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"Clocking Koufax"

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"Clocking Koufax"

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

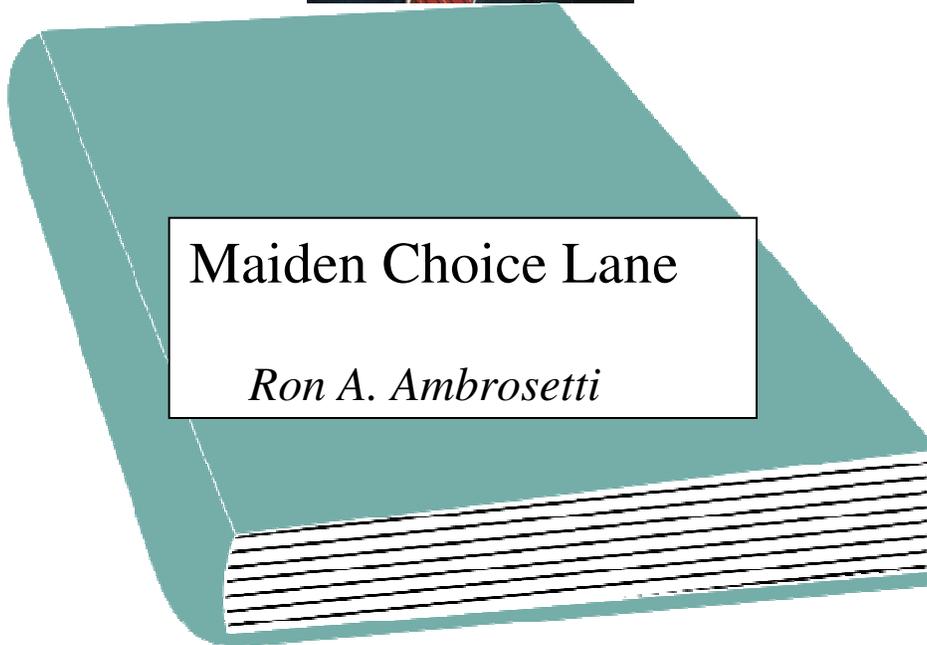
"Walking out of the tunnels of Baltimore's Memorial Stadium, even after the roaring crowds had departed in compressed streams of red taillights, was the best part of the evening, John Angelina had decided early in the baseball season. Especially now that the Orioles were headed for a pennant and possibly the World Series, the line of groupies would wait for the pitchers. Not that the other players or positions were any less attractive, it was just something about the pitchers. Particularly that battery of pitchers that year that would in fact find heroes in all unlikely places and circumstances; that year that would deliver a resounding win at the World Series against the legendary Los Angeles Dodgers and the brilliant Sandy Koufax."

EXTRA! EXTRA! EXTRA!



Maiden Choice Lane

Ron A. Ambrosetti



“Clocking Koufax”

Autumn 1966

Walking out of the tunnels of Baltimore’s Memorial Stadium, even after the roaring crowds had departed in compressed streams of red taillights, was the best part of the evening, John Angelina had decided early in the baseball season. Especially now that the Orioles were headed for a pennant and possibly the World Series, the line of groupies would wait for the pitchers. Not that the other players or positions were any less attractive, it was just something about the pitchers. Particularly that battery of pitchers that year that would in fact find heroes in all unlikely places and circumstances; that year that would deliver a resounding win at the World Series against the legendary Los Angeles Dodgers and the brilliant Sandy Koufax.

As predictable as clockwork, a group of unsuspecting fans, mostly young women in their 20s, would rush the ballplayers as they emerged from the barriers protecting the mouths of the tunnels. The first time that he himself was importuned, John was confused and caught totally off guard. Then, once he realized, that he was a “dead ringer” for Milt Pappas, the Oriole pitcher, he just enjoyed the nightly adoration. And he just signed the scraps of proffered paper with his version of the Oriole pitcher’s autograph. After it happened the first time, John’s uncle, a film consultant for the team and reason for John’s presence at the major league games, informed the real Milt Pappas. The real article laughed heartily and offered to bring John on the road trips also.

Not that John ever intended to “cash in” on the fringe benefits of working on the edges of celebrity; he nonetheless endured the endless jabs from his uncle and the real McCoy pitchers. He also accepted the danger and excitement that inextricably accompanied the continued camaraderie of the actual baseball players. Standing in at the plate for the likes of Jim Palmer, Milt Pappas and Moe Drabowski, while they warmed up during pitching practice, was part of his acceptance into the clubhouse. John remembered how the stitches on the baseball would dance outside of the laws of physics as a pitch would rocket past at 95 to 100 mph. His uncle approved because of the opportunities to test the clocking equipment and put the players at ease with the process.

