

Chapter 1

“BALL FOUR!” THE UMPIRE, FATS Fitzsimmons, shouted.

There might have been a twinge of compassion in Fats’ call. It was as if the home plate umpire was prepared to give the pitcher, Henry “Fast Ball” Harvey, the benefit of the doubt had the ball been close to the plate at all. Fats had been calling strikes in the major leagues for 27 years, even longer than Fast Ball’s 23 years of throwing them. But this ball four was so far above the head of the third batter in the bottom of the second inning that there was no close call to make.

The leadoff batter for the Cardinals’ half of the second inning was their shortstop, Rifle Dickinson, who had doubled to power alley in left and advanced to third on Lace Blackwell’s infield single to the second base side. The walk of the third batter of the inning, Hank Pauling, had loaded the bases. Fast Ball already had given up three runs and five hits in the bottom of the first inning. A line drive double play had kept it from being worse. The start of the bottom of the second inning was not going much better.

Fast Ball turned his back on the plate, walked off the pitcher’s mound toward second base, and reached down for the resin bag. Perspiration dropped off his left eyebrow as he sneaked a peek toward his visiting team dugout while bending over for the bag.

Russ Freeman, the manager for the Chicago Cubs, had his left foot on the top step of the visitors' dugout.

Fast Ball did not want to come out of the game, but he knew that he should. The Cubs could not afford to get much farther behind and have any hope of a comeback. It was too big a game to delay a pitching change. The only thing standing in the way of bringing in Lefty Owens, the Cubs' long reliever, was the friendship between Russ and Fast Ball.

Russ and Fast Ball had played minor-league ball together in Double-A for 1 year in the Cubs organization before they were called up to the major-league team. Russ had been a power-hitting first baseman, and Fast Ball was a hard-throwing right-handed pitcher. They were both 18 years old when they were drafted by the Cubs out of different high schools separated by 450 miles and three state boundaries. Russ was from Alabama. Fast Ball was from Texas.

Russ might have been as good a first baseman and home run hitter as Fast Ball had been a pitcher over the last 23 years, but a severe knee injury caused by a spring training collision at home plate just before his fifth season in the big leagues put an end to any hope Russ had of breaking the major-league record for most home runs by a first baseman.

To stay in baseball after his injury, Russ first tried to play winter ball in Mexico. After just two months in the Mexican League, he started coaching when he realized he couldn't push off his back leg hard enough to accelerate through the pitch to generate enough weight transfer to power the ball over the right field fence. Warning track power was not good enough to play first base for a major-league team, even the Cubs who had never won their division in the franchise's history.

Even though he could no longer play for the Chicago Cubs after his injury, Russ discovered that he loved to coach. Last year, the Cubs' front office fired their manager during the All-Star break and gave him his first chance as a major-league manager. He was a popular choice with the fans, with the media, and with the players.

The Cubs' players, an assortment of aging veterans and enthusiastic youngsters, played .500 ball during Russ's tenure as manager the prior year, and the promise of the current season had been enough for Fast Ball to want to come back one more time in hopes of winning ten or twelve games while providing a role model for the younger players, in particular, the young pitching staff.

Fast Ball had done substantially better than winning ten or twelve games. By the All-Star break this year, he was 14–6. After the All-Star break, however, Fast Ball's trademark pitch dropped in velocity from the mid-90s to the high-80s, and his reliable curve was fooling no one. He had won only two games since the break, and he had lost eight. His record stood at a still respectable 16–14 when he had taken the mound earlier in the day. If the Cubs could win today, they would be the National League East Division champions for the first time in the history of the world. But if they lost today, they would have to return home for a winner-take-all makeup game with the Cincinnati Reds, their longtime nemesis.

That was the situation as Russ stood with both feet on the top of the visitors' dugout. Two weeks earlier, he privately had considered releasing Fast Ball and calling up Fred Farley from the club's Triple-A team in Daytona. Fred was billed as the "Future Fast Ball" and had been pitching well of late after a slow start due primarily to a contract negotiation dispute. After rejoining the Triple-A club two months ago, Fred had won his last ten starts after losing his first two.

Turk McGhee, the Triple-A manager, had told Russ that Fred was ready, but Russ was concerned about bringing Fred up in such a pressure situation. Plus, he was hoping his longtime friend could win one more game to finish his career as a division champion to compensate for years of personal greatness spent on a mediocre team. But Fast Ball was not going to win this game. Russ had to take him out. Russ took his first, and hardest, step out of the top of the dugout and walked toward the mound.

Fast Ball had slowed down his preparation for the next batter to give Russ time to wade through his options and make the

right choice. Fast Ball was through for the day, maybe for the year, and perhaps, for his career. He didn't like it any, but he knew his team's only chance to win the division today was to get him out of the game and bring in Lefty Daniels. Lefty had been warming up in the bullpen since the double by Rifle Dickinson. Lefty also had thrown a few pitches during the three-run first inning, so he was ready. Lefty had stopped throwing when Russ started walking toward the mound, and he waited to see what decision Russ would make.

