

When Iron-Arm McPherson Took the Mound

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I still remember him when he was just a kid (said Big Red), making a name for himself out in the Quinellus Cluster. They said he was the fastest thing on two feet, and that he'd break every base-stealing record in the books.

I took that kind of personally, since I'm pretty fast myself -- or at least I used to be, before I blew out my left knee and broke my right thigh and ankle during my next-to-last season of murderball. (I'll bet you didn't know it, but I took my name from two of the greatest racehorses ever, Man o' War and Secretariat. The press gave each of them the nickname of Big Red.) Anyway, I made it my business to head out that way and see if this McPherson kid was as good as his press clippings.

First time up, the kid bunted and beat the throw, then stole second, third, and home, and he was still looking for more bases to steal when the roar of the crowd finally died down. Did the same thing the second time he was up. Bunted his way onto first base a third time -- and then it happened. There was a pickoff play that got him leaning the wrong way, and suddenly he fell to the ground and grabbed his knee, and I knew his base-stealing days were over.

I didn't think much about him for the next couple of years, and then I heard he'd come back, that he was hitting home runs farther than anyone had ever hit 'em, was averaging more than one a game, so I went out to take a look. Sure enough, the kid drilled the first pitch he saw completely out of the ballpark, and did the same with the next couple.

Then they called in Squint-Eye Malone from the bullpen. Old Squint-Eye took it as a personal insult any time someone poked a long one off one of his teammates, so he wound up and threw a high hard one up around the kid's chin. The kid was a really cool customer; he never flinched, never moved a muscle. Malone squinted even more and aimed the next one at the kid's head. The kid ducked a little too late, and everyone in the park could hear the crunching sound as the ball shattered his eye socket, and I figured with that even with the artificial eyes they make these days, it would have to affect his timing or his depth perception or something, and it was a damned shame, because this was a truly talented kid who'd been done in not once but twice by bad luck and physical injuries.

And that was it. I never gave him another thought. Then, about four years later, word began trickling out that there was a pitcher out in the boonies who could throw smoke like no one had ever seen. The stories kept coming back about this Iron-Arm McPherson, who supposedly threw the ball so hard that batters never saw it coming, and I vaguely wondered if he was any relation to the McPherson kid I'd seen who'd had all that talent and all those troubles.

Well, he was too good to stay where he was, so they sold his contract to the Cosmos League, and before long he got himself traded to the Deluros Demons, and you can't get any bigger than that.

I was playing for Spica II at the time. We won our division and headed off for Deluros VIII for the playoffs, and I got my first look at Iron-Arm McPherson, and sure enough he was the same player I'd seen those other two times. I was batting leadoff, and I figured he couldn't run too good after that knee injury, and I didn't think he could have fully adjusted to his new eye, so I decided I'd bunt on the right side of the infield and I should have no trouble beating it out, and when my teammates saw how easy it was, why, we'd bunt the poor bastard out of the game, maybe even out of the league.

So the game starts, and I walk up to the plate, and Iron-Arm winds up and lets fly, and I hear the ball thud into the catcher's mitt, and the umpire calls it a strike, but I'll swear I never saw it once it left his hand.

He winds up and throws again, and again it comes in so fast that my eyes can't follow it, and then he does it a third time, and I'm out of there, and I realize that everything I've heard about Iron-Arm McPherson is true.

He strikes out the first eighteen men he faces, and then I come up for a third time to lead off the top of the seventh inning, and he rears back and gives me the high hard one, and I can almost feel it whistle by me even though I can't see it, and I toss my bat onto the ground in disgust and start walking back to the dugout.

"Hey, Red," says the umpire, "you got two more strikes coming."

"I don't want 'em," I say.

"Are you gonna come back here and play, or not?" demands the ump.

"Not," I say. "How the hell can I hit what I can't see?"

"All right, you're outta here!" yells the ump, and I get ejected and take an early shower, which suits me fine since the alternative is being humiliated up at the plate again.

We all breathe a sigh of relief when the game's over, because it means we won't have to face McPherson again for another three or four days -- but when we come out onto the field the next afternoon, who's waiting for us on the mound but Iron-Arm McPherson!

Well, 52 hours into the playoffs we're down three games to none, and we're just one game from elimination, and not a one of us has reached base yet, and McPherson's record in the series is 3-and-0, and he's pitched back-to-back-to-back perfect games, and instead of getting tired he seems to be as strong as ever, and one of the local newscasts announces that they've timed his pitches and they're averaging 287 miles per hour, and that his hummer was clocked at 303.

That night, while I'm drowning my sorrows in the hotel bar and wondering what to do with myself in the off-season, which figures to start sometime around midafternoon the next day, I see Einstein sitting by himself, lifting a few and jotting down notes on his computer. I recognize him from his holos, and I figure if anyone can help me, it's got to be him, so I walk over and introduce myself.

He doesn't respond, and that's when someone tells me he's blind, deaf and mute, and I ask how anyone ever talks to him, and it's explained to me that I have to get my computer to talk to his computer and then he'll respond.

I go over to the hotel's registration desk and rent a pocket computer and then return to the bar and have it tell Einstein's computer who I am and how much I admire him, and that I've got a little problem and could he help me with it.

He taps away at his machine, and suddenly mine speaks up: "What is the nature of your problem?"

I ask him if he knows anything about baseball, and he says he knows the rudiments, and I explain my problem to him, that McPherson's high hard one clocks in at 303 miles an hour, and that even at an average of 287 none of us can even see the ball when Iron-Arm lets loose.

