

## Starbuck by Robert Reed

*A sharp-eyed reader noted recently that Mr. Reed passed a milestone earlier this year when he published his fiftieth story in F&SF. Story #53 is a good one for citing statistics, as baseball stories are always a good excuse for reveling in stats. Perhaps F&SF should launch its own series of player trading cards? If we do, you'll see that Robert Reed bats right, throws right, has an exceptional on-base percentage and his speed on the keyboard is almost unrivaled. And the fun fact is that Mr. Reed is Nebraska's leading science fiction writer. (Readers are encouraged to read this story while chewing a flat, cardboard-like piece of bright pink gum.)*

\* \* \* \*

His hard stuff had gone a little soft and his breaking stuff was staying up in the zone now, and what had been a crisply pitched game for the first eight innings was slowing down by the breath. By the heartbeat. Starbuck walked off the mound and slapped his glove against a thigh, and he wiped his wet forehead with a wet sleeve, then he tucked the glove under an arm while he worked at the new ball with both bare hands, trying to coax life into fingers that insisted on feeling hot needles whenever they touched the world. Jeez, his right hand was a mess, particularly on the blistered middle finger. But he barely noticed that pain, what with the ache of his shoulder and the burning inside what had started the game as a strong sound elbow. Finally, grudgingly, he scaled the mound again and looked at the enemy batter--a skinny little center fielder who could smack a pitched ball in any of a thousand directions--and watched the taped fingers of his catcher, ten layers of code laid over the signal so that the runner standing on second didn't get wind ... crap, what pitch did the guy want...? Starbuck just shook him off, forcing him to try again. And again, the fingers were talking gibberish. So what could a pitcher do but wave his glove overhead, screaming, "Time out," to the umpire?

The bloodless machine lifted its arms, and a game barely moving suddenly ground to a halt.

Beyond the glare of the lights were more lights, and there were faces and things that would never look like faces, all attached to voices possessing a perfect clarity, and even if a man's ears could somehow ignore what was being shouted at him, there were also the obvious thoughts that no sentient mind could evade--tension and considerable hope, plus a growing, well-deserved impatience.

"Sit him down," said a multitude, voices full of pity and malice.

"No, leave him in," said a smaller multitude, spirits buoyed by the suddenly rich prospects for their own team.

The catcher was a meaty-faced man with garlic on the breath and nearly two decades of experience. He walked like an old catcher, knees complaining. But he had a boy's smile and an unexpected kindness in a voice that was softer than one might expect from that face and that build. "He's going to yank you," the catcher told Starbuck. "You want him to?"

"No."

"Cosgrove's ready."

Starbuck snapped off a few brutal curses. "Cosgrove cost me my last two games. You think I should let him come out here--?"

"Well then," his catcher interrupted. Then he put his fat glove around his mouth, choking off the garlic stink while asking, "What's your best pitch left?"

"Fastball."

"Well then." With a glance back over his shoulder, the catcher said, "Give him a breaking ball. Put it outside. Can you?"

"Probably."

"After that, start shaking me off."

"Okay."

"And go high with your best fastball. The little shit's going to swing through, and you'll get your first out."

Except it didn't happen that way. The breaking pitch pushed the count to full, but Starbuck didn't get his fastball low enough to entice. Instead, the batter watched it buzz past his eyes, and he took first base at a gallop, and now the winning run was on and there were still three outs to earn.

The manager called time.

Where was the stupid resin bag? Starbuck found it hiding behind the mound, and he contented himself for a few moments by banging the bag against his palms and tossing it down before giving it a few good kicks. White dust hung in the air. The manager was crossing the infield, already taking a measure of his pitcher. Starbuck gave him a stare and jutting lower jaw. "I don't want you to pull me," he said with his body, his face. And then he gave the hapless resin bag one more hard kick.

