

# FROM THE BULLPEN

Official Newsletter of the

# NEBRASKA HOT STOVE LEAGUE

## 2023: Our 39th Season

Edition No. 5



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### OWNERS:

**Ted Bridges**  
("PAwesome")  
Wahoos  
Returning Champion

**Jeff Bechtolt**  
("Screech")  
King Billies

**Jon Blongewicz**  
("Sunny")  
Blues

**Denny Bontrager**  
("SloPay")  
Bears

**Jim Buser**  
("Tirebiter")  
Redbirds

**Rick Drews**  
("Big Guy")  
Red Ball Jets

**Dave Ernst**  
("Skipper")  
Senators

**Bob Hurlbut**  
("Underbelly")  
Tribe

**Scott Krause**  
("BT")  
Saints

**Mike Morris**  
("Mouse")  
The Huskers

**Mitch Pirnie**  
("Magpie/Tricko")  
Bums

**Chuck Sinclair**  
("Shamu")  
Cubs

**John Thielen**  
("Itchie")  
DFL

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Comrades:

### IN MEMORIAM

With the 2023 baseball season soon to be upon us, let's pause for a moment to pay tribute to a few of the players, managers and other baseball persona to that glorious Dugout in the Sky last year:

Roger Angell  
Kimera Bartee  
Tommy Davis  
Jeremy Giambi  
Roland Hemond  
Gaylord Perry  
Joe Pignatano  
John Sanders  
Mickey Schofield  
Bruce Sutter  
Ralph Terry  
Maury Wills  
John Wockenfuss

And last, but certainly not least, the great Vin Scully

R.I.P., one and all.

Sadly, I heard on the news this morning that Tim McCarver, the great Cardinals and Phillies catcher, and later a popular and sometimes polarizing World Series analyst, passed away at the age of 79. I always appreciated his catcher's perspective on the game of baseball, and his great stories about receiving for Bob Gibson.

### NEW BASEBALL RULES

Now that we have tipped our hats to the past, let's take a glimpse into the future with a review of some of the new rule changes soon to be in effect in the big leagues.

Below is an article by Jayson Stark that Linda found on this topic:

## **MLB rule changes are coming to spring training: Get ready for 'the s--- show'**

So now that we've got that little Super Bowl distraction out of the way, get ready for the spring training moment you've all been waiting for.

Pitchers.

Catchers.

And, last but definitely not least ...

*The s— show.*

Wait.

*The s— show?*

What the heck is that supposed to mean?

All right, let's explain. As spring training approached and the talk turned to all of MLB's new rule changes, I noticed I began to hear the same descriptive, spring-foreshadowing term over and over:

*The s— show.*

People in big-league front offices used it. Even people inside the commissioner's office seemed to drop it way more casually than you'd expect. And why is that?

Because every one of baseball's dramatic new rule changes — *shift bans! ... pitch clocks! ... pickoff limits! ... larger bases that shrink the distance between first and second!* — will be in effect from Day One of spring training. Not March 1. Not March 15. Not Opening Day. Not April 15. It all starts on Day One of spring training.

And what's the logic behind that? To get "the s— show" over with as early as possible. That's what I was told, and more than once. And if you think it through, that makes sense.

At some point, somewhere over the horizon, there is widespread confidence that these rules are going to transform baseball into a more watchable, more entertaining sport in many important ways.

But between now and whenever that point arrives, there is going to be a period of ... OK, let's just use the word "adjustment."

Hitters ... pitchers ... umpires ... managers ... even you and your family, sitting in the upper deck ... you're all going to need to reprogram your brains once these rules enter your lives. And won't that make for an entertaining baseball experience?

So what's that going to entail? I've been asking managers, front-office personnel and baseball officials that question for the past few weeks. Now, based on their input, I'm ready to answer your most burning questions on ... the s— show that's about to bust out this spring training.

## Why does MLB actually want a s— show?



*Goodbye to the shift. Hello to chaos.*

Even the people in baseball who have pushed hardest for these rule changes understand. This won't be easy. And this won't always be picturesque.

A lifetime of player routines and thought processes can't possibly be reconfigured in a day, a week or a Zoom call. There are going to be violations of every one of these rules, in every imaginable way. Since pitch-clock violations are going to result in "automatic" balls and strikes, things are going to get wacky.

There will be strikeouts without anybody swinging-and-missing.

There will be walks without anybody throwing a pitch.

