

Reasons to Believe

March 1990—Major league ballplayers love detail. When they tell a story, there are seldom any capitalized Truths. Big thinking gets you the horselaugh in a world of such relentless reality testing.

Big leaguers also have a sixth sense for spotting a telling detail—in technique, in temperament, or even about a whole team. Maybe all those years of spotting the spin on a curveball help you recognize dishonesty in a passing expression on a manager's face. Maybe picking up signs flashed in a blink before every pitch helps you spot panic, or confidence, as it flows soundlessly through a whole team.

Plenty of fans have the knack for watching carefully, too. Like players, they can't always explain why they know what they know. So many games, so many plays. But what's a photograph except a sea of dots? Enough of them make a picture. That's how we see a team's season: an ocean of details that finally form a portrait.

Last summer, fans asked one question before all others: Are the Orioles for real? In other words, have the details formed a picture yet? Month after month, we kept asking, listening to games on the radio, watching on TV, studying box scores, and charting the flow of the averages as the weeks went by. Baseball isn't just for the ballpark. You never know when you'll suddenly see the picture.

Every follower of the Why Nots has favorite moments from a season in which lasting baseball lore was created by a team that won no title and set no major records. The '89 Orioles weren't baseball's best team. Their final 87-75 record was only the eighth best in the majors.

But there may never have been a club that had a better attitude or surpassed reasonable expectations by a greater margin. Evidence, you ask? Only two teams in history ever improved by more than the Orioles' 32½ games—the '03 Giants and the '46 Red Sox. And the Sox should not count. They got Ted Williams (123 RBI), Bobby Doerr (116), Johnny Pesky (.335), Dom DiMaggio (.316), and six of their seven best pitchers back from World War II. Guess they probably would improve. But only a half game more than the Orioles!

So let's rewind our minds to Opening Day of 1989 and, as a new season approaches, relive nine innings of memory that will always seem lit from within.

Finley's Catch

On Opening Day, Steve Finley, on his first play in the majors, ran full speed into the rightfield fence and disabled himself for three weeks.

But he held the ball.

Finley's catch was not particularly acrobatic. If no fence had been there, it would have been a normal full-stretch, in-stride, sprinting catch.

But the wall was there. And Finley simply ignored its existence. He hit the fence shoulder-first a millisecond after the ball stuck in his glove. Had he struck one of the metal poles that support the fence, Finley's career might have lasted only one play. Instead, he got lucky, took a standing eight count, and tried to exchange a high five with a teammate. That's when he discovered he couldn't raise his arm above his head. Even so, Finley stayed in the game until the end of the inning.

To a man, the Orioles insisted Finley's play "set the tone for the whole season." How can such exaggeration be taken seriously?

Sacrificing your body can be inspirational. And, on a team with nine rookies in key roles, one youngster needed to show the others how to play fearlessly. If Finley was not daunted by seeing President George Bush in the stands, the division champion Red Sox on the field, or Roger Clemens on the mound, then others might find their courage too. Finley's play certainly foreshadowed the rookie heroics of Gregg Olson, Bob Milacki, Craig Worthington, Randy Milligan, Mike Devereaux, Pete Harnisch, Dave Johnson, and Brady Anderson. (Wheeww!)

Still, Finley's play—at least within the Orioles clubhouse—was seen as far more important than these factors would indicate.

Why?

A team has to have a reason to think that it can improve. It's not enough to get in shape, have team meetings, and preach optimism. That's all nice. But something more tangible has to be added to the mix. A ball club needs a guiding idea as to its own identity. In '88, the Orioles had no source of pride, nothing to hang their hats on, no firm ground as a starting point.

In 1989, the Orioles had defense.

In baseball, defense isn't supposed to be very important. Not compared with pitching and hitting, anyway. But at least it's something. And because defense gets so little respect, it's easy to acquire. Shake any tree and "glovemen" fall out.

Only one executive in the 1980s believed that defense (and the speed that usually goes with it) was enormously important and vastly underrated. Only one man made it a cornerstone of his teams: Whitey Herzog, the manager of the St. Louis Cardinals. By an interesting coincidence, the Cardinals—probably the best all-around defensive team in history—were the only franchise in the '80s to reach the World Series three times. Almost nobody noticed. Except Roland Hemond.

