

Words 1,475

Thugo 5-2-6

“Hello, City Post.”

“Can I speak to the sports editor?”

“Transferring...”

“Jim Wilson,” a gruff voice replied.

“I... I'm calling to complain.”

“About what?”

“You cheat all the small high schools in the county; fewer pictures and shorter stories than City High,” I shouted.

“Who is this?” Wilson asked.

“Ah... Dr. John Smith," I tried to say with authority.

"Well Dr. Smith we have limited space.”

"Small high schools like Grove never get fair coverage compared to City High."

"Well kid, Grove High plays City on Saturday so there's your big chance. We'll have a reporter there, you little punk."

"You're a jerk," I said shaking and slamming the phone down.

"Hey, we made our point. Let's go to practice," said Tommy slapping me on the back.

Practice went well and we were ready to play City. OMG! I thought as I entered their ballpark. I'm in awe of seating for thousands, a red clay infield, and well-chalked white lines. The sage green fence, easy on the eyes, displayed advertising on every panel.

Sweat ran down my face. I needed water. A white noon sun baked the infield creating mirage-like heat waves rising from the desert clay. We took our positions as Jay, our ace pitcher warmed up. Missing easy ground balls and throwing wildly, Coach sensed our anxiety and called us in.

"Hey fellas, is this home plate the same size and shape as the one at our place? Anyone know where Caroline, Puerto Rico or Silsbee, Texas are? They're the hometowns of last year's Major League MVPs. Boys, you have every right to be here and I wouldn't trade any of you for any two of them. We're playing for each other and all the small high schools in the state. Let's go play Grove baseball," Coach said with authority and confidence.

The game started and we settled down. Jay was throwing unhittable heat and wicked curve balls. The game was scoreless until the last inning. I got nicked by a pitch and as I stood on first base Tom Hugo, aka Thugo, stepped on my foot and barked in my ear, "4-6-3 double play."

In baseball, every position has a number. The pitcher, Jay is 1, me, the catcher 2, first baseman 3, second 4, third 5, shortstop 6 and the outfielders from left to right 7, 8 and 9. In the official scorebook a 4-6-3 means the ball is hit to the second baseman 4, thrown to the shortstop 6 at second for the out, and then thrown to the first baseman 3, for the second out resulting in a 4-6-3 double play. Somehow Thugo thought he could make this happen. But I didn't.

Tommy smashed the next pitch to left field. It bounced past City's outfielder and I scored. Our next three batters struck out. But we were winning 1-0 and only three outs away from the greatest victory of our lives.

Unfortunately, Jay's face told a different story. When he removed his cap to wipe his brow his red, sunburned face looked like a magazine ad for sunblock. When he touched his forehead it turned white then back to red. Rivulets of sweat ran through the layers of red dust covering his arms and neck. White rings formed around his bloodshot eyes. The first two batters hit the ball hard and were on base. Jay walked the next batter throwing three balls in the dirt and a wild pitch over my head. He was out of gas.

With the bases loaded and no outs it was up to Thugo. He was the best hitter in the county. He had hammered the ball every time, but a leaping grab by Tommy and a long running catch by our center fielder kept him off the bases. He was a huge kid probably 6' 3", 230 pounds. He tapped his black cleats with his bat and rubbed the toes of his shoes on the back of his leggings till they shined. As he stared at Jay I picked up a handful of the red dust and tossed it on his shoes.

He looked down at them and whispered "farm boy." City players called every other athlete in the county by this derogatory name.

I just smiled and said, "You're welcome, Thugo."

“Time out!” shouted Coach as he marched to the mound. We gathered around Jay, and although we saw his exhaustion we all felt it would be unbearable to pull him. He was the soul of our team and had the heart of a lion.

Coach reached for the ball in Jay’s hand and suddenly Tommy grabbed it. “We got this!” Coach hesitated and just stared at Tommy. “Coach, Jay brought us to this dance and that’s who we wanna go home with.”

Coach gulped for air then leaned in to our huddle and said in a broken voice, “Okay, no matter what... I’m proud of you guys.”

The crowd was shocked when Tommy handed Jay the ball. Thugo moved to the front of the batter’s box. He was determined to hit Jay’s curve ball before it had a chance to bend. This was it. If he pulled it to left field, our weakest link, two runs would score easily.

The crack of the bat hitting the ball sounded like summer thunder. I could smell burning horse hide. Halfway to third the ball suddenly dove to the ground a foot in front of third base and just inches inside the foul line. I quickly imagined the radio announcer’s voice in my head... ‘It’s a screamer down the left field line all the way to the fence...two runs will score and that’s the ball game. City wins it 2 to 1’.

All three runners took off and Thugo’s twin brother, Dave, barreled down the line towards me, his giant body blocking my view. Joe, our third baseman crouched close to the line but the ball was hit with such ferocity he could only take one step. He lunged to his right and speared hopelessly at the ball. His momentum took him into foul territory behind the runner.

I couldn’t see the ball. Dave had run halfway home when Joe reappeared behind him with the ball in his bare hand.

“Throw it!” I begged as he took a couple of steps towards me and stepped on third base. Standing on home plate I expected a force-out with no tag necessary. But, after Joe stepped on third base for out number one I needed to stop Dave and tag him out before he reached the plate.

I moved up the line two feet, silently praying the ball gets to me before the runner. It seemed to take forever to leave Joe’s hand and I expected to be mowed over by the runner. He had a significant lead but Joe’s cannon-like arm made it an even race. His perfect throw sounded like a kid’s cork gun and produced a puff of dust around my well-worn catcher’s mitt. Crashing into the runner, my hand was buried in my mitt with the ball tucked inside.

The umpire’s face was focused on the tag. He shouted, “You’re out!”

Before I could celebrate, Tommy was screaming my name. Looking up I saw the runner slide to a stop in the loose dirt, nervously obeying his coach’s ear-piercing command, “Get back, get back!” He and Tommy were racing back to second. I cocked my arm and threw to Tommy, who was in a dead heat with the runner. Although a long shot, Tommy made the impossible plays possible.

“Get down!” I yelled as Jay collapsed onto the dusty mound and my throw just missed his cap. I led Tommy too far, but he somehow got to the ball and tagged the runner. Losing his balance, Tommy tripped and rolled to the feet of the umpire. The ump stared motionless as Tommy opened his glove. Inside, lay a handful of red dust, and a dirty scuffed baseball.

The ump, as if throwing a lightning bolt, thrust his arm forward then drew it back roaring “You’re oooutt!” It was over in a blink... we beat City.

Later, a guy with an unlit cigar poked his head in our dugout and asked for Dr. Smith. Someone blurted out, “Not here!”

“Tell him he missed a helluva game.”

Sunday's City Post ran the story on the front page above the fold, **GROVE BEATS CITY 1-0** accompanied by pictures of Coach, Jay, our celebration and not one City player.

A few years later I saw Thugo at the local mall. As we passed he taunted "farm boy."

I turned and nodded, "Thugo, 5-2-6."

He hesitated, grinned and said, "touché."

After 130 years and over 200,000 professional baseball games there have been only 810 triple plays -- not one of them a 5-2-6.