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## MIXED SIGNALS

Nicholas Puckett

No other pitcher in the minor leagues had a more unfortunate name than Homer Walker. It was Homer's adopted father who named him after himself, and his father, and his father before him. The name was planned, as was Mrs. Walker's pregnancy, but after numerous failed attempts at getting pregnant, which eventually left Mr. Walker finally conceding that it was, indeed, "his fault," and numerous rejections from numerous adoption centers, they settled on the blonde-haired boy whom they named Homer.

He was used to fans and teammates making fun of him for having such a perfectly ridiculous name, but their chiding was silenced once they saw him pitch. He could throw a fastball a hundred miles per hour and had a curveball that spun batters into the dirt like a corkscrew when they swung. Those were his high school days, at least. Then, he looked entirely different. He was a wiry six-seven and delivered each pitch as if it were the last to be thrown in baseball. He'd take a slight step back, pause for one second – to the brink of being charged for a balk – then slowly lifted his leg so his knee touched his cap, twisted his body so his torso faced center-field, hid the ball behind him and flung the ball nearly from his hip to wherever the catcher placed his glove.

Homer listened to all his coaches, just like all his coaches told him to do, yet his coaches constantly ragged him for never listening. The only way to the majors was to listen to your coaches, they told him. And really he did listen, only during times he shouldn't have. The last time Homer pitched he gave up back-to-back-to-back-to-back home runs against the Corpus Christi Hooks a day after his pitching coach in New Hampshire told him he was lights out the previous night because he kept his leg straight during his delivery when, in fact, he did not.

"Finally," one coach said, "someone's startin' to listen," but that was only when Homer actually didn't listen to his coach, which resulted in him putting batters back in the dugout. He honed the lessons each coach taught him so he could be promoted. Coach Stevenson in Little Rock praised his straight leg kick, so Homer

worked tirelessly at perfecting a ninety-degree angle with his leg on each delivery. Coach Redmond in Midland wanted him to lean back more, Coach Williams in Harrisburg said he should lean more forward, and Coach Henshaw in Scranton asked if he could throw righty (he could not). So on went Homer's quest to perfect his form, and by the time he landed in Montgomery his delivery was remarkably identical to the diagram displayed in the "How to Pitch" section of Coach Masterson's Coaching 101 pamphlet, and his ERA was 23.69. From this unfortunate beginning emerged the busted ballplayer from Nebraska who was eventually traded to the double-A Montgomery Biscuits for a vending machine.

Homer joined the Biscuits in mid-July. Upon his arrival, Lupe spit tobacco juice on his white Nikes, Despy swore at him, Horatio gave him the finger, Yuri gave him the stink eye, and the janitor gave him the wrong combination to his locker. His was next to Rasmus', the last one in the corner.

"I betcha only got two pitches. What you got, kid? You knuckleballer or something?"

"No, just straight stuff. Got a good fastball, I guess. I donno, I keep 'em off base."

"Not better than a vending machine apparently!" Rasmus burst into laughter. Homer turned red.

"You know it's 'cause of you I don't get my Reese's Pieces," Skip butted in. He was always butting in. "How am I supposed to pitch without my Reese's Pieces? Might as well throw lefty. Probably still do better than you! Ain't worth a pack of gum, if you ask me."

Homer slumped in his street clothes next to Rasmus' bare feet.

"Do your sorry ass better than them damn M&Ms," Rasmus said. "You ain't pitching anyway. Hey kid, you throwing tonight? Bullpen? Let me know if you wanna throw a few. I'll let Beveridge catch you. See, I got this knee problem and coach said I shouldn't aggravate it." Rasmus was always trying to get out of bullpen duties.

It was true Homer wasn't worth a pack of gum. His value was exactly one vending machine, because that's what the Biscuits had and that's what the Modesto Nuts needed, just like when the Binghamton Mets were short on baseballs or when the New Hampshire Fisher Cats needed new foul poles. Homer moved where he was needed. A delivery mix-up served the Mets an extra pair of canary yellow foul poles instead of maize yellow ones and the Fisher Cats figured Homer Walker to be a logical offering of equal worth. That worth, cozy enough, was equal to the Mets' one-time demand for fresh baseballs and the Nuts' demand for a consistent supply of Reese's Pieces and Chex Mix. The Biscuits just needed an arm.

"Reese's Pieces," Skip mumbled. "Dammit, how am I supposed to pitch?"

“Don’t mind him.” Rasmus patted Homer’s shoulder. “He just hates you cause we ain’t got no vending machine no more.”

Homer hated Rasmus when he first met him. For starters, Rasmus always called Homer “kid,” even though Homer was three years older and met Rasmus’ eye level sitting down. Rasmus was the catcher, though his role extended to bat boy duties when there was a righty on the mound. Rasmus was a great hitter, a fantastic hitter, but he had this funky batting stance – a cross from Gary Sheffield and Kevin Youkilis, Homer thought – like a Little Leaguer. For some reason he couldn’t hit righties. He always offered unwarranted advice that never made Homer feel any better.

“The real stick is no soda,” Rasmus continued. “Now how are we supposed to get along without no soda? You tell me that, kid. They can’t give us a motel room in Modesto that ain’t crawling with roaches and they take away the one thing everyone here loved. No hard feelings, though, right Skip?” Skip nodded. “It should’ve been me they traded, tell you what. Coulda gotten us a fine pitching machine. Hell, maybe even a new batting cage! Vending machine. For what? A sorry ass ball-shagger who ain’t worth a pack of gum. No hard feelings.”

Rasmus embraced Homer with his naked chest. Homer dressed out of his bag because his locker still wouldn’t open.