The catcher came out with the manager. Catchers always did that, since they were supposed to be the generals out on the diamond. But there was also a history between Starbuck and this manager, and if you knew enough--and the fans always knew more than enough--you realized the catcher was standing halfway between the men for a reason. These two prideful souls had already suffered more than one flare-up this season. It was smart baseball to have a beefy body at the ready, in case this little meeting on the mound turned into another donnybrook.

The manager began by asking, "What should I do?"

"Don't use Cosgrove," warned Starbuck.

"No?"

"I'll get three outs."

"Tonight?"

"Not with you standing here. But yeah, I will."

The manager nodded, as if he sincerely believed that promise. Then with a strong quiet voice, he said, "Show me your arm."

Starbuck surrendered his right arm into the waiting hands.

The manager was ancient by most measures. The story was that he had played parts of three seasons in the Bigs, but he was too small for the game. So like a lot of idiots in those days, he juiced himself with designer steroids and synthetic growth hormones and enough Ritalin to keep an entire city focused. But the juice could do only so much good and quite a lot of bad. He was finished playing before he was twenty-eight, and after another twenty years of working as a coach in the minor leagues, he started to die. Organs failed. Enzymes went wacky. And weird cancers sprang up in all the embarrassing places.

Before he was fifty, the old man had been gutted like a brook trout and filled up with new organs either

grown in tanks or built from plastic, all back when that kind of work seemed exceptionally modern. But he was still stuck in the minor leagues, working as a batting coach or a scout or sometimes tucked into the front office. It wasn't until he was seventy-two that his career genuinely took off.

In most versions of the story, he was jumping a hooker in Terra Haute, and a pretty important blood vessel in his brain broke. Over the next three days, he died twenty times. Doctors had to do a lot of inspired work just to keep his corpse breathing. How they saved as much of his brain as they did, nobody knew. But what they saved was what was best, and what they built after that more than replaced what he had lost. Once the old guy learned to walk again, and talk, and take care of himself in the bathroom, he went back to managing, and nobody knew how it happened, but the man's new brain had acquired an eerie capacity to absorb a whole lot of factors before gut-feelings took over and made the right call.

"I should pull you," the manager remarked, those strong ageless hands letting go of Starbuck's arm, both men watching it drop, limp and tired. "I really want to drag you out of this game."

His pitcher said nothing.

"But you see Cosgrove standing over there? Glove under his arm?" The manager got a new face before the season. He looked maybe fifty, or at least how fifty used to look. Gray-haired and sun-worn, respectable and wise. He was in control of the world, or so his appearance said. "But the thing is--" he began.

"What?" Starbuck blurted.

"My closer just felt something snap in his shoulder. He isn't telling me, but I'm seeing the readout from the autdoc." Medical telemetry was still legal as long as you weren't actually standing on the playing field. "Cosgrove might think otherwise, but I don't believe he could put the ball over the plate."

The manager's eyes were glass and things fancier than glass, and when they stared, it felt as if knives were burrowing into your flesh.

"On the other hand, you can still put the ball over the plate," he admitted. "On occasion."

The umpire had rolled out, ready to warn the three of them to break up their little meeting.

"So you're my best hope," the manager said to Starbuck. And on that wilted note of optimism, he turned and walked back toward the dugout.

"Fastballs," the catcher blurted, talking through his glove.

Starbuck gave a little nod.

"And keep them down. All right, kid?"

\* \* \* \*

The game had never been larger, at least in terms of crowds and interest and money, as well as the sheer intelligence that was focused on the activities of balls and bats and the boys who played it. But also the game had never been so inconsequential. Tens of millions of fans adored it, yet today the world's citizens numbered in excess of one hundred billion. Truth was, soccer still ruled, with basketball and the UNFL galloping far behind. And while measuring relative values was difficult, baseball was probably only the eighth or ninth most important sport. Excluding golf, of course, which was still nothing but a good walk ruined.

Every sport had its core fans, and among that hardened group were those who liked nothing more than to stand beside their heroes, basking in the fame while they tried to sink their pernicious roots into the players' lives.

