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IT'S THE SECOND INNING when the kid comes up for the first time. He's wearing a uni that's too big for him and has no number on the shirt. He's rolled the cuffs of the trousers. Already undersized, he looks like a little kid playing with the grown-ups.

The Bears have runners at first and third with two outs. The Slammers pitcher has a pretty good move to first and he's paying close attention to Juan, who hit a single up the middle.

From his post in the chalk box by third base, Coach sends a take sign:

Chin ear chin ear chin nose cap nose. Clap, Clap.

The kid looks over and smiles a little and turns his back on Coach. No nod. Nothin'. Coach has no idea if he got the message.

It's a ball, way outside.

Coach doesn't know very much about the rook. He had a flashy batting average. That's why Skip tagged him. He assumes he's a power hitter. That's what the Bears need.

On the next pitch, he relays the Skipper's signal to hit away and try to score Johnnie from third.

Chin ear belt nose chest belt chest chin. Clap, Clap.

The rook turns back to the plate. Coach whistles to get his attention. He wants a nod, something that shows he understands, but he doesn't respond. Coach creeps down the line as close to home as he can get.

The pitch is low and outside. The kid brings his top hand higher on the bat and leans over like he's touching his toes. Then he seems to stumble and he swats at the pitch. It seems almost accidental.

The ball rolls toward third, then bites like a golf ball on a green and jigs unexpectedly to the right.

The third baseman and the catcher go after it. When the ball changes directions, the third baseman clips the catcher in the mouth with his glove. The catcher falls sideways and rolls into the pitcher, Lawry, who collapses on top of the ball.

The third baseman steps back to avoid the pile and puts his hands in the air. There's nothing he can do.

Sporting a wide grin, Johnnie Jett comes in from third with the first run of the game. Coach is windmilling his arm at Juan, who steams all the way from first with the second run.

The kid gets to second, his oversized uni flapping around his legs, before the Slammers pitcher gets his hands on the ball and makes him stop.

The fans are roaring. Both dugouts echo with laughter. The other infielders shake their heads and try to help their teammates back to their feet. Even the catcher, pitcher and third baseman wear silly grins.

Robbie grounds out on the next pitch. The rook is stranded.

"What a freak play," Coach says, coming back to the dugout.

“I’ve never seen anything like that,” Skip agrees.

“Must have hit a hole in the turf,” Coach says.

The score is still at 2-0 in the fifth, when the kid comes up for the second time with the bases empty.

The PA announcer gets a little carried away.

“Now batting: number nothing,” he intones, referring to the fact the rook’s not wearing a number on his shirt. “He got that nothing hit last time up. Let’s see what he can do this time.”

There’s some scattered laughter in the stands and a few boos.

Coach gives the kid another take sign. That means the batter is supposed to stand there and let the ball go by.

Chin ear chin ear chin nose cap nose. Clap, clap.

Lawry has obviously been waiting for a chance to get even. He was embarrassed by the rook’s first at-bat. On the first pitch, the big lefthander rears back and sends a screamer right at his head.

The kid looks like he’s expecting it. He never ducks back. He slides his top hand up again, putting the bat into a vertical position. As both corner infielders charge the plate, he calmly slaps a ball that was heading right for his face.

It goes directly toward the pitcher’s right or pivot foot. Lawry’s motion swings his body to the right. The ball caroms off his shoe toward third.

“Owww!”

By the time the catcher can get to it, the rook is standing safely at first.

The pitcher hops around, holding his foot. The stands are in an uproar again, fans pointing and hooting.

Lawry hobbles on both feet for a few moments until the sting goes away. With the trainer looking on, he takes a few practice throws to show he can stay in the game.

The kid dumps the dirt out of his rolled pant legs. He refuses to smile. He doesn't want to show up the pitcher. He won't look at him.

Lawry glowers at the rookie. Clearly upset, he starts to sweat, even though the evening air is getting chilly. He paces around the mound and lingers on the first-base side.

The home plate ump motions for the pitcher to get back to work.
"Let's go. Play ball!"

Lawry climbs onto the mound, puts his foot on the rubber and bends over to get his sign. The kid takes two steps off first and immediately breaks for second, his overlarge shirt billowing behind him.

At his catcher's frantic gestures, Lawry turns back to first and sees that the runner isn't there. He swivels back and slings the ball toward second. The ball skips under the infielder's glove and into center field.

The rook trots over to third, then brushes a dust cloud off his pants.

The pitcher grimaces and picks up the rosin bag, trying to regain his composure. The kid keeps looking down.

Coach is irritated. He leans across the chalk box and whispers into the rook's ear.

"What do you think you're doing? I never gave a steal sign."

The kid flashes a big excited grin at him.

The Bears don't score again and the Slammers hit a two-run homer in the sixth to tie the game.

The kid comes up for the final time in the eighth inning with no one on base. Lawry throws at his feet twice, making the rook skip, and then hits him square in the butt.

The ump ejects the pitcher from the game, as the kid jogs to first. It's his third time on base in three tries.

The Slammers go on to win with a three-run rally in the eighth.



“Did you talk to the kid?”

Skip takes a sip of coffee. He and Coach are having breakfast at a local diner.

“I was gonna grab him on the bus back to the motel,” Coach says. “but he wasn’t on it.”

“Maybe he was working out his apology,” Skip says, chuckling.

“Ha.”

The manager is an optimist. You have to be to run a minor league club.

The other day Van Vranken went off on him about his favorite subject, how he’ll never make any money from the Bears, how the team is his curse and he never should have bought it. He had those horrible checkered pants on. It was hard to look at him.

Van said to him in that big basso voice he loves to use: “Skip, how do you stay so calm?”

“I can’t help it. It’s the way I am,” Skip said with a smile as he hefted his widebody off the dugout bench. “Don’t worry. They’ll start winning.”

He squeezed the owner’s shoulder and walked away, leaving Van content for the moment.

Skip is good at that. He’s deft with people. A Triple-A team is a mixture of different personalities—old vets at the end of their careers, young guys full of energy and hope, a few just playing for paychecks. Skip keeps them all heading in the same direction.

“I don’t know whether to laugh or cry,” he jokes about Bruno. “The kid did get on base three times.”

“Those were flukes,” Coach says. “He surprised ‘em.”

“I’m not sure they were,” Skip says. “They told us he has some gimmicks.”

There's a nice view of the Pismo Pier out the window, but Coach isn't enjoying it. He's still steamed about last night.

"That kid, he totally ignored me," he says. "He dissed me in front of the whole team. He never even registered my signs. And it's not his decision when to run."

As third base coach, he rules the infield when the Bears are at bat. He's the man the runners have to watch. From first to home, they come into his country. He's the one who says who goes and who stays put.

The batters have to watch him too. He's the one who gives the signals they're supposed to follow. After every pitch, Coach checks with the Skipper and then relays his wishes to the batter and any runners.

Skip slurps some more coffee. He lets Coach stew for a few minutes.

"Baseball is about nine guys playing the same game at the same time," Coach says. "The kid is playing like he's the only one on the field."

"I know. I know. You're right," Skip says, "but those tricks he pulled, they sure tickled the fans."

He promises he'll speak to the kid.

"Not bad for his first game," he says, standing and hooking his thumbs under his belt so he can hike his pants up under his belly. "Pretty entertaining."

"It's not some damn clown show," Coach grumbles. "It's baseball."

The two go a little long, so Coach is a few minutes late for his next appointment, which is a batting session with Bruno. He's also the Bears hitting instructor.

When he gets there, the rook is nowhere to be found.

Coach walks through the clubhouse, but Bruno's not there either. He hangs around for a bit, but the kid doesn't show up.



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