Ask the Orioles general manager point-blank if he consciously rebuilt the Birds along the lines of Herzog's Cardinals, and he says, "Yes. Absolutely. I have great respect for Whitey." Hemond may be the only baseball man who has recognized the stolen Herzog's two key ideas: (1) Great defense turns poor-to-mediocre starters into decent-to-good pitchers; (2) a great bullpen is the most important factor in modern baseball. Ergo: Sacrifice starting pitchers and slow sluggers—the sport's traditional glamour guys, like Walter Johnson and Babe Ruth—for firemen and leather wizards.

When the Orioles won on Opening Day—5-4 in eleven innings on a bloop hit by a rookie that a slow Red Sox outfielder couldn't quite reach—the Birds decided to take the lesson about defense to heart. After all, 1-0 is a lot better than 0-21.

They went on to compile pathetic statistics in most sexy categories and mediocre ones in the rest. Batting: 12th in the American League. Slugging: 11th. Hits allowed: 13th. Strikeouts: 14th.

But the Orioles had the best team fielding percentage in the history of baseball. Sometimes, fielding percentage can be a meaningless sta-

tistic because slow, clumsy players—like the infamous Zeke Bonura—can play “flawlessly” while actually missing everything. However, the Orioles had exceptional team range throughout the outfield and at third base. Both the Ripken brothers, Cal Jr. and Bill, have above-average range for middle infielders. Couple all that with adequate catching and the surest hands (statistically) in history, and you have one of the best total defenses ever.

Baltimore's Opening Day victory was noted nationally with amusement and, perhaps, a touch of relieved sympathy for the team. I heard the score on the evening TV news along with half a dozen other sportswriters. Everybody laughed. “Guess that means they'll only lose 106 this year,” I think I said.

The Otter Arrives

The hard breaking ball started at Dave Parker's hands, then almost picked off his front kneecap as he swung pathetically and missed the pitch by a foot. Parker didn't bother to glare out at the mound as he walked back to the dugout. When you strike out on a pitch that almost hits you, you don't do much talking. Dave Henderson came next, and he looked even worse. He thought the curveball would arrive knee high, so he figured he had to swing. By the time he finished flailing at the Yellow Hammer, the horrible downer, the pitch was one inch away from the dirt. He'd misjudged the amount of break by a foot. Finally, Mark McGwire was paralyzed completely. His front foot did a silly tap dance and his knee did the shimmy as the big slow curve froze his whole nervous system. The pitch bisected the heart of the plate to end the game as McGwire stood, bat on shoulder.

Gregg Olson had struck out the side in the Oakland Coliseum to beat the American League champion A's, 2-1. You can't send word around a league much faster than Olson did that night. He might be pudgy and look like his nickname—“the Otter”—but that curve of his was an Outer. And his fastball was almost as good.

In the history of the major league draft (which began in 1965), the Orioles had never had a pick as high as the No. 4 player. So, when they took Olson in the summer of 1988, it was a historic moment. The Orioles, so consistently good for so long that they never got first dibs on great prospects, had a chance to grab a player who ought to be a star.

The Orioles also had to decide whether to make the 6-foot-4, 211-

pound Olson a starter, which he'd been in high school and the first half of his college career, or keep him in the bullpen. Hemond, operating on the Herzog agenda, decided to keep him a reliever and bring him to the majors as fast as possible. That's another pet Whitey theory. "You're either capable or you're not. Experience means nothing." Who says relievers should be old, mean, and nerveless? What the Cardinals did with Todd Worrell at twenty-five, the Orioles did with Olson at—gulp—twenty-two years old. They made him the ace, the star, the closer, the psychological linchpin of the team.

Only one rookie (Worrell) ever had more saves than Olson's 27, and only one reliever had more saves at a younger age.

Until Olson arrived, the Orioles were a charming spring oddity. Just a few days earlier, the team had nosed into first place. The day after that, Milacki (helped by four double plays and a thrown-out base stealer) had pitched a shutout in which he faced only twenty-seven batters—the minimum. And the day before Olson fanned the side, Jeff Ballard had won his fourth straight start, this time in Anaheim as President Bush (an Orioles fan) shook players' hands in the bullpen. However, all this could be a mirage. A brainy lefty with a new sinker like Ballard and a big stubborn right-hander with a straight change-up like Milacki were helpful, but not so special. The league might figure 'em out. It was also pleasant that A's castoff Mickey Tettleton was hitting a few home runs, that every Orioles outfielder of '89 was better than any Orioles outfielder of '88, and that the Birds had won five games against former 20-game winners.