There will be balks. There will be screaming. There will be stuff unfolding on big-league baseball fields that has never unfolded before.

Some of it will be highly entertaining. Some of it will feel highly outrageous. Does that sound like a s— show to you?

If it does, you'll be ready. If it doesn't, whatever. There are people inside this sport who won't mind if any of it, or all of it, breaks out. You know why? Because they *hope* that stuff will happen. The more s— shows they endure in spring training, the fewer they might have to deal with in April. That's what they're praying for, anyway.

### **Won't players be cut a little slack in the beginning?**

Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho. Nope!

It might seem logical from afar for baseball to phase these rules in gradually, over time. But that is *not* how this is going to work.

There is no more powerful value than shock value. How many times would you want to have an automatic strike called on you because you were hitting and didn't get back into the batter's box on time? How fast would you get your act together if that happened with two strikes and you got called out with the bases loaded?

That's exactly how this process went in the minor leagues, you know. The pitch clock was dropped into the lives of minor leaguers during the season last April. For the next month, that went about how you'd expect.

Two weeks in, there were still nearly two pitch-clock violations being called per game. By week four, that was down to just over one a game. By week six, that rate had settled in at about one violation every two games. If the definition of "normal" is the point at which baseball clock violations were pretty much the same as NFL delay-of-game violations (0.6 per game), then the minor leagues took about a month and a half to reach that point.

So does this sport really need a phase-in period? That would seem to only postpone the inevitable. Or maybe baseball already had that phase-in period. It's called "the offseason" — as in: "They had a whole offseason to get ready for this stuff."

### **What rule is going to drive pitchers the most loco?**



*How will base runners, such as the Guardians' Steven Kwan, test pitchers?*

You might think pitchers are going to have a rough time coping with the groundballs to the right side that used to get slurped up by The Shift. You might think they're going to be unsettled by the compressed amount of time they'll now have to warm up between innings. But here's what's likely to get them most out of sync this spring:

*They're a sure bet to forget they can't just step off the rubber every time they get flustered.*

So what do we mean by that? Under the new pitch-timer rules, pitchers have a newfound word to worry about: "disengagement," which will no longer be something that applies just to various Kardashians every time they break up with their celebrity significant others. In this context, a "disengagement" is a potentially game-changing development that occurs every time a pitcher "disengages" from the rubber in a couple of different ways.

One would be a pickoff throw. That's easy enough to grasp. What's harder to remember is that every time a pitcher steps off the rubber, even if it's merely to gather his thoughts, that is also considered a "disengagement." And for those who haven't followed this closely, here's why that matters:

After two "disengagements," a pitcher can no longer throw over to first base — or any base — unless he then picks off the runner. If the runner isn't out, it's a balk. And that

is going to dramatically alter pitching, base-stealing and the art of controlling the running game.

Managers, coaches and front offices report that they've tried to get their pitchers thinking about this for weeks now. But good luck to them. Think about veteran pitchers, who have spent all their lives stepping off every time they had an issue with a catcher or just needed to hit the reset button. Now there are real-life consequences for doing that. And that's a huge deal.

That's not merely a habit. That's behavior that has been branded into their brain cells for so long, how can it possibly be deprogrammed in one or two trips to the mound — or 12?

So that's a fun game you and your friends can play if you're hanging out at any spring training games. Start a pool on how many times your favorite pitcher steps off and then shakes his head *because he just frigging forgot ... again*. Sounds like an enjoyable beverage-consuming game to me.

### **What rule is likely to drive hitters the most loco?**



*The pitch clock will be a huge adjustment for hitters, too.*

This one is less nuanced. It's just about that ticking pitch clock. You would think that 15 seconds between pitches with no one on base is plenty of time for any hitter. You would think that 20 seconds between pitches with runners on would be a piece of cake. But wait. You clearly haven't read the fine print.

You see, this rule also says that the hitter must be in the box *"and alert to the pitcher"* with eight seconds left on that timer. In other words, with nobody on, the hitter needs to be locked in on the pitcher only seven seconds after the clock starts. You should know that quite a few teams are genuinely concerned their hitters are going to have issues with that.

Aren't you worried about all the batting gloves that might not get adjusted now *between every single pitch*? Have you reflected much on all the time hitters have been allowed to spend thinking — *between every single pitch* — about the data they've been fed about what a particular pitcher likes to throw in this count or that count, in this situation or that situation?

