

The Last Game

by Con Chapman

Don't come 'round here looking for the fresh, clean, family-friendly content this site is known for this afternoon. I'm taking off at 3:30 to watch my kid pitch what may be the final start of his high school career. He will take the mound today with a 3-0 record and three home runs last week alone! He hit them, I mean; he didn't give them up.



It's an occasion that causes normally hard-bitten sports writers—and Boston has them by the pallet-load—to turn sentimental and wax rhapsodic. I have to say, now that I'm in their shoes, I can't blame them. My kid didn't get a scholarship and will thus try to walk on when he gets to college, but he may never play another competitive game.

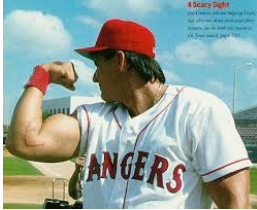


Premature babi—hey, who gave them Sprite, the refreshing lemon-lime soft drink?

He's 6'2" and weighs 165 pounds, but when he came into this world, the prospects that he would ever develop into such a strapping young man were slim. He was born a month premature; for an infant boy, that means his lungs were dangerously underdeveloped.

"Is there anything you can do about it?" I asked the doctor who delivered him.

"We recommend that they go on drugs right away," she replied.
"What kind of drugs?" my wife asked nervously.
"Steroids," the doctor said.



Jose Canseco: He, uh, does a lot of push-ups.

I looked at my wife, and I could tell she was with me 100%. "Go ahead," I said, "Double the normal dosage."

Thanks to the miracles of modern science, my boy was out of the incubator in a few days, but we kept him on the medication. No point in taking chances when a kid's lungs are at risk.



It paid off, let me tell you. By the time he started T-ball he was hitting tape-measure shots, 565-foot home runs over everything. Eventually, we lowered the dose as the 'roid-rage fines began to get expensive. I'll never forget the look on the face of the teenaged umpire who called him out on a ball that just barely grazed the outside corner of the plate. My kid chased him back to his crappy Honda Civic and flipped it over—at the age of 10! That's the kind of upper-body strength you need to hit with power to the opposite field.

As any parent of a young athlete will tell you, a lot of sacrifice goes into the making of a kid who can play at the Division I level. There was the \$45 per half hour hitting coach, the pseudo-religious earrings a la Barry Bonds, the heavy chains that look like they could have been lifted off the neck of a Rottweiler, or an investment banker's second wife. But it's all part of the great American tradition of baseball.



"I don't really like you, but I'm 0 for 21 in June."

I don't mean to suggest that my kid's career has been one long home run trot around the basepaths. Like any baseball player, he's had his ups and downs. I remember when he was 11 and started the season 0-for-June for the Orthwein Insurance Agency A's. One night I heard him sobbing to himself as I walked past his bedroom.

"What's the matter, kiddo?" I asked as I sat down beside him and tousled his hair.

"I've lost it, dad," he said through his sobs. "My career is over."

"No it's not," I said reassuringly. "You're just going through a dry spell."

He calmed down a bit. "You think so?" he asked.

"Sure. What you need is a slumpbuster!"



"What's that?"

"Well, it's a girl who you might not really like as a friend because she hasn't got the greatest personal hygiene or something, but you, uh, decide to . . . to spend some time with her to change your luck."

He was silent for a moment. "So somebody like Susan van de Kamp?"

"Is that the chubby girl in your class who's always wearing her Little Dutch Girl outfit to school on Show 'n Tell Day?"

"That's her," he said. "She picks her butt in line to the cafeteria."

My eyes misted over. "She sounds perfect. Why don't you give her a whirl."

"Like how?"

There are some things you can't coach, but I gave it a try. "You do something to make her think you like her."



"What do the big-leaguers do?" he asked me.

"They, uh, invite them over to spend the night, sort of like you and Timmy Salmon last Friday."

"Yuk!" he said, clearly repulsed by the thought.

"Don't worry," I said. "At the Little League level, all you have to do is throw a spit ball at her."

*Available in Kindle format on amazon.com as part of the collection
"Kids: They're Cute When They're Young."*