Let them get close, and the fans would suck you dry.

Love them, and they would happily ruin your career and good name, and then they'd take home your husk and your bad name as trophies.

That was Starbuck's working premise. Everyone learned which smiles meant trouble and which of the kind words were simply too kind. And sure, every young player was flattered when a pretty creature offered herself and maybe her sister too. What man wouldn't want the adoration and easy sex? But there were rules for players just as there were rules for the world at large, and they were not the same rules, and not knowing the difference was the same as not being able to lay off sliders thrown out of the zone--it kept you in the minors, or it got you kicked out of baseball entirely.

"I love this game," a fan once remarked to Starbuck. "I adore its history and intelligence, and its unpredictability even to the most gifted AI modelers." Then with a glass-eyed wink, the mechanical creature added, "But what I like better than anything is the long, honorable tradition of cheating."

Walk away, Starbuck told himself.

But he didn't. He couldn't. It was just the two of them sharing a long elevator ride. The machine was a hotel maid--a neat-freak AI riding inside a clean gray carbon chassis--and like a lot of entities with brainpower in excess of its needs, it invested its free thoughts in the memorization of statistics and the constant replaying of old World Series.

"Cheating," the machine repeated.

Starbuck didn't respond.

"And when I say that word," his companion continued, "I don't mean questionable actions taken by the downtrodden players."

That won a grunted, "Huh?"

"I am referring to the owners," said the maid. "What they have done and are doing and will continue to do with your good game proves that they are cheats, and it makes them into criminals."

That won a sideways glance at his companion, plus a soft, half-interested, "Is that so?"

"Bob Gibson."

The name meant something. It struck a chord with Starbuck. But he had never been the best student, particularly when it came to historical curiosities from more than a century ago. Pretending to recognize the name and its deep significance, he nodded, muttering to the ceiling, "Yeah, what about him?"

"One of the finest seasons for any pitcher in history," the machine continued. "It was 1968--"

"Sure."

"And do you know what his earned run average was?"

"Not offhand."

"One point one two."

Machines weren't wrong too often, but it could happen. Starbuck was polite enough not to doubt that ridiculously low number openly, and he made a mental note to look up Gibson's career totals when he finally got back to his hotel room.

"The pitcher compiled a record of twenty-two and nine, giving up barely more than a single run for every nine innings of work, and because of his utter domination, the mound was lowered next year by a full third."

A visceral anger blossomed in Starbuck.

"The owners want to see offensive numbers," the machine said. And with that, their elevator stopped on a random floor and opened its doors, exposing an empty hallway.

The pause wasn't an accident, Starbuck sensed.

"They want home runs," his companion continued. "They want to see base runners. They believe that there will always be another two or three million eyes that will watch a debased, cheat-enhanced game, while only a few hundred thousand traditional fans will lose interest and drift away." Peculiar as it seemed, a machine was saying, "The owners care only about numbers." Speaking with genuine disgust, it claimed, "For money and the bodies jammed into the stadiums, and for all those paying Web-presences that pretend to sit in the stands, the damned owners will mangle the oldest rules. By any means, at any time."

Because someone needed to say it, Starbuck mentioned, "They have that right. After all, these are their teams."

"But do they own the game itself?"

The question caught him unprepared.

"Ali the Dervish," said the machine.

This one Starbuck knew and knew well. Two generations ago, Ali was the dominating pitcher for six or seven seasons. He was a Sudanese-born fellow nearly seven feet tall, with hands big enough to hold three balls at once and a delivery designed by genetics as well as a god who loves good pitching. Starbuck had studied the old digitals. From the mound, Ali would start to turn and twist, gathering momentum into some type of hidden flywheel set inside his long, surprisingly powerful legs. Then came the rush forward, and a ball that looked like a starved moth was shot from a cannon, and if it was his fastball, the hapless batter had no time to react. If it was the slider, it broke as he swung, making him look foolish. And if it was the change-up--a wondrously treacherous pitch when lumped on top of Ali's other talents--the batter would finish his swing long before the ball hit the catcher's mitt, his poor body screwing itself around as if trying to bring the bat back again, attempting a second swing during the same tortuous motion.

