



you've got to match their wiles and wisdom to score with these youngsters.

by Charles R. Carner

FAR BE IT from me to stick pins in a Little League umpire's chest protector, but I must confess that few of these "men in blue" are in a class with Bill Klem or Jocko Conlan. I know because I voluntarily spent two seasons, a double-header every Sunday, behind the plate.

What I saw, or rather what I didn't see, convinced me it takes more than 20/20 vision to be a successful Little League "ump."

My biggest problem came from my not chewing bubble gum.

Little Leaguers stuff their cheeks full of the sticky, rubbery goo so they can look like their tobacco-chewing big-league heroes.

We volunteers had no equipment, and we borrowed masks from the catchers of the previous half inning. Being undersized, the masks pinched up our faces until we resembled well-dried prunes. In addition, the boys kept trying to squirt their bubble-gum juices through the masks like big leaguers. The result was disastrous to non-chewers.

Bubble gum caused some new rules to be written in the league, too.

Most kids would think gum balls are

something that comes out of a penny machine. Nope. In Little League, gum balls are wicked weapons not unlike the outlawed spitball in the majors.

Chunky Warren, an 11-year-old left-handed pitcher with a good fast ball, suddenly came up with a sharp breaking curve. He was breaking it off the corners like old Carl Hubbell. With my usual lack of perception, I failed to notice anything unusual until Leroy, the team's usually steady short-stop, heaved three wild throws in a row over the first baseman's head after fielding each grounder cleanly.

The manager called time and ran out to the infield. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing. It's Warren."

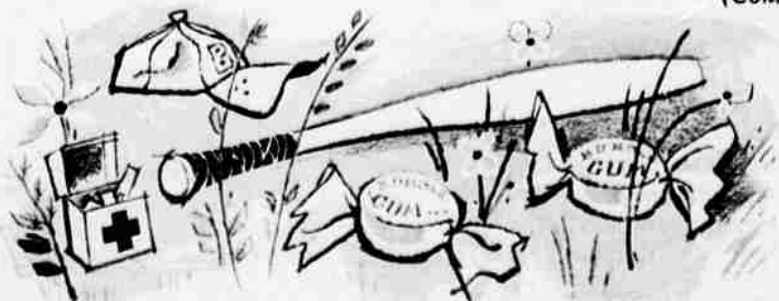
"Warren? He's nowhere near those grounders."

"But he's throwing a gum ball," Leroy snapped back.

Sure enough, when I examined the ball closely and took a whiff of the dark spot on the cover, I recognized it instantly.

Although the gum juice gave Warren a good grip on the ball for his curve, it kept sticking to Leroy's palm when he attempted to throw quickly,

(Continued)



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