

## The Stuff from Which Champions are Carved

I guess stuffing a freshman in his high school baseball locker after a game is never really a good idea, no matter what may have happened out on the diamond. It doesn't build team unity, or impress a coach who's invested three years into trying to teach you some class. Yes... bullying is bad, I'm sure of it, no matter how good it may make you feel at the time. It's wrong, wrong, wrong! Sorry coach. Sorry freshman.

I probably shouldn't have taken the mound that day anyway. Clearly I didn't have my stuff. A sharp pain was shooting through my shoulder causing my fast ball to waft up to the plate like a crippled zeppelin dragging a minibus. I just wanted one last chance to our cocky arch rivals as they heckled me from the other dugout. So I lied and said my arm felt fine. Sorry coach.

After my first few pitches, and the corresponding neck wrenching doubles they elicited, I hastily adjusted my game plan. I had to reach for two rarely used weapons in my arsenal, my curve ball and my brain. Neither had ever proven very overpowering.

In desperation I begin trying to pitch smart, hitting spots, and rallying the team behind me.

I soon realized that acting like a team player wasn't that bad after all. Maybe not as effective as a good fastball, but hey, coupled with a few runs of our own, we actually headed into the last inning leading by one.

I stumbled out to the mound for those final three outs a weary mix of caked dust and sweat; dragging the long shadows of boyhood- threatening the makings of a man. I'd left my all out on the field that day, including most of the cartilage from my shoulder. Hitching up my pants, I eagerly set about to finally settle this vendetta between our two schools.

My first pitch was promptly roped out into left field for a single. I walked the next guy with four straight pitches. This was not turning out the way I planned! Was I going to fall apart at crunch time? The other team was already laughing me to scorn. They knew I had nothing left. I turned to my coach halfway hoping he'd pull me. His jaw muscles were working, but he just clapped and gave me a nod of confidence.

With that I managed to get the next one over the plate. It was slapped pretty hard down the line, but thankfully our third baseman got enough leather on it to knock it down and step on the bag for the force. My next big sweeping curve ball was blasted deep to left; back, back, way back, only to be hauled down at the fence for the second out. The runners had tagged however, leaving the potential winning run at second base.

Who then should saunter up the plate? Eric Anderson, my rival since t-ball, star pitcher, and clean-up hitter. I dug down deep, and with the aid of two of his towering shots landing just foul, I was somehow able to work him to a full count.

Clearly the drama had unfolded before us like a tattered ole' battle flag flapping in the winds of destiny. We were entering into that small chunk of time from which the world carves its champions. Eric's team appeared confident, no doubt already mentally etching their names on the conference trophy. A bat boy cried, "Knock that rinky-dink curve outta here!"

My catcher flashed the same two fingers he had all game, but I'd already made up my mind. Despite all the pain, and the risk of permanent damage to my shoulder, it would be one pitch for all the glory. I gritted my teeth, and went into my windup with the threads gripped for a fastball.

A lightning bolt of pain ripped through my shoulder and shot through my fingertips. That baseball carried everything I had left. It wasn't much, yet just enough to throw Eric's timing off. He dribbled a slow roller straight to our second baseman- our *FRESHMAN* second baseman!

I'd like to report he scooped it up and made the short toss to first to end the game. I'd also like to say that my character changed completely that day and I never again acted like a bully, or a self centered cry baby, but you've probably read way too many of my stories to believe that. Truth is- we're all just human. We've got a tendency to boot the big one at crunch time, or stuff the one that does in a locker. I'm not justifying, I'm just saying. Our best pitch is to learn to call on the mercy and forgiveness of the Lord Jesus; the only truly perfect One. He'll keep working with those who'll keep working with Him. *(And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue His work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.*

**Philippians 1:6 NLT)**

Buy anyway- We're all just making our way up through the minor leagues here. Don't give up on yourself, and don't get down on your teammates. Just be quick to say 'Sorry Coach' when you miss it, and hitch your pants up and get back on the mound. That's the stuff from which real champions are carved.

-Guy Sheffield 5-17-07