By the end of September, the Orioles had clinched the American League pennant and the World Series was ineluctably approaching along with the concomitant cold winds sweeping in from the west. Also approaching from the west was the looming prospect of the ominous opposition in the Series of the World Champion Los Angeles Dodgers—and an untouchable pitching staff crowned by Don Drysdale and Sandy Koufax. The Dodgers had yet to clinch the National League pennant in a tight three-way race that included the Pirates and the Giants.

On the last day of the regular 1966 season, high baseball melodrama was played out in a climactic weekend at both ends of Pennsylvania. On Sunday, October 2, at Pittsburgh, the second-place Pirates were hosting the third-place Giants. In nearby (to Baltimore) Philadelphia, the Dodgers were visiting the Phillies for a heart-stopping finale of the last three games of their season. Their extant World Championship—hard won the year before in Minneapolis—was on the line. The Dodgers were on the roll in the tense

pennant race and had won twenty of their twenty-nine games in the month of September. In fact, on the reliable arm of Sandy Koufax, the Dodgers had captured first place in the National League on September 11. On the fateful date, Sandy Koufax had pitched his fortieth and final shutout of his career.

In Baltimore, the sports press was watching the National League race with great interest. Amongst the Baltimore fans, apprehension was growing despite the Orioles' ten-game lead in the American League. In fact, on September 11, 1966, while Sandy Koufax and the Dodgers swept a double header from Houston and rolled into first place, the Orioles were losing by a lopsided score in Minneapolis, the very scene of the Dodgers' World Championship win just a year earlier. The loss in Minneapolis was also a sign of the Orioles' sustained September sputter; after mounting an impressive record in June and July (losing only 18 games in two months), the O's were only able to win half of the remaining games in the rest of the 1966 season. As the Baltimore *Sun*, along with an entire city of unsettled fans, was observing: the team was "backing into the pennant."

Compared to the Dodgers' finale of winning more than two-thirds of September's games, the Oriole brass was more than nervous when the bookies made the Dodgers 8-5 favorites in the World Series on October 3rd. The Oriole front office had actually already anticipated the high probability of facing the Dodgers and had dispatched John's uncle, with miniature 8mm cameras in hand, to Philadelphia for the final weekend of the National League pennant season. Pittsburgh was only a bit farther away, but the Baltimore management watched the rainy weather forecast for Saturday in Philly and also

knew the rotation of the Dodger pitching. It would all come down to a Sunday afternoon and a prodigy named Koufax who already won 26 games in the '66 season.

John Angelina got the call from his uncle on the drizzly Friday evening. His uncle was driving up to Philly on Saturday morning and trying to get into Connie Mack Stadium for what surely would be a rain-forced double header on Sunday. If John agreed to come along, his uncle would be grateful for the second set of hands and perhaps even a second angle of vision for the cameras. Besides, the sports bars and hotel restaurants in South Philly might even provide an advance glimpse of the Dodgers and the famed battery of LA pitchers. John consented to the 8 a.m. pickup by his uncle.

As it turned out, getting “privileged access” into the Sunday double header (the Saturday game was in fact rained out) was not only “facilitated” by the Phillies’ front office but also the seats were awesome. The Baltimore management found allies in the Phillie organization due to good memory on the part of the Oriole front office. Two years earlier, in early June of '64, the World Champion Dodgers had arrived in Philadelphia and Sandy Koufax had become, with 30,000 Phillie fans watching, only the second pitcher in modern baseball (after Bob Feller) to pitch three no-hitters. Philly manager vowed in rage to never have Koufax mow down his team again. Mauch had actually, it was reported in the gossip columns of the sports pages, calculated the Koufax rotation as far in the future as early September. Mauch had been overjoyed that the next match between the two teams was scheduled over the Jewish New Year. Koufax would not pitch during the High Holydays. Everyone remembered the unexpected Koufax disappearance from Dodger Stadium in September 1963. Suspicions about Koufax’s

health were allayed only when he finally showed up and said: "It was Yom Kippur." A few weeks later in October 1963, the iconic Mickey Mantle lost some national glow when he referred to the LA pitcher as "Yom Koufax." Mantle had just been humiliated in the Dodger sweep of the Yankees in the '63 World Series.

