

Funny Man

Starkle Was Baseball's Pagliacci—And Today As Ever, Humor Is Tragedy's Twin



FIVE STAR FICTION



By Douglas H. Fox

SURE, you remember Wade Starkle—the funniest ball player who ever blossomed out of the Pacific Baseball League. You remember him because every time you see a diamond cut-up these days, you think of Starkle's brand of humor. He was the real thing in baseball funny men—so good he never played a full inning of ball the three seasons he was with the Oaks.

He was that kind of ball clown.

The kind that jerked the laughs out of you when you were out in the rightfield bleachers under a blazing August sun. The kind that caused you to forget your bottle of beer and hot-dog between the double-headers. For when Starkle was down there acting up you didn't leave your seat. You'd miss something. Something rich and clean and side-splitting.

Wade Starkle's horseplay pounded that tiny muscle under your solar plexus and left you gasping for air. He held up plenty of ball games with his antics—but you didn't care, you were having the time of your life laughing at his gags.

The Oaks were a pretty scrubby outfit—until they won the P.B.L. pennant, that last season Starkle was around.

In those years they used infielders who couldn't stop a slow-rolling push-ball, pitchers who dyed their hair at the temples and outfielders who creaker at the knees in the batter's box. The club was famous for bone-head plays and countless errors.

But still you came to see them—because they carried Wade Starkle, the funniest man in baseball.

And you got your money's worth.

Then—the Oaks' great year in 1932.

The year they were parked at the top of the second division, a dozen games behind the league-leaders in mid-July. Then they started to go, until two days before the season ended they were even-up with the Tigers—who'd clamped on to the top berth. Then the Oaks ran into rain in their series with the Little Giants. But they were smack up against the Tigers for the P.B.L. bunting, because the Tigers down in Salt Lake, couldn't play in the mud, either.

Sure, you've probably told your kids about that bitter championship play-off. How, with three games each, the teams came out for that last battle under a leaden sky that had dripped rain for two days. How, even as the ground-keepers ripped back the canvas which covered the infield, the slow drizzle set in. And how Club Managers Chet Fohrman of the Oaks and Gil Kennedy of the Tigers, finally agreed to start the game—because forty-two thousand fans sat waiting for it.

And Big Jess Gerber, pitching for the Oaks, came out to the mound and cut down Tiger batters as if they'd been bush-leaguers—with his very special brand of horseshoe dynamite, that afternoon. And Hee Dooxie, the chunky, bow-legged port-sider who was pitted against Gerber, "screw-balled" the big sticks of the Oaks into a nightmare of fanning.

It was one of the greatest title tilts ever staged in Class AA ball.

And then, with the Oaks at bat in the last half of the ninth, you saw Wade Starkle—Funny Man Wade Starkle—dig down into an empty bag of tricks and turn that dull, rainy day into one of the delectable laughter.

That's the thing you really remember—that gag of Starkle's in the last half of the ninth with the score tied at 1 and 1. You remember it because of three weeks Starkle hadn't been a funny man. And that piece of comedy broke the tension of the Oaks, and handed the crowded Vaughn Park a tremendous laugh—making them almost forget that a championship ball game was at stake. Then you saw the Oaks come to take their heels, finally, and push over that needed run which gave them the P.B.L. flag.

SURE, you saw all that. You saw everything.

But you didn't see that that Saturday afternoon was the blackest one in Starkle's life. Clear up until the Oaks came in for their half of the ninth, it was black. It was black because Wade Starkle had nothing left in his bag of tricks. It was empty—he was a clown without a make-up kit. And there was a guy lying up in St. Vincent's hospital who . . . You didn't know anything about that, because you didn't know what was between Wade Starkle and Roy Dales, the sport scribe.

You might remember a by-line of Dales' in the old *Telegram-News* over some baseball yarns. Maybe you don't. He was one sport writer who never signed his

name all over the sport section. Not Dales.

You might've seen him in the press box with the rest of the boys—the one with the crazy, mashed-in hat that never came off. The one who had the face of a choir-boy—except for those two harsh lines around his full mouth. He was the guy who held a cigar between his uneven teeth the whole nine innings of a ball game—the one who lit up when the last player was put out. That was Roy Dales, assistant sports editor of the old *Telegram-News*.

He was the guy behind Starkle, the one who put Starkle over with Chet Fohrman, manager of the Oaks. And later, with the cash customers. But you didn't know that, because you didn't know that Starkle and Dales were both orphans out of St. Mary's.

