

STRIKE THREE

The Fellowship Group at St. Peter invited the Fellowship Group at St. John to join them in a trip upstate to take in a professional baseball game. Those in attendance at the game were witnesses to one of the most unusual moments in the vast garden of baseball lore. A hot, humid afternoon in the middle of the season; a game between the two cellar dwellers of their respective divisions; a meager crowd of five hundred dedicated fans; a pitcher known for doctoring the ball in the most creative ways; a batter known for frequent wild excuses to explain his lackluster hitting; an umpire that actually wore glasses—all of these elements form the background for this tale.

Our window into this unusual moment begins with the introduction of the first batter in the top of the sixth inning.

Bob: Stepping up to the plate for the Redbirds here in the top of the sixth is Andre Smith. He grounded out in the third. So, how do you think Johanson will pitch him now, Skip?

Skip: Bob, I think he'll probably stay with the hard stuff, but you never know with Johanson. He always seems to come up with something controversial, and there has been a little colorful individual rivalry between Johanson and Smith.

Bob: Let's ask Doug in the control room if we still have the catcher, Mott, miked up. What about it, Doug?

Doug: It's a go, Bob.

Bob: Good. We should be able to hear any comments made at the plate then. Okay, Johanson winds, and here's the first pitch. Strike one.

Skip: Bob, Smith looked a little bewildered at that first pitch. He's stepping out of the box and appears to be asking something. Can we get the audio on that, Doug?

Smith: Man, I didn't even see that pitch. What kind of pitch was it?

Mott: Curveball.

Smith: Curveball?

Ump: Yes, curveball ... you know, life's a lot like a curveball. Things seem to go along straightforward and easy, and then life throws you something

you weren't expecting. If you want to succeed, you really have to learn how to hit those curves.

Bob: Okay, here's Johanson's second pitch.

Ump: Ball one.

Smith: Well, at least it wasn't another strike, but I didn't see that one either. What was it?

Mott: Forkball.

Smith: Forkball?

Ump: Yes, forkball ... you know, life's a lot like a forkball, too. You think you're in a groove and then you find yourself at a fork just like the ball that's wedged between two fingers. If the wrong finger or path dominates the spin, you could lose control.

Bob: Johanson winds and fires his third pitch.

Ump: Ball two.

Smith: Okay ... what kind of pitch was that?

Mott: Slider.

Smith: Slider?

Ump: Yes, slider ... you know, life's a lot like a slider, as well. Sometimes there are things that we want so badly that always seem to slide just out of reach. Perhaps those are the times that you need to rethink just what it is you're going after.

Bob: Okay, Johanson's ready to deliver his next pitch, Skip.

Skip: Look at the catcher, Bob. He doesn't even have his glove on yet. This is incredible. Mott is cleaning his nails, and the pitch is on the way.

The batter, seeing the pitcher wind up, swung blindly, hoping to hit something. Coming up empty, he noticed the catcher was still cleaning his nails. He swung again, hoping to hit something. Seeing the catcher still working on his nails, Smith swung ten more times. Tired, he looked back at the catcher, who after pausing for a few more seconds, finally put on his glove.

Ump: Strike two.

The batter stood with his mouth open and looked at the catcher.

Mott: Changeup.

Smith: Changeup?

Ump: Yes, changeup ... you know, my friend, life's a lot like a changeup. We so often get wrapped up in the fast lane that when things don't move as fast as we want, we get anxious about our time. Can't say enough about that word 'patience', can we?

Bob: Johanson's winding up for his next pitch.

Smith stood with his bat on his shoulder and turned to watch the catcher dancing all around, flitting from one side of the plate to the other, finally smothering the ball on the ground.

Ump: Ball three.

Smith: What?

Mott: Knuckleball.

The batter held out his arm and pointed toward the umpire.

Ump: Yes, knuckleball ... you know, now that I think about it, life's a lot like a knuckleball. Sometimes we just seem to float around out there, never committing to any path in the journey.

Bob: The count on Smith is full. I wonder what Johanson has in store. I know he doesn't want to give him a free pass. There's the windup and the pitch.

Ump: Stee ... erike three.

Bob: He blew that fastball right by Smith, Skip.

Skip: Yeah, Bob, he still had plenty left on that heater.

Mott: I knew you'd never catch up to the heater.

Smith: Heater?

Ump: Yes, fastball.

Smith: Wait a minute. How could I be out? I mean, I never saw any of those pitches. I don't understand.

Ump: Didn't you get a manual explaining the rules of the game when you came into this league?

Smith: Yes.

Ump: Did you read it?

Smith: Well, not all of it. I mean, I thought I knew how to play the game.

Ump: You should have read the book.

At that very moment the skies opened up with a deluge, forcing the umpires to call the game. As the rest of the players scrambled for the dugouts, Smith remained at home plate with a lost look in his eyes.

Smith: Wait. Don't leave me, guys. Don't I get another chance? Somebody should have told me what all was in the book. I don't want to be ... alone.

Were the drops coming off Smith's cheeks tears or merely the rain? No one really asked that question. Smith never played another game after that day. The season went on with the Redbirds finishing last. There are a few fans who claim they can

hear the word 'alone' coming from the dugout at the start of spring training every year. Of course, it's probably just the wind. And yet ... we can't really see the wind. Yeah, maybe life's a lot like baseball.