"Henry," said Russ when he and the catcher, Legs Cooper, arrived at the pitching rubber (Russ had always called Fast Ball by his given name, not his nickname). "I've got to take you out."

"I know," said Fast Ball. "It's the right thing."

Fast Ball handed the ball to Russ, then looked his friend in the eyes with an expression of both appreciation and disappointment. After that, he pulled his cap way down low over his eyes and walked off the field. He wondered if it would be for the last time.

Lefty came in, and after a sacrifice fly to right field, he was able to get the next batter to ground into a double play, third to second to first, and the side was retired. Lefty had done his job, and the Cubs were still in the game, behind 4 to 0 after two full innings.

But the Cubs were unable to get anything going against the Cards' ace pitcher and lost the road game before a full house. You could almost hear a collective sigh of concern from every Cub fan in Chicago as the last out in the visitors' half of the ninth inning was made. The Cubs had lost; Fast Ball Harvey had failed. They were returning home for a one-game playoff against the dreaded Cincinnati Reds.

The Cubs' fans were loyal, and they supported their team with every ounce of enthusiasm they had. They were grateful to have a major-league team in their city.

Their stadium was called Wrigley Field in honor of the team's original owner. It was located in a business and neighborhood district easily accessible by public transportation to downtown Chicago. The Cubs' longsuffering fans cherished the stadium's

odd angles and irregular distances from home plate to the outfield fences. Every local fan knew by heart the story of how Russ Freeman had hit the first pitch he ever saw as a major leaguer in a regular season game over the right field stands and into the picture window of a house across the street from the right field bleachers.

The Cub fans wanted to establish a winning tradition to go with their love of the game in Chicago. But it was hard to establish a winning tradition while finishing in the second division of the league as the Cubs had done 33 times. The Cubs had never finished first; they had never been in the pennant playoffs; they had never hosted a World Series in Chicago; and now, the Reds were coming to town with their best pitcher, Stuben Mitchell, rested, fit, and ready to add victory 27 to his 26–7 record for the year. Four of Stuben’s victories this year had been against the Cubs. The Cubs had not beaten him in the last 3 years. Everyone in Chicago looked forward to the game in two days, but privately, they all expected the inevitable. Stuben and the Reds would win. The Cubs would lose.

After the game, Fast Ball and Lefty walked together through the tunnel and into the visitors’ dressing room.

“Nice game,” said Fast Ball. “I wish I could’ve set the table better for you.”

“They just got lucky on you early,” said Lefty.

Fast Ball and Lefty both knew that luck had nothing to do with the Cards’ three-run first.

Neither player said anything else as Fast Ball went to his locker to shower and change. Because there were two female reporters from major newspaper sports pages covering baseball this season, no reporters were allowed in the locker room after a game. The league had set up an interview room adjoining each locker room. The manager and a few players went to the interview room for thirty minutes after each game to provide reporters with quotes to use in their articles. Fast Ball had been interviewed countless times after victories and losses. One of his best career memories was the excitement of the interview room after the last of his five-career no-hitters just 4 years before.

Today, however, he was glad that he could hide from reporters by staying in the locker room. He worried about his friend and the criticism Russ probably would get for starting him today, but there was nothing he could say or do to help Russ now. Fast Ball did not go to the interview room. He knew that Russ would understand.

The team's plane back to Chicago was not scheduled to leave for two more hours due to a scheduling error with the airlines company. Unlike a few of the more financially successful teams, the Cubs did not own their own plane or airline charter service and had to rely on scheduling charter flights with small market airline companies. The occasional inconvenience was annoying, but charter flights, even late ones, still beat the worn-out buses that Russ and Fast Ball had ridden in the minor leagues as 18-year-old players.

As Fast Ball sat in front of his locker, some of the younger players were playing cards in one corner of the dressing room. A few of the veterans who had played in the junior circuit American League were watching the Yankees and Tigers on television. Those teams were involved in their own pennant race in the AL East. Everyone was very quiet.

Fast Ball closed his eyes and replayed the first inning in his mind. The location of all his pitches had been good. His control usually was not a problem, even as a young flame thrower. His velocity, however, had abandoned him in the last four weeks. His arm was both old and tired. With his curve ball not working, the Cardinals had been sitting on his fastball. Rethinking the start of the game with his eyes closed did not change the results. The Cardinals scored the same three runs in the first inning. When he opened his eyes, he saw Russ walking toward him. Fast Ball looked at the clock on the locker room wall and concluded that the interview time was over.

Russ walked straight up to Fast Ball and said, "Henry, I need to see you in the manager's office before I change for the flight."