Even as kids they were baseball nuts. They knew the fielding and batting average of every player who was ever any good at the game at all—and a lot who weren't. From Lajole to Hellmann, they knew them. From Wagner to Ty Cobb—they knew the stuff by heart.

Sure, the last year they were at the orphanage, Dales wrote the class play and Starkle got the lead. It was then that Dales discovered Starkle could mimic—could pantomime, could make funny faces. Starkle imitated that walk of the orphanage Superintendent's until the old guy almost doubled himself up with laughing. Starkle was a hit, and Dales never forgot it.

That Superintendent was a pretty good fellow—he got Starkle a job with a packing plant and saw that he got a break in Industrial League ball. And he found a place for Dales on the old *Telegram-News*—as a copy boy.

In a couple of years Dales started to scribble off-beat sport stuff. He was handed the usual sand-lot headaches. Only those ball games weren't headaches to Dales. Not on your life. His pal, Starkle, was playing a mighty sweet second base for the packing plant outfit. And Dales gave him all the play he dared in his sheet. He must've done a good job, because before long P.B.L. scouts came buzzing around to see Starkle in action.

THEN, it happened.

One Sunday afternoon Starkle, stretching a double, came sliding into third base. After he'd made the slide, he couldn't get up. They had to carry him off. Dales rode with him to the hospital and when Starkle finally got out of it he left two inches of bone from his right leg. He had a limp and that meant that he was through with baseball. He could get around—but the old lightning-like, double-play stuff wasn't there, anymore. He could swing a bat, catch a fly—but they don't use guys who hobble—not in the infield they don't.

So Starkle went back to the packing plant—empty, with all that really mattered, gone.

Sure, Dales stepped into the picture then. He'd gone up a couple of notches on his sheet. He was meeting a lot of guys in the sport world. He was getting to know the men who carried weight—and those who didn't. And he knew that his pal, Starkle, was eating out his heart at the plant. He knew that Starkle went to see the pro's play every Sunday—that he sat in the grandstand and pep-talked to himself, going through the plays out there on the diamond. He knew that Starkle was covering the steals, cutting the runners off at first—pegging the ball to the plate.

One breezy spring afternoon at the Oaks' training camp down at Santa Ana, the veteran pitchers suddenly stopped easing the kinks out of their soup-bones over in the bull-pen. And the rookies, messing around near the batting

Famous Quotations

PRAYER

Prayer is the spirit speaking truth to Truth.

Bailey—Pitts.

And from the prayer of Want, and plaint of Woe,

O never, never turn away from me!

Perforin, in this bleak wilderness below,

Ah! what were man, should Heaven refuse to hear!

Bailey—Mansel.

Every wish is like a prayer—With God.

E. B. Cunningham—Aurora Leigh.

CONTRIBUTORS

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"The Guy Couldn't Find Out What Was Wrong With the Motor, Then He Brought Out a Monkey-Wrench Big Enough to Overhaul the Normandie."

cage, looked toward leftfield where the fence had opened and a shabby taxicab had come through. The taxi got as far as second base, spluttered, died.

At the wheel of the cab was a guy in a raccoon coat and a ten-gallon hat. When the motor fizzled he got out and raised the hood.

Most of the Oaks thought it was a Hollywood location bit. They stood around waiting for the camera wagons and the rest of the company to show up. But there wasn't any.

The guy in the raccoon coat and the ten-gallon hat couldn't find out what was wrong with the motor. He unbuttoned his fur-clothing and brought out a monkey-wrench big enough to overhaul the Normandie. Then the ball players looking on, saw that he wore a long-sleeved, long-legged bathing suit of about 1840, pearl gray spats and bright yellow shoes.

Sure, you read about it the next day in the old *Telegram-News*—how Starkle flattened the whole training camp with his goofy stuff. How, for over an hour, he kept them laughing. And how, finally, a groundkeeper led in the oldest dray horse in the world to pull the cab out of the park—and Starkle rode out of it, astride the ancient plug, waving good-bye with the big wrench.

And then you read, a few days later, how he rolled the Oaks into the dugout with his capers—while umpiring a game between the rookies and the regulars. And how, finally, a groundkeeper led in the oldest dray horse in the world to pull the cab out of the park—and Starkle rode out of it, astride the ancient plug, waving good-bye with the big wrench.