John and his uncle were treated as royalty when they showed up in Connie Mack Stadium on Sunday morning to pick up their tickets for the double header. The seats were nearly front row and behind home plate. No one in the Philly front office asked about the obvious pair of camera bags. John could have sworn that in fact he observed subtle smiles all around. Additionally, the peanuts, popcorn and soft drinks arrived with regularity at their seats.

The next surprise came when Drysdale was chased before three innings in the first game. John and his uncle used very little film in the first game as the growing prospect of a Koufax appearance in the second game became more inevitable. At one point, however, the cameras jumped to life as Sandy Koufax actually ran down to the bullpen in a futile gesture to appear as a relief pitcher in the doomed first game. Two errors later, the defeated Dodgers returned to a glum clubhouse and the knowledge of a sudden life and death situation in the next and final game of the season.

John and his uncle aimed the cameras at Koufax warming up for the final and decisive game of the regular season; in fact, his warm-up sessions were notoriously marathon stretches. It was not uncommon for Koufax to throw a hundred pitches or more in the warm up. As Koufax's elegant deliveries homed in on the plate at a 100 mph, the opposing team would watch in desperation and feel its spirits sink. John listened as the

public address system in the stadium announced that Willie McCovey had lifted a home run out of the ballpark in Pittsburgh; the Giants' victory meant that the Dodgers had to win. The surreptitious Baltimore cameras were rolling not only because the opening of the World Series was just two days away but also because of the inevitability of Koufax's imminent victory in the next two hours and thirty-four minutes of baseball at its best.

Working on only two days' rest, Koufax found in the early innings of the game that he had no curve ball. In the bottom of the first inning, he struggled with two on and two out. Koufax could not get the curve over the plate and John was focusing the second camera on the pitcher's hands and the ever-important appearance of the glove through the wind up. Koufax went to the heat and Richie Allen struck out as Koufax escaped early trouble and ditched his curve for the rest of the game. Starting in the bottom of the second inning, Koufax threw nothing but a fastball for the rest of the game. What was absolutely amazing was that the Philly batters knew it also; they knew what was coming and could not prevent Koufax and the Dodgers from winning the game and the pennant. John and his uncle got it all down on film. Years later John would reflect on the film's value not only for the edification of the Oriole hitters but as a chronicle of the final days of baseball's greatest pitcher. It was the falling trail of a dying comet as its final flare of light raced to darkness' horizon.

Here comes the part about which John knew he would regale his grandchildren many years later. After Koufax allowed three runs in the bottom of the ninth, he struck out the final two batters with a holy determination that resembled the perfect game of the year before in the Blue Heaven of Chavez Ravine. The fabled Dodger clubhouse once

more was baseball's Camelot in a wash of champagne and eruption of shaving cream. For Sandy Koufax, the mystical grail of the gifted athlete—so steady in his 10-year grip of the baseball curvature--was soon to slip away. He had just won his last game of his professional career. The celebratory champagne could not eradicate the permeation of the Capsolin. The pain reliever had been applied to his arthritic left elbow for years, and this final night of the season was no exception. After each game, the Capsolin—a hot sauce extracted from red-hot chili peppers and applied with surgical gloves—was purged from the skin a tub of ice water. The searing sauce was attenuated and the swollen elbow was eased from its edema.

After packing their equipment, John and his uncle looked for the Philly front office to offer both condolences for the game and gratitude for the seats. John left the equipment with his uncle and looked for a restroom before the 90-mile trek back to Baltimore. John took two turns in the tunnels between the clubhouses and was lost. He wandered into a locker room that was too quiet to be off limits. He found himself looking directly at Sandy Koufax whose left arm was grotesquely swollen, even under a rubber set of wraps in the ice water bucket. The legendary pitcher looked up and smiled as he hoisted a bottle of beer to his lips. Two empties reposed by the tub of water.

“Hi, kid.”

Even after four entire seasons of sitting in the Baltimore dugout next to the likes of Brooks and Frank Robinson, Jim Palmer, Dave McNally and Boog Powell, John flushed with surprise and stammered to a quick: “Excuse me, Mr. Koufax.”

“Want a beer, kid? Even with the hat you have on, I am willing to share my pain killers.”

John touched his own head in total amnesia of the fact that he had slipped his Oriole hat on in preparation of the car trip home. It was part of packing up the gear and getting on the road. This time the words did not come.

“So what is a nice Jewish kid from Baltimore doing in Philadelphia? Hedging your bets and scouting the opposition for the Series?”

“I came to the game with my uncle. But I am not Jewish.”