But the coming of Olson, for as long as he could remain untouchable and allow others to assume subordinate bullpen roles, made the Orioles a potentially different team.

Some fickle fair-weather types started listening to the occasional Orioles game on the radio again.

Joe Carter's Bunt

Joe Carter is a slugger, a free swinger, not a finesse guy. With the winning run on third and two outs in the ninth inning, he's the last guy in the world you'd expect to drop down a bunt for a hit. If he fails, it looks like he chickened out, abdicated responsibility for his cleanup role. Against a journeyman pitcher like the Orioles' Mark Williamson, a star like Carter would look doubly dopey if he popped up a bunt. Swing, fool!

But Carter bunted. Perfectly. Chugging out of the right-hand batter's box, he barely beat it out.

When he crossed the bag, the Orioles lost the most brutal sort of game: 1-0 in sudden death. First baseman Milligan lay on his back in the infield dirt for a minute after the game ended. Not a good omen. A superb performance by Milacki, wasted. A chance to beat Cleveland ace Greg Swindell, squandered. A five-game winning streak, snapped. And the team's league lead down to one game with a night flight back to Baltimore on the docket. Let's see. Who's pitching for the Rangers tomorrow night? Maybe we'll catch a break.

Nolan Ryan.

A bad team becoming a good team is a fragile thing. Almost every spring, two or three clubs threaten to make the leap. Yet, since World War II, only fourteen teams have improved by 25 or more wins in one year. The ones that make the great transformation tend to get remembered. The 1969 Miracle Mets. The 1980 A's, who played Billy Ball. The 1984 Cubs, who finally finished first.

Such teams are extremely prone to lost confidence and sudden, disastrous losing streaks. Often, one spooky game starts the catastrophe. Baseball mythology has it that surprise teams usually collapse around the 50th game or the 100th—either you swoon in June or the dog days of August get you.

How would the Orioles respond to their first morale-slaying loss of the season?

For fans, it was painful to tune in Monday night's game after watching Carter's bunt on TV the previous day. But by now, 45 games into the season, the Orioles' struggle to stay above .500 (they were at 23-22) and in first place for as long as possible had become a question of faith. Might as well watch the carnage. It's been a great ride. Too bad it had to end so unluckily. Damn stupid bunt.

Ryan, the hottest pitcher in the league, threw Tettleton a change-up.

The Froot Loop Kid hit it into the rightfield bleachers.

Ryan threw Larry Sheets his best low fastball. Sheets hit it even higher into the same bleachers.

Ryan threw Cal Ripken his best knee-high curveball. Ripken golfed it into the leftfield stands for another home run.

Sure, Ryan struck out ten. But the Orioles became the first team in years to hit three homers off him in one game.

Would such a game have any carryover effect, you might ask?

Before they cooled off, the Orioles won 8 games in a row—that's 13 of 14 in all, with the only loss on Carter's bunt. Yup, it sure upset 'em. If the Orioles weren't scoring six runs in the first inning in Detroit, then Milacki was pitching a two-hitter or Tettleton was becoming the first American League catcher since Rudy York in 1938 to have 13 home runs before the start of June.

The insanity reached its apex in Yankee Stadium. Over the radio I heard Jon Miller say, "It's outta here! A grand-slam home run for Steve Finley! And the score here in the top of the third inning is Baltimore 11, New York 0."

I almost drove my truck off the road. The division lead was 5 games.

The Ripken Way

On this night in Memorial Stadium, the Orioles and Toronto Blue Jays met for the first time in '89. The season was really beginning. By the ninth inning, the Orioles, the worst team in baseball in '88, had introduced themselves quite thoroughly to the Jays, the favorites to win the American League East.

Tony Fernandez, the Jays shortstop, slap-bunted the ball past the charging Orioles third baseman. What followed has become my favorite play from my favorite season.