And before the regular playing season was three weeks old the Oaks' stockholders were slapping one another on the back—over their luck at having as smart a club manager as Chet Fohrman.

From the Seattle *Guard* to the Los Angeles *Breeze*, you couldn't get past a sport page without seeing Starkle's dead-pan map looking out at you—a mild, blank oval face with a great brush of hair that looked as if a strong wind had whipped through it once, and no comb had touched it since.

Up and down the coast they thronged into the ball parks when the Oaks visited. The fans saw a different Oak gang out there, that year. They saw a team hopped up with the spirit of Funny Man Wade Starkle—a team that had scrap in it. A team that beefed over the close decisions at home plate, players who showed red in their eyes when the ump's called 'em haywire. The fans saw a three-seasoned down-and-under outfit on its way to brighter days.

Maybe you were at the Vaughn Park that night the floodlights went blooey in the third inning of a game between the Oaks and the Little Giants.

It was the night that Starkle came out of the Oak dugout with a lighted candle in his hand—came out there on the diamond in the inky blackness, looking for the ball game. He made the rounds of the infield—wandered to the outfield. The candle went out. When he lighted it again he was sitting on the first-base sack, rubbing a hand in the dust as if he'd lost a dime. His head was bare. And he had on a split-up-the-side nightgown which was two sizes too big for him.

Sure, they laughed. In the darkness of the stands they roared for ten minutes. Then suddenly the lights flashed back on and the game continued.

But that gag of Starkle's was hardly mentioned in the sheets the next day. Because they were full of the head-on collision between Charlie Baum, the outfielder, and Pete Jackson, the Oak shortstop. It happened in the first half of the eighth inning when Jackson chased a teasing

Texas-leaguer into Baum's territory. They crashed and little Jackson, who couldn't have weighed an ounce over a hundred-and-twenty-five, went down and didn't get up. Jackson suffered concussion of the brain and minor internal injuries, the papers said.

THE jinx was on.

Four days later down in Los, fast-moving Pi Brenne, the speediest rightfielder in the P.B.L. tried to pick a high one off the wall in the last half of the fifth. He misjudged, slammed into the garden planks and the next morning had breakfast in bed with his arm in a sling.

He was hitting .354, had 26 stolen bases to his credit and was a wonder at breaking up one-run lead ball games. You didn't hear about him breaking up any more that season. His being out of the line-up left a hole that Fohrman could not fill—although Carl Davis, stiffening at the knees and greying at the temples, scrambled around out in the pasture as best he could.

Sure, you heard how the Oaks lost three straight series after that and how Funny Man Wade Starkle, between a double-header at San Diego, had the cash customers choking over their peanuts with his woman dummy and that famous card game at second base.

How Starkle limped out to second, dragging his lady fair, and sat the dummy opposite him at the keystone sack and brought out a deck of cards. How he pulled off a shoe, when he pantomimed losing a hand, and gave it over to the dummy. How he took it back, when he won the next play. And it went on for twenty minutes with the crowd howling for more.

Then the wind-up of that caper—the cop coming out to Starkle and the dummy and slapping handcuffs on them. Starkle's violent protesting, and finally getting the policeman to join him and the dummy in a game—and they sat down to the bag and Starkle won the cop's club, handcuffs, cap and coat in three hands. And the woman dummy had Starkle's shoes and his socks.

Then the ump's appeared and the second ball tilt was called, ending the act—with the fans wiping the tears from their eyes while they stamped their feet and applauded.

Still, the jinx hung over the Oaks like a black cloud.

It was six-foot-four Rube Henshaw who went out to try and win that second game, that afternoon. Even before the smiles of his teammates had faded, Henshaw was in hot water—three men on and no outs. He took his time pitching 'em over, as always, but he couldn't find the plate. He couldn't have found it, if he'd used a basketball—it just wasn't in him. And before the inning ended San Diego had chewed six runs off.

Every Oak player knew that Henshaw had won sixteen and lost two—up until the Baum-

Tigers, playing down in Salt Lake, also took it on the chin from rain. They don't play ball in a sea of mud, so there they were—the Oaks and the Tigers perched at the top of the heap and the season over!

Then the play-off started—

Each team nabbed three games, a coin was tossed for the seventh and the Oaks came home to Vaughn Park to show the home fans how championships were won.

You probably didn't notice that the old *Telegram-News* wasn't running any of Roy Dales' stuff those last few weeks of the P.B.L. campaign. But you did notice that Funny Man Wade Starkle hadn't staged a stunt for three straight weeks. You noticed that, because the papers were crammed with his having gone stale.