“Actually, I am glad about that. Otherwise I’d be hearing from every rabbi in Philly about drinking with minors.”

“I turned 21 last summer.”

The great Sandy Koufax broke out in a hearty laugh and then when his elbow shifted in the ice water his face turned into a tight grimace.

“Do you play baseball, kid?”

“Actually, I was a pitcher in high school. Until I ripped a deltoid playing handball.”

“It is always those other games that get us. My off-season golf is not helping this monstrosity of an arm. What high school in Philly did you play for?”

“It was a Roman Catholic seminary in Baltimore.”

“Well, I guess that you really are not Jewish. But you should have been—would have saved your arm. Jews don’t play handball. That game is part of that preppy

Catholic school stuff. Anyway, I am sorry about your arm and you really do need a beer as badly as I do. Do you go to college?"

"I am senior at Loyola in Baltimore."

"I went to Columbia for a while. And then the team moved to LA. I just can't myself over to UCLA with everything.... Well, you can see here for yourself."

"You are the greatest pitcher in the history of the game."

"You know what I always say, kid? Baseball is what you did until you grew up." What happened to your seminary training? Aren't you still going to be a Catholic priest?

"No. I ran afoul of some rules and regulations. I left the seminary two years ago."

"Yeah, I know about those things. This religious stuff sometimes is more baffling than a wild pitch. Can't win sometimes. Last year after I honored the High Holydays and did not pitch in Minneapolis. That was cool, right? A week later I was the goat of the game; people claimed that I was eating ham sandwiches in downtown Minneapolis."

John desperately wanted to ask him if the ham sandwich story was true. He found the discretion of biting his tongue.

"Look, kid. Nice talking to you. I have to get this arm into a shirtsleeve and get on the bus. We are flying back to LA tonight. Big game in two days, you know. So, whom are you rooting for?" Koufax paused. "Don't answer that."

Before John could say any else, Sandy Koufax was up and moving away from the tub of now melted ice water.

Without looking and still walking away, Koufax yelled back to John: “Your guys look pretty good. I played against some of them in the All Star Game in July. Don’t tell them what you saw here; they might just know how close it will be.”

“By the way, kid, I saw you in the second row behind home plate. You and—your uncle, you say—were pretty busy with those movie cameras. When I pitch, I look straight into and through the plate. I had a better view of you than you had of me. Have a safe trip back to B-more. See you in LA in two days?”

John was dumbfounded. He was not going to LA, although his uncle was. He found a restroom and then wandered back to his uncle’s impatience in the tunnel to the parking lot. His uncle had been drinking and also had to pee. His uncle’s mood darkened when he drank. When his uncle returned, they both went into the Phillies’ front office and retrieved the camera bags.

Once out in the parking lot, John offered to drive and let his uncle have another one or two for the road. His uncle was agreeable to more drinking and additional disagreeability. John steered the car down Broad Street toward the Schuylkill Expressway and headed off to the brand new I-95. His uncle was sound asleep by the time they passed the Delaware Memorial Bridge.

Listening to his uncle’s deep snoring, John was amazed by his meeting Sandy Koufax. He thought of that great arm and its pitiable distortion wrapped in plastic and turned blue in the ice water. He could still smell the Capsolin, of which he had only read.

Approaching the interstate bridge over the broad expanse in the Susquehanna River, John touched the brakes lightly. His uncle was out cold and snoring in the arms of Morpheus. John stopped the car in the middle of the bridge. Careful to be quiet, John reached to the back of the car and found the camera bags. He opened the one with the film that had been shot earlier in the day. Grasping all of the film canisters, he opened his door quietly and avoided the noise of the stray passing vehicle.

He walked around the back of the car and stood at the bridge railing. He sailed each canister, the diameter of a baseball, into the vast darkness of empty space high above the river. He remembered from a British Romanticism course in the seminary that Shelley and other utopians had planned to come to the banks of this very flume. The 8mm mini-canisters flew outward and dropped earthward with the grace of a perfectly pitched curve ball. John's deltoid muscle felt the soothing cold of an ice water bath.

The next morning, John's uncle called him and bellowed through the phone wires: "Those fucking Phillies. They stole our film. I knew that I should not have left it in their office for five fucking minutes. Those cocksuckers now will kill Koufax next year thanks to MY fucking film. John, I am really pissed."

"I have to get to school. I need to work on a paper for poetry class. Have a good trip to LA."

"Ok, John. I will. And you need to stop reading about those fucking faggots and get a life in video. It's coming, John. Listen to your uncle."



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