There isn't going to be time for that anymore. And a lot of these hitters just aren't ready to live in that world. So violations will be flagged. Strikes will be called. Tempers will erupt. And that will be quite a sight this spring.

At least, somewhere over the horizon, a couple of months into the season, everyone will have figured it all out ... and games will be zipping along in a beautiful, eminently watchable rhythm ... and nobody will miss those bad old days. But first, this spring, there is s—show potential.

### **Why should you pay attention every time there are runners on first and third?**

So now that we have you primed on the pitch clock and disengagement rules, here's an especially interesting situation to focus on this spring:

Runners on first and third ... man on first takes a big lead ... so the pitcher throws over once ... then the pitcher can't help but throw over twice ... and then ...

Uh-oh. That's two "disengagements." So then what? Is the track meet on?

In the minor leagues, for some teams, this was a time to lean into this situation, force the issue and make the defense react. In the big leagues, that's a lock to happen on a far greater scale.

Suppose the runner on first then takes a gigantic lead? Does the pitcher take that bait, throw over to first and let a run score while a little league base-running adventure fires up? Does the pitcher get all shook up and balk home that runner on third?

This spring figures to be a time when teams will experiment with that scenario and more, just to see what happens. Sounds like the ultimate in new rules fun!

### **Are the umpires ready for all the stuff they now have to look out for?**



*Umpires will have their hands full this spring — and beyond.*

Never in the history of baseball have umpires had more on their plates than this year. Is that good?

They still have to do 100 percent of the stuff they always did. But now they also have to keep constant track of the timers ... when they start ... when hitters lock into the box ...when pitchers start their delivery ... how many disengagements there have been ... where defenses set up in this new world without shifts, etc., etc., etc.

What could possibly go wrong?

It sounds like a lot. But by all accounts, nobody is more ready for these rules than the umpires. They held a three-day new rules retreat with MLB officials in January, and pelted them with all sorts of questions about every conceivable new-rule situation. And there's one other important thing to remember here.

Joe West retired! But not just him. There has been massive umpire turnover over the past several years. So these rules will be implemented and enforced by a much younger, much more open-minded group of umpires than would have been in place if MLB had passed these rules a decade ago.

Also, many of these younger umpires have worked with these rules in the minor leagues. So they'll be a valuable source of information for older umps in their crews. In other words, the umpires appear to be the least of baseball's concerns. Nevertheless, we need to ask ...

### **Isn't there pretty much a guaranteed 'Angel Hernandez Moment' coming?**

I know what you're thinking. If you're a true connoisseur of Angel's umpiring travails, you know there's always another Angel Hernandez Moment coming. But in this case, there's more of a chance than usual this spring. It's easy to see why.

Add in ... a bunch of new rules players haven't acclimated to yet ... umpires who will enforce those rules by calling actual balls on pitchers and actual strikes on hitters for timer violations ... the volatility of having some of those balls and strikes — not to mention balks — resulting in walks and outs in potentially game-changing situations.

And ...

Hoo boy. You know.

But no reason to pick on the always-popular Angel Hernandez here, because here's the important part: Umpires have already told managers that they've been instructed *not to overlook anything*. And managers have told umpires *that's what they prefer* — at least this spring.

So get ready. MLB has urged all umpires to call every violation ... no matter what the situation ... even if it allows the winning run to score ... and regardless of how big a star is about to get totally irritated by that call.

Who out there thinks that's going to go smoothly ... the first time that, say, Pete Alonso, gets called out on a pitch-clock violation with the winning run on third ... or, say, Kenley Jansen, blows a save on a pitch- clock-induced balk?

I think we all know that answer. But think of it as what it's designed to be — *a valuable learning experience*. Once it happens one time, is there any chance it happens two times?

### **Will we see a spring training record for ejections?**

Hey, guess what? We might. Other than the fact that nobody even keeps track of spring training ejection records, they would be in serious jeopardy this spring. Here's why.

Well, there are all the scenarios we just explained. But also, this: You know what happens to players who argue pitch-timer violations? Oh, nothing unusual, other than ... *automatic ejections*.

MLB has told teams it will consider arguing about pitch-clock calls to be equivalent to arguing balls and strikes. And the penalty for that has always been an automatic ejection. So don't say I didn't warn you!

## Will we see a spring training record for balks?



*Richard Bleier balked for the cycle last season. Who's next?*

Great Moments in Balk-ball History: Remember the fateful evening of Sept. 27, 2022, when Marlins reliever Richard Bleier did something that had never been done — by balking for the cycle?