Shortstop Cal Ripken chased the ball down the leftfield line. Without looking toward the infield, Ripken slid across the grass, like a runner coming into second base. He barehanded the ball in mid-slide, then, still canted at a 45-degree angle, threw perfectly to second base as he collapsed face-first into the grass. Fernandez hurried back to first with a single, instead of a double on a bunt.

At that moment the score was Baltimore 16, Toronto 3.

Considering those circumstances, Fernandez was hustling. But Ripken's play came out of some other league. Or species. Ripken, playing in his 1,161st consecutive game, could have sprained his ankle, wrenched his back, or thrown out his shoulder. His team was 13 runs ahead. With 89 more games to play. It was a ridiculously wonderful, totally meaningless play. And one that, perhaps, no player had ever even tried before. Such a slap bunt is a freak play. Who'd plot a ploy to stop it? Or improvise a method in a split second? Ripken, the headiest player of his era, would. And, last season, in the year of "Why Not," the entire Orioles team probably would too.

For once, an entire team performed, from Opening Day to Closing Day, with the same level of commitment, alertness, and indomitable stubbornness that Cal Ripken always provides.

The Ripken Play epitomized the team's evolving style. Do the mundane, and do it at full throttle, without asking about rewards. Just do it. Ahead by 13. Down by 13. That's how habits are formed. In baseball, over 162 tedious, jet-lagged, nerve-racking games, you become your habits. Frank Robinson's only rule of managing was: Play the game right. The way the Orioles once played it for more than twenty years in a row.

The night after Ripken made the play, the Birds and Jays eyeballed each other in earnest. With the score 1-1 in the eighth, the Memorial Stadium press box had its game face on. This was no longer a colorful feature story. It was the biggest story in baseball, by far. The season's halfway point was only a week away and the Orioles' division lead was so big—7½ games if they won this one—that they could probably lose a dozen games in a row and still be in first place. The O's were so inspired and improved, and the division so weak, that they threatened to become the first team in history to go from worst to first in one season. There was a new song out, and the biggest crowds in Orioles history turned out to sing it every night. "Can you believe where we are today? You see it just don't matter what no experts say. . . . It's really happening. . . . Come on, O's, we can win this thing. WHY NOT?"

The "Why Not" part was usually pretty loud.

When Ripken—yes, the same guy from the night before—took a curveball from John Cerutti into the leftfield bullpen in the bottom of the eighth inning, the game was already over (final score, 2-1) before the ninth inning began. Why? Because Olson was going to strike out the side. Manny Lee. Nelson Liriano. Junior Felix. Just like Parker, Henderson, and McGwire.

Why not, indeed?

The next two nights, the Orioles lost, 11-1 and 16-5. Oops.

Guess it's really baseball, not fiction, after all. It seemed so unfair or, perhaps, wonderful that the Orioles were going to have to play all 162 games with the world watching and judging.

Foul Is Fair

When foul balls start becoming sudden-death game-winning hits, then everybody knows that the game is afoot. This was the weekend when the general public got the message. Many Orioles fans remember Mike Devereaux's home run on Saturday night July 15—a hooking drive that almost everyone but the umpire thought was foul—as the most dramatic single swing of the season. The final score was flashy: 11–9. The opponent was worthy: the California Angels. And the Orioles, who never led until the game ended, trailed by three runs as late as the eighth inning. However, I liked Sunday's game better. Every team has a few hellacious comebacks and a few ridiculously good breaks in any year. In fact, statistically, the Orioles did not have as many late-inning comebacks in 1989 as the average big-league team. Nonetheless, when Mickey Tettleton's probably foul ground ball was called fair just eighteen hours after Devereaux's gift home run, the Orioles seemed to have the Fates on their side. The Orioles even seemed to anticipate such omens. When Tettleton's smash down the first-base line picked up—maybe—one molecule of white chalk on its trip into the rightfield corner, the Angels defense reacted slowly. Meanwhile, Cal Ripken, a Clydesdale base runner, gambled all the way and scored from first to win the game with his “speed.”

The Angels seemed almost too stunned and furious to argue. Actually, it may have been lucky that California's explosive manager, Doug Rader, had been ejected before this game ever began for screaming obscenities about the previous night's injustice. Rader might have been cerebral hemorrhage material.

