

Steve Glines

Johnson's last pitch

This is American Baseball. Jackie is pitching, Joe is on first base, Tommy on third. Mike is shortstop and Tim is second base. Jim, John and Bob are in the outfield. It's the bottom of the ninth inning and we're leading by one run. Jackie has pitched the whole game so far and I know he's getting tired.

I've been squatting at home plate for years now. I know these guys. I know that Bob out in right field is slowing down. He tore a hamstring last year and is terrified of doing it again. He's an ok batter with a lifetime average of .260 but that's not going to get him a DH slot next year. I'll bet this is his last season.

The team we're playing knows this too and they've stacked the lineup so that most of the guys try to put the ball into right field. To compensate, and I don't think our manager gets this, Tim, on second plays further back than he should, Jim, out in center field plays a little bit right leaving John in left field, and Mike at shortstop covering. Even Tommy, on third base has to cover more ground than normal. He's made two errors this game because of it. Both times Tim caught a popup ball and tried to nail a runner on third but Tommy was out of position and the runner got a run.

At the start of the inning I asked our third base coach how many pitches Jackie had thrown already. 87 was the answer. I know he can't pitch more than about 100. He once threw 123 pitches in one game but we lost that when he threw a bobbler that got whacked out of the park, four runs batted in. I know all our pitchers and know their peculiarities. Jackie knows his limitations but does whatever his trainers and the manager tell him. He gave me a funny look, both of confidence and desperation as he walked out to the mound.

I'm the catcher, I run this part of the game like a quarterback. Baseball is a game of statistics, Jackie's a right handed pitcher. The first base coach signals how I should handle each batter. The guys in the back room study the stats in stupefying detail and let the first base coach know what's what. But I've studied them all too, I know the lineup and I know these guys almost as well as I know my own team.

Warming up Jackie throws five slow balls right down the center of the plate. I signal a curve ball, low and inside for his last warm up pitch. Jackie grins, he's specially proud of his curve ball. He winds up and lets loose. It curves beautifully at first but doesn't break to my right and downward as it should. Instead it flies up and to the left. I barely get my mitt up to catch it. He didn't put enough spin on it. He's getting tired and I'll bet that hurt his wrist.

First batter up, top of the lineup. Jimmy Moran. He's been around almost as long as I have, He started in the outfield but now plays first base. He's a big guy, a little overweight so can't run very fast and he never tries to steal a base. I couple of years ago I caught him trying to steal second. He hasn't tried that again. He bats a solid .220. Not great but he gets on base enough to keep him around. When he connects he almost always hits to right field in that sweet spot between the second baseman and the right

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

fielder. The first base coach signals “right short” to everyone on the field and “up inside” to me. Normally I’d agree with that but that’s how we’ve been playing him all game and he’s gotten on base twice so I’m not going to do that again. I know Jimmy Moran expects that so that’s what he’s looking for.

I signal “slider down the middle” to Jackie. He nods, winds up and lets fly. The world goes into slow motion almost before the ball leaves his hand. I see the spin, so does the batter. I have to instantly adjust to where the ball is going so does the batter. For the first microsecond the ball looks like its going to be high and inside, just like everyone expects and Jimmy Moran stretches up to hit a high ball. But I know that’s not where the ball is going to go. The ball is spinning slowly up, rotating from the bottom up very slowly, maybe five times from the pitchers hand to my glove. Ten feet from home plate it’s as if the ball suddenly loses all its energy and begins to drop like a brick, it’s a dead ball. The pitch is spent and I prepare to dig the ball out of the dirt. I pitch my glove down. Jimmy Moran swings and misses. Strike one.

Jackie is grinning. That was an easy pitch. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Jimmy Moran twitch his nose in annoyance. That pitch was so slow he should have clobbered it. Inside I laughed. He’s going to be looking for that pitch again. I signal Jackie “fastball high and inside” exactly where Jimmy Moran expected it the first time. Strike two.

