

making him erratic, to say the least. After a short conference, baseball gum balls were forever outlawed. This didn't keep outfielders from being blinded occasionally when a big bubble exploded in one's face.

AN UNPLANNED hidden-ball trick during a tight game in a bases-loaded situation almost cost me my head. On this particular Sunday, the little second baseman, Dennis, 10, was wearing a vacationing teammate's uniform which was much too big. His mother had washed Dennis', and it had shrunk. As Denny ducked to field a grounder, he became tangled in the big, billowy pants, and the ground ball ran up his arm right into the sleeve of the oversized shirt. While he was trying to get it out, the hitter went all the way, clearing three runners ahead of him, for an inside-the-infield homer.

I called everyone safe, and the parents went wild. They went even wilder in the second game when a ball being chased by an outfielder disappeared into a rabbit hole. I had to call it a ground-rule double since the youngster hadn't touched it.

Terrible-Tempered Billy, an argumentative third baseman who fought on every play like a miniature Leo Durocher, gave me one of my most humbling moments.

In a close game, Billy rested on second where he lipped off on everything in general, including the umpiring, until a teammate cracked a sharp grounder to short. Billy raced for third, and noting the play was to first, scooted for home plate, where he arrived in a cloud of dust—but the first baseman's throw beat him there.

"Out," I decided. "What!" Billy yelled, scrambling to his feet.

"I said you're out, and don't give me any back talk, Billy, or I'll toss you out of the game."

"Safe," he insisted. "You just talked yourself out of the game. Get going," I commanded.

He stood there glaring at me. "Did you hear me? You're out of the game. Go take a shower and cool off a little."

"I'm going, I'm going," he said finally, "only I think you'll need this to finish."

He opened his grimy little hand to show me the baseball the catcher obviously had dropped in attempting to make the tag.

Some double-headers are all-day affairs with football scores like 23-18, or 19-7. A Sunday second game, a tight 1-0 contest, followed one of those marathons. By the last inning (the seventh in a Little League game), I'll have to admit it was not too sunny.

Little 10-year-old Mike, a crafty right-hander, was pitching the last half inning, and he suddenly ran into a wild streak. Ball after ball crossed the plate until he'd loaded the bases. With each walk he came to the plate

and protested that it was too dark to see any more. "Nonsense," I said, "and if I hear another word about it being too dark, I'll throw you out of the game."

In a moment, Mike, calling time, had crossed to the baseline, where he conferred with one of the adults whose car was parked near the field. "Play ball," I yelled, acutely aware

of the fading light myself. Mike scurried back to the mound. He started pitching to the next batter and ran up a count of three and nothing in a few seconds.

"Ump," he started in protest. "I warned you, Mike—" "Okay, okay," he said, and began walking toward the plate, "only hold this for me for the rest of the inning,

will you?" Mike pulled a two-foot-long flashlight from under his shirt and switched it on. The beam flashed clear out to center field. I called the game.

Little Leaguers are even more superstitious than major leaguers, and some of their superstitions create fads. Ronnie, 12, normally a .400 hitter, was in a slump. This Sunday, when

he walked to the plate he concentrated so hard his cheek muscles bunched, and not from bubble gum. He'd even taken that out of his face and plastered it to the button on his cap. While I watched from behind the plate, he went four for four. His teammates, seeing his success, all aped their cleanup hitter. Within two weeks, the gum on the buttons had spread to every team in the league.

It stopped abruptly when one outspoken third baseman saw Ronnie stride to the plate with a five-penny-wad stuck to his cap.

"Here's bubblehead," the third baseman yelled. Unnerved, Ronnie whiffed on three straight strikes, and that ended that.

THE WORST of my bad days taught me a lesson that more adults should remember when it comes to Little League baseball.

Red was a wiry little freckle-faced youngster as scrappy as they come. I knew his reputation from other umpires. Several told me he'd been able to get under their hides like a burr, and he'd been riding me all day from his squat position as a catcher.

I got rattled just enough to call a pitch wrong, then managed to foul up the count as well.

Red called me on it. To make matters worse, I got out of position on the next pitch and missed it, too.

"That's two in a row, ump," he reminded me.

I was still considering the last pitch when the next slammed over the plate. "Ball," I said before I'd even considered what I saw.

"What!" Red yelled, spinning around to face me. "Now you're evening them up," he said to me, but the remark was actually made to the crowd.

Anger blazed in me at his accusation that I hadn't "called it as I saw it."

"You're out of the game," I ordered. Hordes of parents and both managers descended on me, pleading with me to leave him in the game. I did when I suddenly realized that the reason his accusation made me so mad was that he was right.

When the game was over, Red came to shake my hand, and it was I who hung back—but only for an instant. I accepted it firmly then, when I realized it took a boy to remind me that baseball is still a game, after all.

Many times I thought it would have been fun to be a manager, and I'd bring my battered old glove to the field early to play with the kids.

Johnnie, 9, was from a broken home. His father had deserted the family during the Winter. Johnnie was not a natural ball player, but I worked out with him whenever I could. One day, as we tossed the ball back and forth, Johnnie gave me a warm look.

"Mr. Carner," he said, "I'll bet if my dad had known how much fun we could have had together, he'd never have gone away."

It would seem that there are some pretty big people among those Little Leaguers, and I believe that is one call I made correctly.

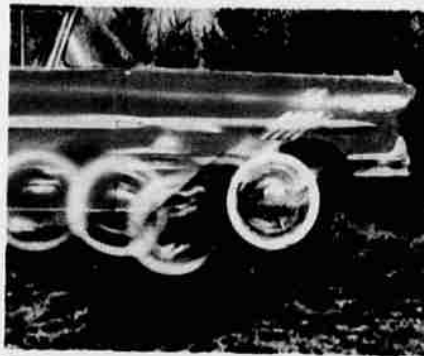
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