He balked Jeff McNeil from first to second, second to third and third to home — *all in the same at-bat*. It was special. And that was before pitchers had clocks and a disengagement quota to deal with.

So is that coming to a spring training park near you? Don't rule it out. For one thing, that Bleier balk cycle was a result of MLB leaning on umpires to start strictly enforcing the no-stop part of the balk rule last summer. And clubs are hearing that umpires have been told to be even more vigilant this year.

But beyond that, those new rules were in effect for a modest spike in balk calls in the minor leagues last year. So if you're a balk lover — and really, who isn't? — this is going to be a spring for you. After all, what's more soothing than the sight of palm trees, sunshine, gleaming baseball diamonds ... and balks?

### **BALKS PER GAME IN MINOR LEAGUES**

**2022 — 0.201**

**2021 — 0.164**

**INCREASE — 22.6 percent**

## Is the two-man outfield about to become a thing?

You can wave so long to the four-man outfield. That's now officially against the new shift rules. But what about the two-man outfield — featuring a center fielder and a right fielder, as usual, but with a left fielder set up in short right field, where shifting infielders used to hang out? If you guessed *that's still legal*, you win. But will teams dare to try it this spring? I'd bet yes on that.



At the Winter Meetings in December, MLB held a new rules meeting with all 30 managers — and then scheduled January follow-up Zoom sessions with individual managers, coaches and anyone else they wanted to loop in. One of the most asked questions at those meetings was: Is the two-man outfield legal?

Since it is, that sounds like a sure sign some teams will at least experiment with it this spring, against just the right pull-happy hitters in certain low-risk situations. But they should know that MLB will be watching closely.

MLB's best-case scenario: The first eight teams that try it give up a bloop triple to now-unoccupied left field and everyone realizes this is way too risky. MLB's worst-case scenario: It works way too well — and within a few weeks, every team is doing it.

But teams should know that if the two-man outfield becomes too popular, the shift ban rules allow MLB to rewrite the rule to make that formation illegal, too. So if a two-man outfield breaks out at a spring game near you, pay attention!

### **Is the infield-in-motion formation about to become a thing?**

Have you read the new shift rule closely? If you have, you need a hobby. But either way, it's notable the language dictates that two infielders must be set up on the infield dirt (or shallower) "when the pitch is released."

So now imagine, as the pitcher lurches into his delivery, the shortstop starts sprinting toward the second-base bag and crosses the bag a millisecond after the pitch is delivered, so he's on the "wrong" side of second base when the hitter swings. Is that legal?

Good question. In fact, it's such a good question that several teams have confirmed they asked it to MLB this winter. But the answer is: No! Not legal! It's considered a "circumvention" of the shift rule. So that will not be a spring phenomenon waiting to happen.

### **So will this all be worked out in spring training, and come April, everything will be cool?**



*Opening Day could usher in a whole new round of rule change ripple effects.*

In a perfect, dreamy, best-case world, oh yeah. Spring training would be plenty of time to iron out every potential episode of the s— show. But in real life? In this world? No chance.

How long does it take for any player to rewire his brain and expunge all muscle memory from a lifelong habit? Only your local neurosurgeon probably knows for sure. But does the answer seem like it would be “a month” — for every baseball player in North America? I’ll take the over.

In the minor leagues last year, pitch-clock violations did level off after a month but then held steady, from about week six through the end of the season, and never did disappear. So these newfangled ball/strike/balk calls are here to stay.

But now factor in the bigger picture. Remember that every front office has spent the winter brainstorming ways to exploit these new rules and gain whatever edge might be out there. Also, remember that there’s no reason those teams will reveal their favorite beat-the-rules tricks until the season actually starts. So the arrival of the regular season will launch a whole new chapter of new rules adventures.

OK, now there’s more. Remember that many players will leave these spring training camps for the World Baseball Classic — where none of the new rules will be used. So those players will miss out on weeks of new-rules indoctrination and habit-breaking.

And finally, there’s this part. It’s one thing to have the winning run score in the ninth inning of a spring training game because an umpire called a pitch-clock violation. It’s a very different thing to have the winning run score *in a regular-season game* for that same reason.

