astonished. “Best. First pitch. EVER!”

Fun Fact: The absolute worst thing about being the player selected to catch the ceremonial first pitch is when you get some wannabe athlete who winds up and tries to throw you something nasty but has no idea if it’s going to work or not.

One time, during one of my many years of service in Lake Elsinore’s High A level, I had to catch a guy who wanted to throw a split finger as hard as he could. I’m talking maybe 70 mph because he used to pitch in college. Him throwing out the first pitch was as close as he’d ever get to living the dream, so he wanted to make the most of it, winding up and uncorking a sixty-five-foot plate topper. The ball was not white, either. It was screen printed in dark colors so it blended into the dark batter’s eye instead of popping out. It hit the plate then shot off and smacked me in the face. Instead of running out to greet the guy, I threw the ball back at him and walked off the field.

You’ll hear me say over and over again that Luke, Chip, and I spent a lot of time at the clubhouse because our apartment sucked. Here is some photographic evidence of just how much it sucked.