Ten or twenty times a year, Ali put batters on the disabled list, pulled groins and ravaged backs being the usual culprits.

Just thinking of the carnage made Starbuck laugh.

"Because of Ali, the owners dropped your mound another two inches," the machine reminded him. "And then just to make sure that pitchers learned their lesson, they made the balls a little larger and smoother, and by most measures, a little less likely to break when they were thrown."

"What are we talking about?" Starbuck had to ask.

"Cheating," the machine reminded him.

"But what's this got to do with me?" Then he leaned out of the open elevator, making certain nobody was walking or rolling in their direction. "Unless you can somehow make me into an owner, and then I can change things."

That earned a quiet, quick laugh.

Then the elevator doors pulled shut, and they started climbing again, but more slowly than before.

"Batters cheat too."

"I guess."

"They have holos of every major league pitcher. They'll stand at a practice plate and swing at your best pitches, and your worst, and they eventually learn everything there is to know about your delivery and foibles."

"That's not quite cheating," Starbuck pointed out. "It's awful and I hate it, but it doesn't break any clear rules."

"So batters are scrupulously honest?"

"I didn't say that."

"On your own team," said the maid, "I can think of two or three obvious culprits. Men who are a little too good to be genuine."

"Maybe so."

In theory, if you played baseball, you kept your body in its original state. No artificial parts, no overt enhancements. If an elbow or knee needed repair, the raw materials had to come from your own muscle and tendons. And when those organic fixes didn't work anymore, you came out of the game, or you learned how to hit or pitch in entirely new ways.

But there were certain sluggers who found ways to circumvent all of the careful checks and medical probes that were required of them. Genetic doctoring was subtle in one respect, while its results were apocalyptic. A few strands of DNA spread through the corners of a fit body would come to life according to some preprogrammed schedule. For a few hours on each of the season's game days, subtle enzymes emerged from hiding, coaxing key muscles to contract a little faster, clearing the vision in the old-fashioned human eye, and subtly goosing the batter's reaction times.

Their cheating was obvious, and it was ugly. If rain delayed a game by several hours, the biggest sluggers on the team suddenly had slower bats and noticeably less thunder. Of course the owners could have hunted out every criminal. More random tests; less tolerance in the bioassays. But they preferred things exactly as they were, with the occasional public justice for the most inept offenders, everyone else baked into the very profitable cake.

"I love this game," said the gray machine.

"So do I," Starbuck replied, with feeling.

"And I appreciate good pitching," the machine claimed. "Which is why I think so highly of your skills. And

your potential too."

"But I won't do that crap," said Starbuck. Though he said it perhaps with less feeling now. "They're always testing us. And worse than that, cheats show easier with pitchers. If I suddenly find another three or four miles an hour on my fastball, they're going to inventory every cell in my damned body."

"Agreed," said his companion.

For the last time, Starbuck asked, "So what are we doing here? What exactly are you trying to sell me?"

"The mind," were the first words offered, followed by the touch of a Teflon hand against Starbuck's temple. "What you know, they cannot inventory. What resides inside this temple ... this is what I offer to you, my friend ... and for what you would have to agree is an exceptionally modest fee...."

\* \* \* \*

Top of the ninth and bases loaded, with the potential winning run lounging at first, and not a single blessed out showing on the scoreboard. Starbuck took one last walk around the mound, his head dipped forward and eyes narrowed while his soggy brain considered the next few moments. Then he climbed up onto the rubber and looked in at the catcher exactly as the umpire bellowed, "Play ball." The enemy batter was the left fielder--a tall rangy kid, a right-hander, and last year's rookie-of-the-year--who wore every bit of armor allowed by the rules and had an irritating habit of laying his bat across the strike zone during the wind-up, as if the pitcher might try to sneak the first pitch past him.