Teams in pursuit of miracles need to believe in their own magic. At some point, circumstances must offer them raw material that they can interpret as divine baseball intervention. Otherwise, the tough losses grow in memory. Devereaux's homer and Tettleton's double, with their double impact, seemed to make up (with interest) for a game that the Orioles had lost a month earlier to the Yankees. On that bizarre night, a routine New York fly ball in the ninth inning disappeared into a pea-soup fog and was not retrieved until a 1–0 Baltimore lead had become a 2–1 Yankee victory.

The illusion of luck, magic, and mystery always helps a team bond. These guys aren't two dozen nuclear physicists; they're delighted to buy into any myth or ritual that's helpful.

For instance, as the season progressed, the Orioles became obsessive about shaking hands after victories. Every player made a serious attempt to shake hands with every other player. That's 276 handshakes, not factoring in the coaches. No wonder it sometimes seemed that the Orioles might be out in the infield giving each other skin until midnight.

"We believe in really shaking hands and looking people in the eye," said Bill Ripken. "It takes a while. I don't know who started it. Maybe Cal Junior."

"After one game Craig Worthington bumped into me and said, 'Don't give me a dead fish [handshake]. Look at me,'" said coach Al Jackson. "Now he and I bump into each other so hard, we almost knock each other down. You've got to eyeball each guy and say something [specific] to show you really appreciate what he did."

For fans, watching the Orioles shake hands and make their little hip quips of appreciation became a ritual too. On most teams, you notice which players seem to like each other. On the Orioles, everybody seemed to like everybody else. Such deliberately crafted conceits can start to become reality.

Within days, the Orioles needed all the camaraderie they could get their hands on. On July 21, in the 94th game of the season, with the Orioles holding a 7½-game division lead, the worst possible thing happened. Gregg Olson walked to the mound in the Oakland Coliseum on the first night of a fourteen-game road trip with the Orioles leading, 2-1. It was the same mound from which he'd announced himself so brilliantly.

This time, he walked four straight men, threw a wild pitch, and simply handed the game to the A's. The team's psychological security blanket had come unraveled. And the Orioles fell apart.

Milligan's Swing

The radio reception on Mount Desert Island off the coast of Maine wasn't very good, even if you were just trying to pull in Ned Martin's gravelly version of a Boston Red Sox game. Too many hills surrounded our vacation rental for the signal to make its way easily to the old kitchen radio. That romantic, flickering, fading reception was even more infuriating because it was the fate of the Red Sox' opponent that concerned me. Or, you could say, obsessed me.

A grown man does not cancel his family's summer vacation just

because he doesn't want to be out of touch with a baseball team that's in a slump. In particular, a man doesn't do such a pathetic thing if for twenty years he's written about games, particularly baseball, for a living. Enthusiasm for one's work is all very nice, but if you let it spoil your two weeks in the Maine woods, you are a sick puppy.

Like a lot of people, I had become a sick puppy.

When my vacation came due, the timing was perfect—perfectly awful. On my first morning in Maine, the *Bangor Daily News* informed me of Olson's disaster. There may be such a thing as knowing your subject too well. The Orioles had lost only two games in a row. But I told my wife that, conceivably, they could lose every game on the rest of their road trip. "Whatever it takes to lose, they'll do it," I said. "That's just how it works." In the midst of Eden, I suddenly found myself in hell. For ten days, I refused to pay outward attention. A few calls to a New York score tape, sure. But sometimes I didn't even bother to find out the score until the following afternoon. I knew they'd lost and that they'd lose again. Just as they knew it. Blow a 4-0 lead? Why, of course. Lose eight games in a row—one shy of the A.L. record for most consecutive losses by a first-place club? No question about it.

When the Orioles finally won a game, it was because the Royals, also choking in a pennant race, forced them to take it in the thirteenth, courtesy of an error, a wild pitch, and a perfect peg that sailed over an uncovered base.

After that win, the Orioles made sure they lost. One day they walked ten men. The next, they made four errors. The day after that, they lost a doubleheader. Quicker than you can say, "Life's a bitch and then you die," the Orioles had lost 13 out of 14 games, and their division lead was 1 game with 57 to play. They were still in first place (at 54-51) but were already doomed.

I listened to every pitch of the August 2 game against the Sox—the last of the road trip. If somebody did not step forward that night and act heroically—allowing the team to return home in first place and with a vestige of dignity—I was convinced that the whole Orioles season might still go down the drain. Ninety defeats? Why not?