I give Jackie the same signal for the third pitch. This time Jimmy Moran read it right but Jackie’s pitch was high and Jimmy tapped it for a fowl. We got two more fowls before Jimmy struck out on a curve ball. Jackie kept rejecting my signals until I let him throw that curve. It wasn’t much of a curve, just enough to deceive Jimmy Moran. Jackie was happy but I could see he was running out of steam. That last pitch was probably only 75 miles per hour, it should have been around 80, maybe 85. Jackie was up to around 95 pitches. I looked at our manager, he wasn’t concerned.

Next up was “Bongo” Morley, my opposite number, their catcher. He’s pretty good but I don’t think he thinks as much about the game as I do. He only bats .180 but can catch anyone. He’s a sucker for fast balls so that’s what I have Jackie throw but Jackie’s slowing down. We get to two and two and “Bongo” hits a bobbler into left field. An easy run to first base. Jackie’s at 98 pitches.

Next up is Peter Calamaris, their second baseman and a .310 hitter. He’s a big guy, likes to swing with a 40 inch bat. That means if he connects there’s a good chance its either a big popup or out of the park. It also means that being a heavier bat he’s got to commit to swinging early. I’ll plan for that.

I call for a slider, inside and low. It’ll probably be a ball but he might commit to swinging early. He does and we get a strike. I see him hunch down ready for another slider. I look up at Jackie, he shakes his head even though I haven’t sent him a signal.

He doesn’t assume the stance. That’s a sign he wants a conference at the mound. I walk out to the mound, so does the infield and the manager. “Are you running short?” I ask.

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

"I can finish," he says, "just slow it down."

I nod but the manager sigles number 3 to the bullpen. That means Johnson should warm up. I look over to the bullpen to see that Johnson's been warming up since the inning started, he's ready now if we need him.

Jackie's had lots of time to recover so I signal for a fastball up and outside. It's a foul tip. Ball one. I give Jackie a choice fastball low and inside or curveball down the middle. He wants to throw a slider again. Another foul tip. Jackie's getting annoyed. Two more foul tips and the count is three and one. I walk out to the mound again. Just me this time, "I'm getting a second wind," he tells me. That tells me he's spent. I walk back to the plate and casually point to the manager. He knows what that means and respects my opinion.

I call for a slider. Jackie almost throws it over my shoulder, a walk. Two men on base, one out, the winning run on first with the cleanup man on deck. Next up is "Bobo" Timm, a Jamaican who sings in taverns wherever he goes. I've heard him. He's a good singer and a pretty good ball player, he's batting .320 this year but he can be erratic. Last year he barely hit .180.

Neither team is going to the playoffs this year and this is the last game of the regular season so it really doesn't count except for pride in the game and bargaining position for those who's contracts are expiring. I've got two more years on mine so I'm in it for the game, not the money. Still.

I call for a curve ball middle but outside. I think Jackie still has enough control to deliver even if his speed is falling off. It's a swing and a miss. Strike one.

I call for an easy pitch, Jackie's screwball right down the middle. It's a very slow pitch, 65 miles per hour, where the ball hardly spins at all. When he gets it right no one can hit it, if he gets it wrong it's an easy hit. The trouble is that he's erratic, he doesn't practice it very often and I only call for it when he's in trouble or getting very tired. He was clearly getting tired and smiled when I called for it. He wound up like he was going to throw a fastball only he let the ball go really slowly. I could almost take a break it was so slow. But without spin the ball began to wander and "Bobo" tipped it right to the second baseman who missed it causing an error. By the time he got the ball and looked to see where to throw it the bases were loaded. Just one out with the winning run on second.

I looked at our manager who didn't move, instead he turned away and spit his chew of tobacco in to the trashcan in the dugout behind him. I thought it would be a good time to bring in Johnson.

I shrugged, next up was their star player, their cleanup man, Jake Thornborough, left fielder, who batted .345 for the year but was averaging over .400 in the last ten games. His contract was up this year so he was looking for a hot exit he could point to when he started negotiating his next contract.