This year and last, Starbuck had gotten the kid to strike out eight or nine times. And eight or nine or maybe ten times, the kid had gotten a hit off him, including one homer--a single shot that didn't matter, since the game was already lost.

But not this time, Starbuck told himself.

He shoved the ball into his glove and the glove back under his right arm again, and in full view of the world, he took a piece of his forearm between his left thumb and forefinger, and he squeezed hard enough that the batter momentarily flinched from the imagined pain.

"I said, 'Play ball,'" the umpire complained.

Which was what he was doing. But Starbuck gave a little nod and got his foot in place, and his back and shoulders aligned, and with a motion practiced until every aspect seemed invisible to him, he threw a fastball that ended up remarkably close to where he was aiming--a point just a few inches south of the batter's exposed chin.

The kid went down in a dusty heap, his helmet careful to stay stuck to his skull.

Starbuck took the throw back from the catcher, and both of the next two pitches caught the outside corner, putting the kid into a nice deep hole.

The last pitch needed preparation. Again, Starbuck took a lengthy break, arm and glove against his ribs while the left hand savagely tugged at the increasingly red skin just below his elbow. The batter watched with interest, and standing on deck, the next batter also stared at the blatant self-abuse. Then Starbuck took the mound and reached deep, gathering up every muscle fiber that hadn't yet been shredded. And with an audible grunt, he sent the pitch high and straight out over the plate, forcing the kid to react too late, swinging just below the ball as it was leaving the strike zone.

The crowd voiced its approval and hinted at its hope. Except for those voices and whistles that came from the out-of-towners, who still had plenty of hope, not to mention a small amount of anger for having

their kid brushed back.

The next batter was another strong right-hander, an old third baseman with tired legs but thunder in his swing. In six years, he had earned six homers off Starbuck, plus five more round-trippers that were gifts--bad pitches put into awful places directly above the plate. For a moment, Starbuck filled himself with optimistic blandishments. He was older and wiser now, and tonight was different ... that sort of claptrap. Then he pinched his forearm again and deciphered the signal from his catcher, and again he pulled together his resources to heave the ball at a point that should have been too high to touch with any bat.

But the trajectory was too flat and too far down, and nine times out of eleven, there should have been a grand slam. Yet sometimes luck is everything, and maybe the batter was a little too keyed up to react. Whatever the reason, the third baseman sent the pitched ball high up into the night sky, and after a week or two, the shortstop caught it in his glove and lobbed it back to Starbuck.

Two out, but the next batter was by far the worst.

The enemy first baseman was a big bullish left-hander, both in build and in personality. For years, rumors had hung around his powerful swift body. If any batter in this league cheated in any important way, he was the culprit. But his power sold tickets, and his arrogance made him enemies who would buy tickets just for the chance to scream at him. He was a broad and gigantic glowering hunk of meat who wore the absolute minimum in armor--a small helmet and one tiny pad on his right elbow--and he stared out at Starbuck while the pitcher again made a show of giving his forearm a hard long pinch.

"Like hell!" the batter screamed.

At that point, the enemy manager popped out of the dugout, and to the umpire, he said, "I protest!"

Man and machine discussed the issue for a few moments. Then both rolled out to the mound, along with the catcher and Starbuck's manager, who was allowed this second visit because this was an official protest. Ten million fans were present in some physical form, watching as the umpire took samples of flesh and blood and hair, both from the pinched-up arm as well as the aching shoulder and both hands. The lab work was accomplished inside the umpire's belly, occupying most of ninety seconds, and then the big voice screamed, "No foul. Play ball!"

But the batter didn't agree. With the tact of a landslide, he told the umpire and both managers that this was an injustice. Wasn't it obvious what was happening here? Then he stared out at Starbuck, roaring, "You're not getting away with this, you miserable little prick!"

Starbuck shook off his catcher, again and again.

Finally they settled on a breaking pitch, putting it down near the batter's ankles.