He does some quick calculations in his head, takes about two seconds to verify them on his computer, and then sends me another message: "The human arm is incapable of throwing a baseball at more than 127.49263 miles per hour."

"Maybe so," I answer back, "but they clocked him at more than twice that speed."

"The conclusion is obvious," sends Einstein. "The baseball is not being thrown by a human arm."

And suddenly it's all clear to me. Here's this kid who's already got an artificial knee and a replacement eyeball as a result of injuries. Why not get a step ahead of the game by buying himself a prosthetic arm before he can develop bursitis or tendonitis or whatever? And if he was going to buy a new arm, why not the strongest, most accurate arm that science could make?

I thought about it for a while, until I was sure I was right, and then I told Einstein that I agreed with him, but that didn't help solve my problem, which was that whether McPherson was using his real arm or one he'd gone out and bought, no one could even hit a loud foul ball off him.

"It's an interesting problem," responded Einstein. He began tapping in numbers and symbols, and pretty soon his fingers were almost as hard to follow as one of McPherson's fastballs, and after about five minutes he quit just as suddenly as he started, with a satisfied little smile on his face.

"Are you still here?" his machine asked.

"Yes."

"I am going to transmit a very complex chemical formula to your computer. In the morning, print it out and take it to the laboratory at the local university -- they're the only ones who will have everything that's required -- and have them mix it up as instructed and put it into a titanium vial. Then rub it onto your bat."

"And then what?" I asked.

"Then don't trip on third base as you turn for home plate."

I thanked him, though I didn't really believe anything could work against McPherson, and I went to the lab in the morning, just like he told me to, and got the vial and poured the entire contents onto my bat and rubbed them in real good about an hour before game time.

I wasn't real thrilled when the home plate umpire cried "Play ball!" and Iron-Arm McPherson took the mound for the fourth day in row and I had to step into the batter's box, but the only alternative was to get myself thrown out again, so I sighed and trudged up to the plate and stood there, waiting.

McPherson wound up and reared back and let fly. I'm not sure exactly what happened next, except that I heard a crack! like a gunshot, and suddenly the ball was soaring into the left field bleachers and I was jogging around the bases with a really dumb grin on my face, and McPherson was standing there, hands on hips, looking like he couldn't believe that I'd belted his money pitch out of the park.

He struck out the next eight batters, but when I came up again with two out and nobody on in the third inning, he leaned back and gave me his zinger, and I pickled it again. I nailed another in the sixth, and I led off the ninth with my fourth homer of the day. I looked at the scoreboard as I rounded third, and saw we were still down 7 to 4, and there wasn't any activity in the Demons' bullpen (and why should there be? I mean, hell, he was still pitching a four-hitter), and before Shaka Njaba left the on-deck circle and went up to take his raps, I crossed home plate and kept on running until I came to him and told him that if he wanted to win the game he should use my bat. I didn't have time to tell him why, but Shaka's as superstitious as most ballplayers, and he jumped at the chance to use my lucky bat.

McPherson rubbed the ball in his hands, hitched his pants, fiddled with the peak of his cap, toed the rubber, went into his motion, and let fly -- and not only didn't I see the ball come to the plate, but the bat moved so fast I didn't see it either. But I heard the two meet, and I saw the ball go 19 rows deep into the center field seats, and I passed the word up and down the bench that everyone should use my bat.

The next six hitters took McPherson deep, and when his manager finally came out and took the ball away from him and sent him to the showers (for the first time all season), we were winning 11 to 7. I figured our bullpen could hold onto the lead, so I took my bat back before someone broke it, and sure enough, we won 11 to 8.

McPherson was back on the mound the next day, but after we hit his first five pitches into the stands for a 5 to 0 lead, he was gone again, and we didn't see any more of him in the series.

We won that afternoon, and the next two nights, and became the champions. I sought out Einstein to thank him, but he told me that he'd gotten 30-to-1 odds against Spica II when we were down three games to none. He'd bet a few thousand credits, so he felt more than amply rewarded for his efforts.

As for Iron-Arm McPherson, getting knocked out of the box in front of all those millions of fans was -- to borrow a baseball expression -- his third strike, after messing up his knee and his batting eye. There just wasn't a place in the game for a pitcher who couldn't get anyone out, even if he could burn that hummer in there at 303 miles an hour.

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"What became of him?" I asked.

"Last I heard, he was running a spaceship wash at one of the orbital stations out near Far London," answered Big Red.

"So that's how you managed to hit those homers off him!" said Bet-A-World O'Grady. "I'll be damned!"

"You saw the game?" asked Big Red.

"I'm the guy who gave Einstein 30-to-1 that you couldn't win!" he laughed.

"Just goes to show what happens when you bet against Einstein."

"Same thing usually happens what you bet against me," said O'Grady.

"I'll bet you've been involved in some big-money games," offered Three-Gun Max.

"I've been in my share of 'em," agreed O'Grady.

"I heard about the time you put up three agricultural worlds against the Tamal Jewels on one roll of the dice," put in Nicodemus Mayflower.

"And I remember reading that you lost a whole solar system in a card game out on Tevarius IV, and then won it back the next night," added Sahara del Rio.

"Absolutely true," said O'Grady.

"What was the biggest bet you ever made?"

"You really want to hear about it?" asked O'Grady with the air of a man who couldn't be silenced by much less than a lethal blow to the head.

"That's why we're asking," said Max.

O'Grady walked up to the bar, then turned so he could face his audience.

"Then I guess I'll tell you," he said.