Jackie was focused. He was over 100 pitches and he knew it. I signaled fastball high and inside. He delivered. Jackie caught him looking. I was surprised the umpire called a strike and so was Jake.

Jake looked at the Umpire, stepped out of the batters box and said to

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

the umpire, "Need your glasses?" A couple of warmup swings and he was back in the batters box and in his stance. An average sized man Jake was all muscle but he tended to twitch every couple of seconds when he was wound up ready to swing at a ball. I decided to try to time Jackie's pitch to coincide with Jake's twitch. Jackie wouldn't start up his windup until I positioned the glove over the plate, giving him a target. From the time I gave him a target to the time he released the ball was about a second and a half.

I signaled a fast ball right over the plate and timed my movements so that the instant I saw Jake twitch I'd position my glove starting Jackie's firing sequence. Jake was going for a home run and should have gotten one but that twitch thing worked or so I thought, he fouled almost straight up and back into the stands.

The next pitch, the same thing happened with a fastball low and outside. Almost straight up and back. Damn, how did he get under that ball. We got a third foul with an up and outside fast ball. Sooner or later he'd clobber one of Jackie's fastballs so I called for a slider low and outside. Strike one.

Three more foul balls and Toby, our manager walked out to the mound, signaling for Johnson. Jackie didn't say a word but slammed the ball into the manager's hand and walked away with a look of disgust. I think he was actually happy to get relieved, 114 pitches was the most he'd done all year.

Johnson was known to all and wide as Johnson. He had a first name and probably a middle name too but everyone knew him as Johnson. The funny thing about Johnson is that he couldn't remember anyone's name so everyone he met he called Johnson. He kept to himself and spent most of his free time playing pinochle with the house staff. His contract was up after this game.

Johnson took his time walking to the mound while we waited and watched. When he got there our manager, Toby, slammed the ball in Johnson's mitt and growled, "sink em," then Johnson looked at me with what almost looked like anger and said "I'm going to burn a hole in your mitt, can you handle it?" I grinned as I walked back to the plate.

After a few hot warmup pitches Jake walked back to the batters box and assumed his stance. The umpire squatted down behind me and said, "Gentlemen, play ball." I signaled a fast ball low but right down the middle. Johnson had a tendency to pitch high so I'd target low and it worked, mostly.

Johnson was our star reliever, a closer. He'd run out of steam at fifteen or twenty pitches but everyone of them could be a 98 to 100 mph fastball. The first five, maybe ten were deadly accurate except for his tendency to pitch higher than I called for. After that he became less accurate but kept up his speed. By the time he threw thirty pitches they could be almost anywhere, he'd lose all control so we only brought him in for occasions like this where we only needed one more out, we needed two.

Johnson had a funny stance when he wound up. He always looked like he was going to throw a sidearm curve and I think he fooled a lot of batters with that, but with a kick of his left leg he always ended upright

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/4

with a whistling fastball off his fingertips. His follow through was equally absurd, it almost threw him in the direction of first base and way off the mound with his back to the plate.

Johnson wound up and let fly with his fastest fastball. I could see the ball spinning like a bullet from the end of a gun, perfection at over 100 miles an hour. Jake leaned back, his right foot a couple of inches off the ground, fully cocked. He was going for the wall. He swung and I heard, no felt, the crack of the bat striking the ball. Jake knew Johnson pitched high and adjusted for it but Johnson was right on the money with his first pitch.

I don't know if Johnson had time to really react or not but in the fraction of a second between the time the bat struck the ball, Johnson was able to turn just enough to see the ball coming right at him and position his glove to intercept it, then pivot and nail the runner trying to get back to first base. The Universe stopped momentarily and for an instant everyone wondered what had just happened. I stood up, threw my mask off to get a better view, the Umpire did the same and I heard him say, "sumbitch." Jake threw his bat down and exclaimed, "Aw crap." His contract was up too.