What are the odds of that happening in April? I’ll set them at approximately 9,000 percent, give or take a thousand. But just keep one thing in mind:

Someday, all this hubbub will pass. Someday, everyone will settle into these rules and we’ll wake up and find MLB has sliced 20 minutes off the length of the average game. And when that day comes, we’ll have to remind ourselves: Baseball never could have gotten there ... without the s— shows of March.

## RAPID CITY REVISITED

Last week I had to trek out to Rapid City, South Dakota for a deposition of a neurosurgeon client who had assisted in an operation at the Nebraska Medical Center during his seven-year<sup>1</sup> residency there. The bad news is that it was a 7-1/2 hour drive from Omaha. The good news is that it was mostly on Interstate 90, which runs basically from one side of South Dakota to the other, with at least 26,234 signs advertising for *Wall Drug* along the way. So of course, being the travel nerd that I am, I decided that a stop into *Wall Drug* would be my reward for making the grueling drive across the Mount Rushmore state.

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<sup>1</sup> You read that correctly. Neurosurgery residencies are seven years in length. Clearly, indentured servitude.



I know what you're all thinking: "What, the loser doesn't even stop to see the fabulous *Corn Palace* in Mitchell, SD along the way?" Tut tut, my friends, let me assure you that on a previous thrilling drive across I-90—that time to visit the state capitol in Pierre—I took the time to stop and see the House of Corn. I mean, duh!

But your collective thought bubbles have sidetracked me. Back to the matter at hand. I do remember for a fact that the Ernst family made a previous visit to *Wall Drug* during our family vacation to *Outlaw Ranch* back during the Johnson administration.<sup>2</sup> While the *Outlaw Ranch* vacation was full of wonderful, deep-seated, crystal clear memories for me, the side junket to *Wall Drug* was more forgettable. All I really remember is that the five of us—Jack, Phyllis, Kathi, Dan,<sup>3</sup> and me—pulled into the place in our 1964 Dodge Dart station wagon and headed inside for a much-advertised hearty breakfast and a little bit of souvenir shopping. We almost never ate out in those days, and never, ever, to my memory, did we go out for breakfast, and so this particular repast has a prominent place in the memory bank. As I remember it, we ordered up our food, and soon our cheery waitress put down our plates for us and I began to dig into my bacon, eggs and toast feast.

### Jam Side Down

However, as fate would have it, or put another way, as you might well expect from the 9-year-old knucklehead boy who was wearing my clothes at the table that day, my full piece of toast with strawberry jam on it somehow levitated and leapt from my plate and—defying certain immutable laws of physics—flew all the way off the table and landed, ever so sadly, on the floor. For this sinful act, I probably received a scolding from Phyllis and some chiding from Kathi, but all I really remember are the words of my father, Jack, who, with a pained expression on his face, said something like, "I don't even have to look, but it's 'jam-side-down,' isn't it?" And indeed it was.

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<sup>2</sup> Probably in 1966, if I have done my math right.

<sup>3</sup> Who could only have been 1 or 2 or at most 3 years old at the time, and therefore unable to contradict me on any of my memories of this vacation.

I can't honestly remember if my reckless toast-eating was rewarded with a fresh piece of replacement toast or punished with a grim-faced declination of the offer by our waitress of a replacement toast, but I'm almost sure that it resulted in the curtailment of the souvenir shopping, since I have no *Wall Drug* keepsakes from the 1960s in my personal property collection at home. And I save pretty much everything.

But the silver lining to this little tale is that on my return visit to *Wall Drug* this past week, I enjoyed helping myself to a couple of refreshments as I tried to reimagine our earlier visit there, and I picked up a cherished new *Wall Drug* refrigerator magnet for the house. As the old bromide goes, all's well that ends well.

## THE HOTEL ALEX JOHNSON

For my trip to Rapid City, I asked Linda to look for a hotel in the nearby towns of Sturgis, Spearfish or Bell Fourche, so I could see some real estate that I hadn't seen before, but she wisely ignored me and booked me into the Hotel Alex Johnson in the middle of downtown Rapid City. The world's greatest travel agent proved her mettle once more. Not only was my hotel less than a city block from the law firm where the deposition would take place, but the Hotel Alex Johnson is one of the coolest hotel venues anywhere. See the picture immediately below.



