

# From the Bullpen

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Boys,

To help myself stay awake during my Tuesday night drive through the Sandhills between Ogallala and Scottsbluff, en route to my Wednesday deposition in God's country, I have gathered in my modest clump of gray matter a few thoughts about baseball and life, which I will share with you here, like it or not. And what better time to ponder the delights of a new baseball season than now, mere days before our annual HSL Draft? (It's a rhetorical question, Denny, so don't bother scrolling down the screen for an answer. There isn't one.)

## **DRAFT DAY**

The first on topic matter running through my head tonight is: Why in blue blazes haven't I been able to force myself to sit down and start getting ready for this year's Draft? Of course, this is U-Bob's \$64,000 question each and every March, and doubtless others of you have wondered about this one once or twice. Just two weeks ago, I made a trip to Phoenix, part work and part fun, and took five pounds of baseball data with me to digest and assimilate during the trip. I had a fair amount of down time during the trip, including the plane flights each way, and yet for some reason I didn't crack open a single magazine or give the Draft more than two minutes' worth of thought during the entire trip. Why?

Well, for one, I'm pretty damned confused about what our new scoring system will look like, and so this was a convenient excuse to wait until I got back and asked Brother Drews to spoon-feed this to me. But it was more than that. I think it partly has to do with the fear of failure. We all know that you can study like a Maynard for this Draft thing, pouring your heart and soul into getting ready for the big day, and then have an almost completely unprepared but quintessentially lucky stiff like Itchie single-handedly and cocksuredly quash all of your hopes, dreams and aspirations for a Hot Stove League title. As several members in this organization are acutely aware, it's not so much about how much you know, it's about how damned lucky you are.

I'm kidding, of course. Partially. We all know full well that my four Hot Stove League titles were the result of the winning combination of celebration and elbow grease, not mere fateful fortuity. But others, clearly, have won because of luck.

Which isn't to say that all of us shouldn't prepare fully for the Draft, merely that you may not want to emotionally invest yourself 100% of the way, because only one out of the twelve of us can win, and let's face it, it probably will be Itchie. And of course, if one of the heretofore Luckless Five (you know who you are) should happen to prevail in the 2006 season, there's always the risk of the placement of an eternal asterisk next to your name. But hey, knock yourself out.

## **SPRING TRAINING**

Speaking of Phoenix, Itchie and I had the good fortune of attending a spring training game on 2 March between the Angels and the Padres at Tempe Diablo Stadium, where we watched the Halos administer a 10-1 whipping of the Franciscans. Not only did we get to see a promising young Angels pitcher (who shall remain nameless) befuddle the Padres with serious gas and a couple of jaw-dropping Uncle Charlies, but we were treated to the spring debut of Tim Salmon as he attempts to make yet another comeback. Two-for-two at the plate, as I recall. And just because we want to be fair, I should point out that Angels second-sacker Mark Bellhorn looks poised to drive in a boatload of runs and score a whole heap of points for his new team. File that one away for Draft Day.

As we sat in the glorious spring sunshine and wetted our whistles aplenty, Itchie and I were reminded that Tempe Diablo Stadium was the situs of one of the most harrowing events of Underbelly's harrowed existence, the infamous "Double Turk Night" circa 1987 or '88. As John and I sat in our excellent seats just eleven rows behind home plate, we recalled with perfect clarity that fateful March night almost twenty years ago when U-Bob, Itchie, B.T. and I abandoned our rightful seats to occupy empty chairs in almost precisely the same area of our seats in or about the 2nd inning of that evening's game. After congratulating ourselves on our good fortune and our bold opportunism, the rightful owners of the seats administered that dreaded tap on the shoulder which became unaffectionately known as "The Turk." Tragically, this story did not end on this note. Instead, our foursome made a hurried decision to relocate just a few rows back in other as-then unoccupied seats, which led to a condition of discomfort extremis for Brother Bob, as he fidgeted around like a guy with Tourette's Syndrome, warily anticipating another humiliation. Before we even had time to order another round of adult beverages, the dreaded Turk tapped on Bob and the rest of us again, and poor U-Belly will never be the same. Even though "Double Turk Night" was almost a score of years ago, U-Belly still can't even sit in his *own* seat without breaking into a nervous sweat.