The swing couldn't have been any harder, and every imaginary fastball was smacked out of the park. But not the pitch that Starbuck threw, and now the batter found himself in a quick one-strike hole.

Going back to the well, Starbuck threw a second breaking pitch. And again, the batter swung at phantoms and his own considerable fears.

"Oh and two," the umpire reported.

The batter called for time, and he used his time to stand off to the side, gripping the handle of the bat with both hands, talking to somebody who didn't seem to be paying attention to what he had to say.



When he stepped back into the box, Starbuck stepped off the rubber.

Again, he started to pinch his arm. Then he paused, as if thinking better of it. And showing just the trace of a good confident smile, he brought his forearm up to his mouth and bit down until the flesh was red and bruised, blood starting to ooze from the fresh wound.

The batter screamed with his eyes, his stance.

Then up went the piece of hardened maple, ready for anything that Starbuck might throw.

Again, Starbuck made an inventory of his surviving strengths, and with visible show of concentration and fortitude, he went into his motion and gave a huge wet grunt as he flung the ball, and the batter swung at everything, hitting nothing, while a pitch that would barely serve as a batting practice toss eventually wandered its way over the plate and into the dusty leather mitt.

\* \* \* \*

"I'm not going to ask," the manager promised. He was sitting in his office, swirling a bulb of beer while shaking his plastic face, speaking to the floor when he said, "I don't want to know. Not the truth, and not even the lie."

"Well, I want to know," the catcher snapped. He set down his empty bulb and leaned forward, asking, "What is it?"

"What's what?" Starbuck replied.

"You pinch and bite yourself at key points," the catcher explained, "and the pain is the trigger to unlock some deeply buried coordination skills. Stuff you learned once and then hid away. Reflexes your body can't remember until those sharp specific aches cause them to bubble up again."

Starbuck sipped at his own beer, saying nothing.

"I've heard rumors about this trick. Nothing physically changes inside the arm. The muscles are still tired and sorry, which is why nothing shows when they test you."

"Nothing showed," Starbuck reminded both of them.

"But what if you suddenly had a different style of pitching? If your fastball rolled in with a different spin? Or your breaking stuff looked like it came off someone else's arm?"

"Is that what you saw?" Starbuck asked.

"I saw you knock out three tough hitters," the catcher reported. Then he looked at their manager, asking, "Did his stuff look different at the end? From where you were sitting, could you tell?"

A perfect memory was unleashed, and after a thoughtful moment, the manager declared, "I'm not sure."

"Three grown millionaires came to bat," said the catcher, "and you made them look like bush-league fools."

"I did that," Starbuck conceded.

"So I'm asking," the catcher pressed. "What's the story here?"

"It is a story," the pitcher allowed. Then with a smug, somewhat embarrassed smile, he confessed, "I have a friend. A friend living in a different town."

The other men leaned forward, neither breathing now.

"My buddy works at the hotel where most of the teams stay when they come to play. And sometimes, he finds himself riding on the elevator with a slugger or two ... and he'll say a few words, in passing ... how much he loves the game, and how powerful these gentlemen are, and by the way, did you know that idiot Starbuck is a shameless cheat...?"

His audience absorbed the words.

The catcher laughed quietly, saying, "Huh."

The manager shook his head and sipped his beer. "So are you or aren't you?"

"Cheating?" Starbuck shook his head, admitting, "Not really. No."

"Is this buried reflex thing even possible?" the manager wanted to know.

Then Starbuck was laughing. "Oh, there's a buried reflex, all right. And by pinching and biting myself, I trigger it. But the reflex isn't hiding inside my nervous system. It's inside theirs. My friend tells them that I cheat, and so they're looking for a pitch they've never seen before. At least from me, they haven't seen it." He was laughing louder now, rubbing hard at his broken-down arm. "What they're reacting to is just an idea that was set inside them ... implanted against their will ... put there by a few words thrown their way during a long, long elevator ride."