In retrospect, I don't know whether I still believe that Randy Milligan, with one swing, salvaged a whole team's season-of-a-lifetime. But from the moment Milligan's three-run homer tied the score, 6-6, in the eighth—erasing what had been a 6-0 deficit entering the seventh—I began to proceed from the assumption that everything would be

all right. The Orioles' tale would have an appropriate ending of some kind. They would make it to the wire.

Pennant Race by Committee

Major league baseball is a game within a game within a game. It is psychology within technique within talent. Or you can call it personality within experience within ability. First, you learn that you can play the game. Then, you learn how to play the game. Finally, you learn something about yourself through the game.

Fact accumulates. Every detail seems to carry over to the next day or the next week, locked in somebody's mind—maybe your own. You don't escape your past very often. What you have done right, learned properly, observed correctly, tends to reinforce and protect the future. Whatever or whomever you have neglected or disdained "returns to haunt you"—a favorite baseball cliché.

Although they were a team of limited talent and experience, the Orioles survived a two-month pennant race with barely a hint of a haunt. After Milligan's home run settled their stomachs, the Orioles went 33-24—a solid pennant-contender pace. Their persistence, interdependence, and resiliency carried them through a distinguished performance in August and September. In sports, is habit just a synonym for character?

Above all, the Orioles took strength from the example they set for one another. They admired one another. So they removed egos from their clubhouse and invented baseball by committee. If their cleanup hitter and catcher (Tettleton) was disabled for a month, they simply picked up old Jamie Quirk, released by three teams in one year; the Orioles went 18-11 until Tettleton returned, as Quirk produced runs faster than Tettleton had.

The tire-patching and canoe-bailing projects became almost comical. When second baseman Bill Ripken was disabled, Tim Hulett (who'd been gone from the majors for two years) was summoned out of desperation. He came up five times with the bases loaded and got five hits. When Finley's wrist wouldn't heal, someone named Stan Jefferson was brought from Rochester. In 127 at-bats, he produced at a 20-homer, 100-RBI, 45-steal pace.

The consensus star of this off-Broadway production of *Les Misérables*, however, was Dave Johnson—Baltimore native, shrimpy, slope-shouldered, ten-year minor league veteran, off-season truck driver,

proud owner of a mobile home, and one gutty little right-handed spitballer. Sorry, sinkerballer.

Until Johnson arrived, the Orioles thought Kevin Hickey was the ultimate in baseball humility. Hickey had been out of the majors for five years and, the previous season, had slept in his minor league team's clubhouse to save rent. As an Oriole, his job was easy: Face left-handed-hitting superstars in crucial situations. Light lifting. Wade Boggs, Don Mattingly, George Brett, and Harold Baines went 1 for 17 against the pudgy, balding Hickey, who seemed to be throwing his heart to the plate along with the ball.

Johnson quickly topped that. In his home debut, with thirty relatives and hundreds of friends in the stands, the Overlea High grad pitched a 6-1 complete-game win. Five days later, with the Orioles' rotation and bullpen both in tatters, Johnson did it again—another 6-1 win, another complete game.

American League Player of the Week: Dave Johnson.

Such deeds have repercussions. The next day, on August 14, the Orioles negotiated the most modest victory of their entire Meek Shall Inherit the A.L. East season. Robinson didn't have a single starting pitcher fit to put on the mound against Jack Morris of Detroit. So the manager named three starting pitchers—and prayed that each could survive three innings. No first-place team had ever resorted to anything so obviously desperate.

After nine innings, the score was 1-1. Brian Holton, Mark Thurmond, and Dave Schmidt had done their jobs. But would the Orioles ever score again?

In the tenth inning, the team got a glimpse of its future. A spring rookie is not the same as an August rookie. With 100 games under his belt, Craig Worthington was not the same hitter Morris had seen in Lakeland, Florida, in March. By now Worthington was thinking along with pitchers—hitting to the opposite field with men on base, guessing pitches, building a book on the league. Morris threw a perfect fastball a couple of inches off the outside corner. The only way Worthington, a pull hitter, could smack the ball with any authority was if (1) he was looking for that exact pitch and (2) he had decided to hit it to rightfield.