But back to the present. Itchie and I watched the rest of the Angels game in harmony with the world, and Itchie exercised admirable restraint in limiting his intake of beers so as to minimize his prospects for a night at Tent City, which is part of the Greater Phoenix area's draconian effort to crack down on inebriated drivers. As for me, I enjoyed my first Cactus League game in more than a decade, and promised myself that another such span would not pass before a return trip to watch spring baseball.

While in Phoenix, Cheryl and I had a chance to see a Suns-Magic basketball game. This was probably the first pro basketball game I have been to in about 15 years, and while I'm certainly not a fan of the NBA, it was one of the funnest sporting events I have been to in years. Watching last year's league MVP, Steve Nash, direct the Phoenix offense was truly enjoyable. The guy is probably the best playmaker since Nate Archibald, and unlike most NBA players, his Suns teammates also know how to pass the ball and actually run team plays. If you are ever in the area and the Suns are in town, I highly recommend seeing a game.

### THIS 'N' THAT

- \*\* On Bonds. Does anyone really think that the Commish has the 'nads to pull the plug on Bonds for the 2006 season, in light of the two recent books about Bonds and his undeniable steroid use? It'll never happen. It must be driving Selig crazy to know that he has a guy about to pass Babe Ruth and possibly break Hank Aaron's record for career homers by virtue of beefing up with steroids. His only hope is that Bonds will embarrass himself on the field and throw in the towel before he breaks the record. While his bum right knee makes this a possibility, I note that he is batting like .750 in spring training.
- \*\* Thielen told me in Phoenix that he is definitely taking Albert Pujols as the first pick of the Draft, robbing the **Senators** of their best player over the past several seasons. Jim Ed would be a fool not to take A-Rod second, but I just can't decide who I will take with my third pick. Santa or Vladdy or Michael Young or Teixeira? Hmmm, I just can't decide. I'll let you know at about 1:15 p.m. next Saturday.
- \*\* What is Clemens going to do? He had a stellar outing the other day in the World Baseball Classic, but will he decide to take the mound for a 23rd season? And since we may not know that until May 1, is anybody going to chance a high Draft pick on him? Interesting.
- \*\* Will 2006 be the swan song for Greg Maddux and Tom Glavine? I don't see either of them having great years, and smart money is on them hanging it up after 2006.
- \*\* Have the pickings ever been slimmer at second base than this year? Chase Utley seems like a pretty sound pick in the early going, but does Jeff Kent have any gas left in the tank, and which Brian Roberts will show up in 2006?
- \*\* I recently flipped my baseball calendar over to March, but before doing so, I stood and admired the February portrait of Tiger Stadium. I remembered our trip to Detroit and that ballpark during our three-city swing to Detroit, Cleveland and Toronto, and I remembered sitting in the seats in the second deck between home plate and third base, where you feel like you are almost on top of

the playing field. I'd love nothing better than to be able to watch another Tigers game from that vantage point in that beautiful old stadium. You could almost hear Mike Flannigan cursing under his breath as he was being hung out to dry by the Baltimore manager. June 13, 1992. Final score: Tigers 15, Orioles 1. As Casey would say, *You kin look it up.*

\*\* In the *just taking up space* department, I read on my baseball desk calendar the other day that in 1998, Devil Rays pitcher Scott Aldred pitched in a total of 48 games, but did not record a single win, loss, or save. He was truly just eating innings. Depressing.

### **THE CLUBHOUSE CURMUDGEON**

Gripe of the week: Halfwit sports announcers and shock-jocks who say "literally" when they mean "figuratively." As in, "He *literally* carried the team on his shoulders today." No, dummy, he didn't.

### **THE TRIP**

Plans for the 2006 Trip to St. Louis are shaping up nicely, although Fretmeister is already fussing and whining that we don't yet have hotel accommodations cinched up. I'm still waiting for final numbers before making the call. As of now, it is my understanding that Big Guy, Itchie, Stretch, Screech, Mouse, Shamu (God bless him), Underbelly, Tirebiter and myself have made air reservations. B.T. has already begged off, SloPay's whereabouts are currently unknown, and so this leaves only Magpie and Possum to check in on the Trip. If both of them go, this would put us at 11, which would surpass our San Diego trip in 2004 insofar as largest number of Trip attendees. Don't let the rest of us down.

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Enough, already. Have fun getting ready for the big day, and see you next Saturday at 1 sharp.

Skipper