And you didn't know that for three weeks before the play-off series, Dales wasn't pouncing out copy for the old *Telegram-News*—because he was in the hospital with double pneumonia!

The nurses said that Dales heard every inning of the Oaks' battles with the Tigers. A mild-faced guy with a batch of hair which gave every uniformed sister the creeps to see, brought up the tiny radio and left it in Dales' room.

He'd sit at the bedside and wouldn't leave until he was told that it was after hours. Dales was unconscious half the time, but the mild-faced guy just sat there, anyway—quiet, and looking at the gentle face with those two harsh lines in it.

And Starkle had to hustle to make the clubhouse before game time. But even after he got there and was dressed he didn't have anything for the cash customers, or the players, or anybody else.

Sure, you remember how the Tigers got the jump on the Oaks in that last game, with that first-inning squeeze-play which netted them the one-run lead.

The game wore on in that thin curtain of rain—with Big Jess Gerber heaving his dynamite down the groove with all he had behind every pitch. And stocky Hee Dooxie of the Tigers pumped his twisting screw-ball past the heavy bats of the Oaks until they didn't know whether they were coming or going.

And the last half of every inning brought out Starkle to the third-base coaching line—still putting on his starting act, not doing a thing to amuse anyone.

He knew that his team needed a laugh, that the crowd needed a laugh. But Roy Dales was lying up in St. Vincent's and Funny Man Wade Starkle was out of

tricks—because he'd never had any, anytime. All the stunts and all the gags and all the horseplay had been Dales'. He'd made the Oaks great through a ball player who never played ball, who never without his make-up kit—didn't have any grease paint, didn't have any props, and a lot of people were hungry for laugh.

AND then you saw it happen.

You saw Starkle hobble out to the coaching line for the last half of the ninth with the score still knotted at one each.

You saw Baum go to the batter's box, the Oaks' dugout, select his war club. You saw him look up, when he heard a yell of laughter over in the grandstand seats back of the third-base coaching box.

For Funny Man Wade Starkle had come to life—craned at his waist, bending low, looking something in the short grass. There was a tense moment in the big crowd—they sensed a stunt, a laugh.

This was it!

You saw Starkle take his bat out of his pockets, advance a retreat. He crouched lower, extended his arms, hands cupped. Then he dropped to the soggy ground on all fours. You thought he'd suddenly gone nuts—he saw him make a savage grab at that something in the grass.

Then you saw that tiny frog jump—and you let a laugh out of you that was heard in blocks. Starkle missed the bat and skidded on his face.

Baum, starting for the batter's box, stopped dead in his tracks watching Dooxie. The Tiger leger, ball in hand, stood out on the mound—a slow grin on his face. The infield behind him waited—watching Starkle.

How Funny Man Wade Starkle clowned with that frog jump in the papers the next day. He couldn't catch it—how he popped into his face—and after running in terror, Starkle came back and stalked it. He sat for seven minutes while the sands laughed and the time grew heavier.

And then, when half of Vaughn Park was in convulsions, Starkle finally captured the jumper and with a look of ghastly glee all over his dead-face rushed to his dugout—and a ball game went on.

The papers were crammed with the following day. How Starkle lit off with a sharp single, how Craft sacrificed him in the end. Then Jackson came to bat and nicked Dooxie for another single and Baum wound at third. Holliday fanned. Pi Brenne, after being worked to two-and-three, gave the last big thrill of the year—the last big thrill of the year doubling off the leftfield wall and Baum came hiking across home-rubber standing up. He told the Oaks the P.B.L. flag.

All the sport writers except one—wrote about Funny Man Wade Starkle playing 'em with that frog trick. That bit of vaudeville broke the tension of the Oak hitters, sent them into the box with smiles on their faces with a hit.

But they didn't say anything about Roy Dales—who heard the last half inning over a tiny radio up at St. Vincent's. They didn't tell you about the tears that came down his almost hollow cheeks the laugh tears caused by the nouncer describing Wade Starkle's antics.

They didn't say anything about that—because they didn't know that it was the first gag Starkle ever pulled out of his own bag of tricks—a gag that was empty of it. And they didn't know the rain steered the Oaks to the P.B.L. bunting—because there'd been no rain there'd been no frog, no gag.

And without a gag, there'd been no laugh—to start a sick sports scribbler back on road to health.

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