As the three-run, game-winning home run landed in the upper deck in the rightfield corner, Morris put his hands on his knees and looked at his feet as Worthington circled the bases.

Aarrgggh!

There's always one game you want back. You know if you could just play it over again, you'd win. The only reason you lost was that you wanted the damn thing too much.

This was the one.

It was Fan Appreciation Day, as if the fans hadn't been rewarded enough already. For a month, the Orioles had regrouped every time they faced a true crisis, managing to win almost every time. Head to head, Baltimore had won games from Boston, Milwaukee, and Toronto when those teams could have moved into first place with a victory. And after September 1, when the Orioles finally fell out of first after ninety-eight straight days in front, they really gave their followers something to value.

Instead of resigning themselves, as most thought they would, the Orioles stayed in the race. While the Blue Jays put on a 26-9 rush, the Orioles maintained cruising speed at 22-14. For a month, from August 20 to September 20, the Orioles never won on a day the Jays lost. Though they never gained ground, they didn't despair. When the remnants of Hurricane Hugo blew three cheap Yankee home runs out of the park one night, the Orioles won, 10-2, the next evening. When Johnson became exhausted, Robinson gambled on a three-man rotation, and all three—Ballard (7-2, 2.64), Milacki (6-1, 2.50), and Harnisch (4-4, 3.57)—were in top form down the stretch.

Finally, on Fan Appreciation Day, the Orioles were poised to catch the Blue Jays with a week left in the season and a three-game head-to-head series due to end it in Toronto. The Orioles had their best, Ballard, set to start against one of the Yankees' worst—Chuck Cary, a career nobody worthy of an Orioles uniform. The left-handed Cary even said he'd become an Orioles fan.

But he beat them, 2-0, as a crowd of 51,173 held its breath, waiting for a home-team explosion that never came. Screwballs down and away, fastballs on the fists, showcase the breaking ball down and in, 10 strikeouts in seven innings against a lineup of nine right-handed batters—the best game of Cary's career. Where did this lifelong wild man find such control?

The stats say the Orioles played better against left-handed starters (35-25) than righties. But the stats lie. The Birds hit, slugged, and scored far better against right-handers. The won-lost numbers were

just a fluke. In particular, southpaws who could spot the ball, first in, then away—even for just one day—drove the Orioles crazy. Ripken, Tettleton, and Milligan—the heart of the order—couldn't touch 'em.

This one game may have been more bitter for the Orioles than all the late pennant race nights of listening to the Blue Jays win extra-inning games—six in a row over the closing weeks. Once, Kevin Hickey became so mesmerized listening to a Toronto-Boston game on his car radio—with the Red Sox taking leads in the eleventh and thirteenth innings—that, by the time the Blue Jays finally won the stupid game, he discovered that he'd driven entirely out of Maryland and into Pennsylvania.

That Cary defeat did not unravel the Orioles. They still won two out of three in Milwaukee to stay one game behind the Blue Jays and force that final weekend showdown in Toronto. But losing the season's final home game, when Memorial Stadium was full to the top row with throats anxious to sing hosannas, whittled the Orioles' margin of error down to almost nothing.

One Pitch Equals One Season

Like a good soldier leading his men over the top, Phil Bradley hit the first pitch of the first Toronto game into the second deck of the SkyDome bleachers. It was a monstrous, resounding 420-foot home run that created an instant atmosphere of high tension.

In that pressurized setting, the Orioles couldn't hit in the clutch, and the Blue Jays, a scatterbrained team for years, couldn't run around the bases without getting in each other's way. The score stayed 1-0 into the eighth inning, though the Blue Jays were giving such a clinic in bad fielding and running that two well-known former big leaguers kept the press box snickering with a sarcastic running commentary on Toronto's mental blunders.

With one out in the eighth inning, the Orioles called Olson. He had not allowed a run since July. Yes, two scoreless months. August ERA: 0.00. September ERA: 0.00. Twenty straight games.

With two out and a man on third, Olson got ahead in the count to Kelly Gruber, 1-2. One more strike and the inning would be over. Then, one more inning, and the pennant race would be tied. The pressure, if it wasn't already on the Jays, would certainly be there with a vengeance. Would the *Toronto Sun* spell CHOKe in mere 60-point type or go for the World War III 120-point kind? Waiting in the

wings for the regular-season ender, the Orioles had Milacki, one of the game's hottest pitchers; Baltimore had won his last seven starts.

