

BLUE ANGEL

Indianapolis, 1973

After my big first AAA win in Denver, I kept on feeling my way through the league, just packin' on the innings and taking no prisoners. It was "Oh-eee-Oh" off to work we go, and lovin' every minute of it. One month later, when I was 5-0 and living the life, we were playing in Indianapolis. The Indianapolis Indians team was the AAA affiliate for the Cincinnati Reds. Owen J. Bush Stadium was a nostalgic old ballpark that had some flair. It had a brick wall and looked like "The Natural" might have been filmed

there—it fit the part. The team was a good one; a lot of these guys would be part of next year's "Big Red Machine." Joel Youngblood, Dan Driessen, George Foster, Ed Armbrister, Rawly Eastwick, Ray Knight, Will McEnaney, and Joaquin Andujar—pretty damn good bunch of players. Their manager, Vern Rapp, would even be my first manager when I was traded to the Cardinals.

Dennis Paepke, "Pap," was catching me that night, and he was the one with the most tenure. He was also the meanest—don't cross Dennis, you want him on your side. It was the first week of May and the weather was warmer. I thought to myself, *"I can dig this, one step out of the show; I'm 5-0 and catching a lot less shit from the older players."* I felt pretty damn good.

I was coasting along but the umpire was making it a little tough on me. Still, I wasn't going to start showing up a AAA blue much less any umpire...you want those guys on your side, too. If we didn't know the umpire on a personal basis, we called them blue, since 99.9% of the time their uniform color is BLUE. In AAA, you have three umpires; AA and below you have two on the field, a plate and field umpire. In this particular game, the umpire wasn't giving me much of the plate, and I could tell Dennis was starting to get a little irritated.

Pap was talking to the umpire behind the plate and I couldn't help but notice that he'd put a mark in the ground with his index finger—this was happening about every other hitter. My body language was generally pretty good but I felt I was getting squeezed.

I threw in a few disgruntled facial expressions to chime in on the disappointment of his strike zone. I thought, *"This boy blue needs his eyes checked!"* I was about ready to go up and tell him to punch a hole in his mask to see the incoming.

A couple of pitches later, Dennis put another mark in dirt but this time he stood up and turned around. As he swung around to give the umpire his two cents, you could see his mask come off. The mitt was in his left hand, the mask in his right, Dennis's back was to me but I could tell they were going at it for about 15 seconds. What I would find out after the game was that Dennis was putting the marks down in the dirt as a way of saying to the umpire, "Yeah, you missed another one."

Dennis went back into his crouch and put a third mark down into the dirt when all of the sudden, this blue boy of an umpire with his arms crossed, bent over and said, "Hey Paepke, you get to five and your ass is grass. You're gone."

Paepke turned and said, "Oh yeah? So now you can count."

The umpire glared but Pap didn't say the magic word, so he was still in the game. I got the next hitter out for out number two. Dennis called time and came to give me a little comfort ... yeah, right. Instead, he said, "Country you're throwin' just one hell of a game. You feelin' pretty good huh?"

"Yeah, sure," I said.

"Here's what I want you to do. Give me your best fastball right down the middle. Throw it right at my mask."

Well, that was no problem for me but the number five hitter was coming to the plate and every once in a while he'd run into one. That hitter was Roe Skidmore, and he too had had some time between the lines.

I said, "Pap, Skid's goina smoke it."

"Listen," Dennis said. "I'll take care of Skid. You just throw right at my mask. He never swings at the first pitch anyway." As he started to walk away, he turned for a second and said, "Don't forget... let'er fly."

Skid was just outside the batter's box stretching with his hands above his head as the bat dangled

behind him. Pap bumped into Skid before he got into the batter's box. He took his place behind the plate, kinda lookin' over the situation as most catchers do. But there was no situation. Nobody was on base, and behind that mask he probably had a big, shit-eatin' grin. I would later find out that when he had bumped into Skid on purpose he said, "Skid, how about lettin' the first one go?"

Skid's response: "No problem."

Dennis crouched down and set up. He didn't even give me a sign; all he did was motion with his glove and right hand—both hands moving like he's lining up a freightliner truck to back up. Basically he was saying "Let's go, let 'er fly."

I wound up and let 'er rip, just like Pap had said. Roe Skidmore didn't swing at the first pitch, and the ball went between Dennis's mask and mitt. But as I was watching, something funny happened. The baseball gods came into play on this one really quick, and all of the sudden, this umpire fell backwards onto the ground and landed spread eagle. The ball had hammered the lower part of his mask and pushed against his jaw, kinda like taking a one-two punch from Ali. This guy was out, stone cold.

I walked up to the plate area and Pap said, "He looks like a snow angel."

I responded, "No, he's a Blue Angel."

I had thrown what one would call a heavy fastball; the pitch had real good rotation with plenty of RPM's on the ball. Catchers always let me know that I was not fun to catch. To add to my flavor, I was also what you might call, "conveniently wild" to top it off.

Both trainers came joggin' out to see why this guy was looking straight up at the stars, not moving, with his mask still in place. The other two umpires hovered over their buddy, plus there was a small covey of folks starting to form around the plate. Even the team doctor came down out of the stands. For about a minute we were on the field and then realized we should go to the dugout and take a load off. We could see that this mishap was going to take a while.