As I soon learned, the Hotel Alex Johnson was built by the then vice president of the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad which, I'm guessing, had a railroad line running from Chicago to Rapid City. Anyway, this admirer of the rugged beauty of the Black Hills and of the American Indian decided to build this grand hotel which now bears his name. As the story goes, construction on the hotel began exactly *one day* after work began on Mount Rushmore in 1927,<sup>4</sup> and was completed less than a year later and opened its doors on July 1 to the first of what would become a long line of satisfied patrons, including numerous presidents and celebrities.

As I was getting ready to check out of the Hotel Alex Johnson on Wednesday after the deposition, I noticed that when the elevator doors opened on the first floor, there was a panorama of photographs of famous people who have stayed at the Hotel Alex Johnson, ten across by eleven up and down, totaling 110 celebrity guests, filling the entire wall from floor to ceiling.

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<sup>4</sup> Which, of course, was the year of the *Murderers' Row Yankees* and the year that the Bambino swatted 60 home runs. No connection to the Hotel Alex Johnson, mind you, but just something that popped into my mind.



Among the photographs were pictures of Presidents Herbert Hoover, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Dwight David Eisenhower, Richard Milhous Nixon and his Pardoner-in-Chief Gerald Ford. There are photos of Alfred Hitchcock and Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint and James Mason who were evidently staying at the hotel during the filming of the classic thriller *North by Northwest* in 1958; comedians Jerry Seinfeld and Jay Leno once stayed at the Hotel Alex Johnson and have their mugshots up on the Wall of Honor; and numerous other actors, musicians and celebrities from various walks of life, including Meadowlark Lemon and Al Roker. In fact, it struck me that out of the 110 people included on the Hotel Alex Johnson Wall of Fame, these are the only two people of color. Not sure that there's anything more to be made of that, other than Rapid City does not strike one as a particularly diverse community.

Anyway, if you're ever in the area and looking for a place to stay, the Hotel Alex Johnson has my unalloyed imprimatur.

As I was leaving the Hotel Alex Johnson and heading to my car before the drive home, I walked past an intersection that had statues on each corner, including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Ronald Reagan and this one shown below, Andrew Johnson, bedecked in a pink stocking cap. Turns out Rapid City has an ongoing downtown feature where they have erected bronze statues of all the presidents, each one on a corner and each one matching the height and weight of the president except one. William Howard Taft's statue was trimmed down from the president's actual weight to make the amount of bronze needed for the statue more affordable.



## MORE OF "THE WONDER YEARS"

During my 16 hours of driving to and from Rapid City and Omaha, I had plenty of time to reflect more on the halcyon days of our youth, those placidly peaceful *Leave it to Beaver* days of the 1960s. I remembered some more of the shenanigans and tomfoolery that the Ernst, Berka and Kloefkorn children participated in, and that a young fellow who lived across the street from the Kloefkorns, Conrad Good, served as the lead instigator of most of the ill-advised and ill-fated activities that took place up and down North 63rd Street. I will share a couple of them here:



In Conrad's house, for various reasons which may not be fully understood by me, there was a lower threshold of supervision of his activities. Conrad seemed to have the run of the neighborhood pretty much all day, every day, until his mom (Mary Jean Good) opened up the screen door at twilight and shouted at the top of her lungs, "**CONNNNN-RAAAAAD.**" Not only could we hear this from my own house about a block away, I imagine it was probably heard all the way to Havelock, a mile or so to the north. Once summoned in that fashion, Conrad knew that it was time to go home and presumably did so most of the time, but the rest of his days were spent cooking up ways to get into trouble.



One of my crystal clear first memories of being led astray by Conrad was an episode previously written about in this organ, which I called *Head Over Handlebars*. I won't regurgitate the entire content of same in this issue, but the *Cliff's Notes* version is that Conrad talked me into taking my beautiful new Schwinn Black Beauty bicycle and pushing it down off an enormous mound of dirt near the Gateway Shopping Mall, resulting in the tire coming off my bike and him then abandoning me as I had to walk my bicycle home. I had hand-tightened the lug nuts on my front bicycle tire so I could roll Black Beauty home, and then later that same day, in the early evening hours, a different friend came over and asked me if I wanted to ride with him over to the Ballard softball fields near Havelock. By that time, I had forgotten about the hand-tightened lug nuts on Black Beauty. As we were heading down the Lincoln Northeast hill toward Adams Street together, I hit a bump, my front tire came off, and I went head-over-handlebars down to the pavement, as hard as Chinese arithmetic, and chipped one tooth and cracked a couple of others, leading to a lifetime of dental surgeries and misery. And yes, I do blame Conrad for that.