Jamie Quirk called for a curveball and set a low target. Either throw a perfect unhittable pitch or else waste one.

Olson got on top of the pitch a bit too much, snapping it short and wide of the plate, and fifteen-year veteran Quirk didn't get the best jump moving out to block the ball. Once, long ago, the Red Sox kept a season-long count of how many pitches in the dirt Carlton Fisk blocked with a runner on third base: 71 in a year. Exceptional defensive catchers (like Quirk) block so many balls in the dirt you barely notice one of the game's difficult plays.

"I should have blocked it. I think I should block everything. I'm a professional catcher. Olson's supposed to throw that curveball there," said Quirk. "I've blocked that same ball before."

But this time, the ball kicked up high and hard and Quirk had no chance. Wild pitch. Tie game.

A better team than the Orioles would have surmounted this disappointment. But a better team than the Orioles would not have been such an interesting team. When Olson shut out the Jays in the ninth (and then the tenth too), it did not save a victory. It merely prolonged the Orioles' agony as the Blue Jays' fabulously deep bullpen held Baltimore scoreless and waited for its own sluggers to greet whoever might eventually follow Olson.

Many fans think the race ended the next day as the Orioles were eliminated in another gallant one-run loss. That afternoon, Dave Johnson, an emergency starter for the injured Harnisch, made a one-day national hero of himself by taking a two-hitter and a 3-1 lead into the eighth inning. Few will forget his determination or his tears in the dugout as he watched the lead and the season disappear.

Earl Weaver's classic response to all the hypotheticals of baseball was to shrug and say, "Everything changes everything." But some of us stubbornly persist in believing that Olson's wild pitch changed everything. Is that really how close the Orioles came to going from worst to first—one pitch that was nobody's fault?

The Orioles won their last game of 1989, then returned home to a rain-soaked celebratory parade. In every way, they finished with organizational dignity and individual pride. Mark Williamson, who had the best year of his life but lost those two games in Toronto in relief, was congratulated by everybody up to team president Larry Lucchino after the elimination game. Quirk, the oldest player on the team, set

an example of unselfishness by repeatedly taking blame for the wild pitch and, thus, removing the stigma from Olson, the franchise player. "I didn't go out and get it," Quirk would say, sipping his Labatt's beer as teammates shook their heads respectfully, knowing that Johnny Bench might not have stopped that one.

This Orioles season will almost be a laboratory experiment in baseball behavior. Many believe that the team will collapse, that 1989 was an utterly unrepeatably fluke. Perhaps. But remember, in baseball, good young players almost always get better: The last time the Orioles used nine key rookies in one year (1977), they became a powerhouse for the next six years and ended up in two World Series. Those Baby Birds, including Eddie Murray, Scott McGregor, Dennis Martinez, and Rich Dauer, were not nearly as deep a group and probably not as good as the '89 Orioles rookies. And this isn't even counting Ben McDonald, the top pick in the '89 draft.

A team can't end a season with a better opinion of itself than the Orioles did. But what now? This is a year of countless questions. As a team, will they take the next steps up the ladder of professional craftsmanship?

Will Ballard, Milacki, Tettleton, and Worthington be future All-Stars or just journeymen? Maybe Olson, as long as he's healthy, is a "can't miss." McDonald too. But these other guys could go either forward or back.

Moving down one level of potential, will Milligan, Devereaux, Harnisch, and perhaps Finley develop into front-line players? Or will they be role fillers, part-timers, "tweeners," and might-have-beens? And what about the Birds who are probably closest to our hearts because they're closest to our abilities? Will Everymen like Johnson, Hickey, Hulett, Jefferson, and even one-game wonders like Mickey Weston return to the world of Never Was? Please, we say, let some of them stick around for the rest of the ride back to the top.

April is the time for such harsh questions and reality-tested answers. Will the Orioles think that one thrilling year, one parade, make them stars? Is harmony a temporary state of grace? Or can it be recaptured? Years from now, will the Orioles and their fans think of 1989 as a distant sweet memory or a living touchstone?

Soon enough the picture will start to come into focus from that sea of dots, another season of baseball detail.