We went into the dugout, and though nothing was said, the thought had circulated among the other players. Harry said nothing to any of us about this trip off the field, but we knew what everyone was thinking. A minute later, Pap was smilin' and suckin' down some water, saying, "Yeah guys, Country and I got crossed up." Right.

Another few minutes later, the umpire in question stood up, groggy and lethargic. There wasn't an ambulance yet, but the other two umpires and the trainer for the home team took charge. What a sight to see. I was sittin' on the bench watching these two umpires holding this guy up just weaving their way along the 3rd base line then continuing to head up the left field line toward the umpire's room. My take was three blind mice having a tough night but the one in the middle just got the shit kicked outta him. Dad and my high school buddy Jamer Hilfiker were at this game and they were both just laughin' their asses off. Dad said it was like watching three drunks after an all-nighter.

After about five minutes or so, the umpires came back out one man down, and the game resumed in the fourth inning. We headed back out to the field where I threw a few needed warm-up pitches, and the game got back underway. It was probably close to 15 minutes before the new umpire motioned to play ball.

Roe came back up to the plate, but before he got in the batter's box, Pap turned to the new umpire and asked, "What's the count?"

The umpire's reply was, "It hit him in the mask, so it must have been a strike."

Pap said, "That's what I wanna hear," as the umpire held up his hands as 0 and 1.

Roe flew out for out number three, and we headed to our dugout on the 1st base side. Harry our manager now decided to speak up in an elevated tone. "Country, did you knock him out on purpose?"

"No sir!"

"Well, that's all I wanted to know."

Pap heard Harry and yelled, "Don't blame the kid, Harry. I called it, he did just fine. Country's doin' just fine."

Even though Harry raised his voice to me (elevated vocal sounds are quite common in sports) and put on his badass performance, he was still on my side. Hell, I was 5-0, soon to be 6-0, and this was just in the bottom of the fourth inning.

In the top of the 5th when we were up hitting, we could see the flickering red lights of an ambulance off the corner of the left field wall. Somebody yelled out from the bench, "Yeah baby, don't 'F' with Country!"

It reverberated through this old concrete pillbox of a dugout. All my games seemed to be close, but my guys always gave me enough to get over the hump. I

eventually finished the game out. Complete games are like getting a mini rush, and to top it off this was my best game. I threw a one-hit shutout.

But, here's the bad part of the whole deal. The next morning, we had a 9:30 am flight to Des Moines, Iowa. George and I were rooming together, and we were at the Indy Inn. We were supposed to have a six o'clock wake up but the phone rang at 5:30.

I picked it up, and on the other line a voice said, "Country, this is Harry. You got a pen and paper?"

"No, let me look." I felt around in the dark and found an Indy Inn pad and pen.

"I want you to call the umpire from last night and apologize to him before we board the plane," Harry said. "Here's his name and here's the hospital number. You call him and apologize."

"Are you shittin' me (a common baseball term)!?" But Harry had already hung up.

George was half asleep, and he rolled over and asked, "Was that Harry?"

I nodded and told George what he wanted me to do. George's response was the same as mine, "Are you shittin' me (a common baseball term)?"

The bus to the airport was leaving at 6:45, and now it was 5:45. I hopped on the horn and called up the hospital. I knew what the chain of command would be because my Mom was an RN. I was shootin' for the head nurse on the floor, hoping I could pull this off. I got through and really had some explaining to do. The nurse told me the patient was sleeping.

“Can you just put the phone up to his ear...please? It won't take me but 30 seconds, I promise.”

This nurse was cool about it after I thoroughly explained the situation. I could have gotten Nurse Ratchet but the Man Upstairs was with me. She said to call back around 8:30am, so I promised I would and hung up.

Now I had some breathing room. I went downstairs, got on the bus and made sure I had a quarter to make the call from the airport. We got to the airport, got in line and put our bags on the cart to be checked in. We had an hour to kill before we boarded, so we grabbed breakfast on the run, which was standard procedure.

Finally, 8:30 rolled around. George had spread the word about Harry waking us up and about me going to make this call. Most of the team was pretty pissed at Harry for making me make this ridiculous call. They

all watched as I made my way to the telephone booth, grasping that quarter and pushing it into the slot.

I got through to the hospital and got connected to the nice nurse I spoke with earlier. She informed me he was awake, and said she was going to get another nurse to put the phone up to his ear. I was on the fast track. After a long minute, a voice finally said, "Ok Mark, you can talk."

Finally, I was going to talk to George the umpire.

"George? This is Mark Littell, huh, Mark Littell here...George, sorry I drilled you, bye." I hung up quick as I could after that. Glad to get outta that phone booth.

I did my deed and it only took me ten seconds and six words to get it out. Harry saw me come out of the phone booth, and he asked, "Did you get ahold of him and apologize?"

"You bet! Done deal," I said.

"Hell of a game you threw last night," he said, and then he walked away.

The things you do to win a game. Life's not always a bitch but you gotta go for that gusto. Even though we were still a nuisance and immature, the team started to

Blue Angel

include us younger guys. We were performing as good if not better than most, and I guess they were tired of giving us shit. We were there to stay or move up. I can truly say this: George and I would always be a nuisance and immature both on and off the field...but we had a blast.