I have a vivid memory of Conrad talking the North 63rd Street crew into heading down to the drug store/soda shop at 66th and Holdrege Streets, but not before he first helped himself to his mom Mary Jean's secret money jar, supposedly hidden up high in a cabinet in the kitchen. Conrad was always quite generous with these purloined coins which were likely unauthorized for such purpose by Mary Jean, and treated us to shakes and candy and all kinds of good stuff. Were the rest of us complicit in knowingly accepting fruit from the poisonous tree which was Mary Jean's secret cookie jar full of change? Clearly, yes, and we can only be thankful that the statute of limitations has expired for prosecution.



Between games of pickle in the backyard and driveway basketball and hide-and-seek and various and sundry other summer activities, there was also a fair amount of wrestling and roughhousing that went on among our wild pack of boys. Because Conrad and I were about the same size, even though he was a grade younger, we tended to scrap and wrestle each other more than the others, it seems to me. While I was stronger and a bit more athletic than Conrad, he made up for it with tenacity, a complete absence of fear of reprisal, and dirty tricks. I remember one time when we were sparring in the backyard and Conrad somehow got his hands on a golf club and whacked me right on the shin. Dang, that hurt. But an even more memorable melee between us ended up with me wrestling him down to the ground and giving him exactly what he deserved until, instead of crying uncle, he resorted to—wait for it—biting me on the stomach. You read that correctly. Conrad actually bit me on the stomach with full bicuspid treatment, and didn't let go for a while, resulting in a bloodcurdling scream on my part that quickly brought my mom to the backdoor and sent Conrad sprinting across the Berkas' backyard toward Fort Good.

I'm not sure if Conrad learned that little trick from watching All Star Wrestling or how he added that to his bag of tricks, but it hurt like crazy and left teeth marks in my flesh for a considerable time. That was probably the moment that I realized Conrad might be capable of just about anything, and that maybe "might didn't make right," after all.



In another example of his excellent leadership, Conrad used to enjoy hopping on his bicycle and getting it going pretty fast and then coasting along with his left foot on the left pedal as he lifted his right leg up over the seat, and then hopping off and leaving his bike to roll along riderless until it ran out of steam and collapsed onto the street, or collided with something else, person, place or thing. He developed a bit of a following amongst the more dull-witted of the neighborhood boys, but then he pushed his luck and cooked his own goose when he attempted to extend his own record for the longest riderless distance traveled by a neighborhood bicycle, and his bicycle careened into the side of my father's beloved pale green 1963 Chevy automobile, right before Jack's very eyes. We didn't see Conrad around our house very much after that, and soon his father and Mary Jean moved the Good clan<sup>5</sup> out of the neighborhood and into a witness protection program closer to the Havelock area.



I hadn't seen Conrad in twenty or thirty years or more when one day, probably ten to twelve years ago, I was reading the newspaper and saw a photograph of Der Viener Schlinger at a Husker football game and read from the caption below the photograph that it was our old neighborhood hellion, Conrad Good.

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<sup>5</sup> Possibly an oxymoron.





My eyes almost bugged out of their sockets to see this because pretty much everybody who attends Husker football games knows of the legendary Viener Schlinger. One evening in that same general time frame, we were down in Lincoln having dinner at *Dino's* on North 70th Street after Joe's Mount Michael baseball team had played a game in the state tournament, and we were sitting around shooting the breeze while we waited for our food to arrive, and I spotted Conrad at another table there at *Dino's*. My kids had heard all of the childhood stories about Conrad leading the rest of us astray, and they now knew that he was Der Viener Schlinger, so I asked them if they wanted to meet him, and the answer was a resounding yes. I went over and said hi to Conrad, and he answered me in that very husky voice of his, and agreed to come over and meet Joe and Will. When I brought up a couple of the above-mentioned stories while he was at our table, Conrad offered to provide his own version of the events in question, at which time I quickly asked for the check and told him that we had to be on our way back to Omaha.

I don't believe that she is still alive, but there is no doubt that the Berkas and the Kloefkorns and the Ernsts all owe a debt of gratitude to Mary Jean—for relocating Conrad far away from our North 63rd enclave. Otherwise, a few of us might have spent some of our junior high and high school years at the Kearney Reform School instead of thriving at Robin Mickle Middle School and Northeast Lincoln High School.

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Okay, that's a wrap. Have a terrific weekend, lads.

Skipper