There was distress in Russ's voice. Fast Ball was concerned that maybe his not going to the interview room had been a mistake. Maybe the reporters had blasted Russ for starting an aging veteran in the middle of a slump in such a big game. Perhaps he had over estimated Russ's understanding of his desire not to talk to reporters after the game.

Russ abruptly turned and walked toward the tiny office provided for the visiting team manager. Fast Ball followed. When they reached the office, Russ waited for the pitcher to go inside. After he did, Russ closed the door. That is not a good sign, thought Fast Ball.

"Henry," began Russ, "we play the Reds in two days in Chicago. Who do you think should pitch?"

Russ often asked his advice, and Fast Ball always told him exactly what he thought without regard to their different roles on the team. Russ was the manager, and Fast Ball always treated him with respect, especially in front of the other players, but behind closed doors, they were two old friends talking about a difficult decision.

"Well," said Fast Ball, "no one is pitching very good right now. Jules has a sore arm, but he's afraid to tell you. Willy is a left-hander, and the Reds are full of right-handed power. Carson pitched nine innings yesterday, and he won't be ready in two days. I'm your fourth starter, and I didn't throw that many pitches today, but you saw what happened out there. My arm is spent. You don't have any good choices."

"Henry," said Russ, "taking you out of the game was the second hardest decision I've made today. The hardest decision is that I'm going to release you and open up a roster spot for the playoff game. I'm bringing up Fred Farley to pitch against the Reds."

Fast Ball usually had been able to predict his friend's decisions, but he was not prepared for what Russ had just said. Fast Ball had been in the league long enough to know its bylaws. Being released and not being suited up and in the dugout for

the last game of the season meant that he would not be eligible to compete in postseason play, even if the Cubs won the game in two days. He had just walked off the mound for the last time in his career. He wasn't mad. He was just stunned. He did not say anything. He just stared at Russ.

"I'll petition the league to let you rejoin the team and take Jules' place if we make the playoffs," said Russ. "That is, if I can get Jules to admit he's hurt. I'm sorry, Henry, but I think it's the best decision for the team under the circumstances. I hope you'll understand after you think about it."

Russ had always been a risktaker. In fact, that's how he hurt himself in spring training 17 years ago. He had been trying to score from first on a long single down the right field line when he barreled into the opposing catcher who had planted himself in front of home to block the plate. Fast Ball wondered if maybe Russ's penchant for risk had gotten the better of his judgment. Starting a Triple-A pitcher, even a supposed phenomenon like Fred Farley, in arguably the biggest game in Chicago's history was a huge gamble. If it paid off, Russ's place in Chicago baseball lore would be secure; if it didn't work, it could be the beginning of the end of Russ's dream to bring a division championship to the Chicago Cubs.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" asked Fast Ball, still in a daze.

"I don't want to do it, but my decision is final, Henry. I'm going to go shower. I'll tell Hooks and Tonic before I announce it to the rest of the team. I'm sorry."

Hooks Harrison was the club's best middle inning relief pitcher, and Tonic Tisdale was a power-hitting right fielder. Each had been with the team over 15 years. Hooks, Tonic, Fast Ball, and Russ had spent their entire careers in the Cubs' organization. All four men were close friends.

Fast Ball stayed in the manager's office for a long time after Russ left. When he finally checked the time, he saw that the flight back to Chicago was scheduled to leave in just one hour. He started to hurry because the team would be leaving for the airport soon. Then he realized that he did not want to fly back

with the team. He decided that he would rent a car and drive back home. He might even call his wife, Madge, and ask her to meet him at the Lakeside Resort, where they had vacationed several years ago. As he thought about Madge, he realized how much he missed her that very minute.

When he walked out of the manager's office, he saw Hooks and Tonic. He could tell from their expressions that Russ had told them the news. The usual dressing room chatter suggested that no one but Hooks, Tonic, Russ, and Fast Ball knew yet what Russ had decided.

Hooks walked up to Fast Ball and wanted to hug him, but years of being a jock in an all-male environment kept him from following his natural instinct. He settled for a pat on the shoulder. Tonic followed with a shrug.

Fast Ball told them about his decision to rent a car and drive back to Chicago. They both immediately said they wanted to go with him. Fast Ball initially declined, but then said he would like for them to come along, if Russ said it was OK.

At first, Russ thought it would be disruptive for the team if all three players missed the flight, but then he realized his friend might need company. The trip home would only be about 250 miles. It might take them five or six hours, but the big game was two days away. Hooks and Tonic would be well rested by then. Russ knew that the companionship might be important for Fast Ball, so he agreed that Hooks and Tonic could miss the team flight and drive back with Fast Ball. After he thought about it, Russ wished that he could go with them, but his place was with the team. He also needed to tell the other players soon about releasing Fast Ball and calling up Fred Farley from the minors. He had already called Turk McGhee long distance to ask him to get Fred to Chicago early the next day. Russ said good-bye to Fast Ball, Tonic, and Hooks, then he and the team left for the airport.