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This was Homer’s fifth first game of the season, a muggy summer night in Montgomery. The Biscuits played host to the Jackson Generals in a four-game set. The Biscuits put up ten runs in the first inning, a first for Homer in first games. He sighed and leaned back on the bench with a mouthful of seeds.

“Walker, get loose,” were the first sounds he heard all game. It was the seventh inning. The Montgomery Biscuits led the Jackson Generals 10-5. A single from the next hitter made it 10-6.

Coach Masterson, the manager, called for Homer. He jogged out of the bullpen and met his catcher and coach and, for some reason, Skip on the mound.

“Quite the turnout, aye Walker?” Coach Masterson patted Homer’s rear, which reached to the coach’s chest when Homer stood on the rubber. “Rasmus’ll give you the signs. Got a nice cushion for you so should be easy as pie. Just throw what Rasmus calls and we’ll be outta here quick, got that? What feels good today?”

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“He looks good coach,” the uninvited Skip declared. “Cheese is good. Spinner’s tight. His change look like it’s on a string.”

“That’s what I like to hear! Rasmus, run ‘em through the signs real fast, would ya?”

The catcher obliged. “One, two, three. Cheese, spinner, string. Real simple. We got two runners on now so every sign I give

you just add the number of outs minus the number of runners on base plus one. Got that? Real easy. Just sling it, kid.”

“So right now,” Homer turned to the scoreboard and realized he hadn’t been paying attention. “One out, two on. You gimme a one and that’s...” Homer was never good at math. “That’s a zero, ain’t it?”

“No that’s the cheese! One. Outs minus the runners plus one. One minus two plus one. Cheese.”

“Cheese. Got it.” All Homer could think of was what kind of cheese.

“Nice and easy, boy.”

The three left Homer alone on the mound.

Rasmus flashed the first signs. One, three, two, three, one, three, one. One. Fastball. Munster? Homer fixed his jersey, sighed, and raised his right leg perfectly parallel to the ground, leaned forward – but not too much – hid the ball behind his body and flung a fastball down the middle. Strike one.

“Hey, atta baby.”

“More like that, kid.”

“Lookin’ good right there.”

The first kind words from his teammates relaxed him. He took the ball back and leaned in again. Three, five, four, five, one, two, three. Change? He shuffled the ball in his glove and delivered again. The batter barely connected as the ball dribbled up the third base line. Bases loaded. A new batter. More signs from Rasmus. Outs minus one plus runners. Three runners. How many outs? Two. Plus one. Plus outs minus one? Minus outs plus runners minus one? Cheese? Homer began to sweat. Three, one, two, one, two, one, three, two. Two. Four? What pitch is four? He stepped off and asked for the signs again.

One. Three, two, four, three, one, four, one. Two. Changeup. First pitch? He hesitated a moment and delivered another. The ball floated across the middle of the plate. Homer prayed that a string connected his hand to the ball so he could pull it back. The pitch left the park before Homer could recoil his body to find it. The crowd bood.

“That fucking thing was a meatball!” Coach Masterson fumed, brown spit dripping down his chin. “Rook shook me off! Hey Walker! Get your head outta your ass! Rasmus! Why ain’t he throwin’ cheese? I said cheese dammit! Get out there before I put both y’all back in the pen!”

Rasmus met Homer on the mound.

“You’re making me look bad. Can you see alright? I called the cheese. Change-up on a first pitch? C’mon now. Put some mustard on it,” Rasmus said. He spoke like he was trying to ease a mental patient.

“Run through the signs again. Just one more time.” Sweat

beat down Homer's neck. The umpire moseyed toward them to break up the visit.

"No gimmicks. No runners on. Just outs plus one, minus two if the batter's lefty."

"I thought it was outs minus one."

"Outs plus one! D'you see anyone on? They all skipped home with our lead. Or d'you forget?" Rasmus handed Homer a fresh ball. He was alone again on the mound.

Outs plus one. Minus runners on. Plus one. Mustard? Hot dogs. Popcorn. Soda. Cotton candy. Lefty adds two. No, one. Plus one, no runners. Lefty. What about switch hitters? Meatball?

One, three, two, one, three, one, three. Four? Cheese, he guessed. Strike one.

Two, one, three, one, four, two, three. Four again? Four. Does he know my four? Do I have a four? He invented a fourth pitch. The batter whiffed.

"What the hell was that?" Coach Masterson shouted across the dugout. "Damn thing was on a tee. I don't want him throwing them marshmallow pitches. Gave up a granny and he's putting it on a tee for 'em? The hell he's got? Hey Walker! You want to play for Jackson we can move your ass quick! Right now you're a Biscuit so dammit throw like one! You're a grown ass man!"

Homer tried to channel a breakfast pastry. Three, one, two, two, two, two. Two? Why so many twos? Spinner? Does mustard go on a spinner? Does mustard go on cheese? Are biscuits a pastry? Popcorn. Cotton candy. He lobbed a curveball to Rasmus' glove set up at the batter's jersey letters. The ball went flying again, right over Homer's head again, into the bleachers. The crowd booed again. Coach Lee stormed to the mound before the batter touched home.

"You sorry sonuvabitch! Get your ass to the showers! You hang an 0-2 curveball on his dick? The hell's the matter with you! Rasmus, you tell him to throw the bender?"

"Called it on the second pitch coach. You wanted the cheese, right?"

"High cheese! At his tits! Hit the showers."

Homer trudged to the dugout under a shower of popcorn and nacho cheese.

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Things did not get better for Homer.

Some games he played decent. Like against Chattanooga, when he put up a sterling two-inning hold against Mobile only to be erased on the first pitch of the man who relieved him. Other games he did not. Like when he walked the first (and last) six batters of his appearance against San Antonio. His appearances came less often, and his mistakes worsened. The rest of the Biscuits struggled as well. But no other comrade took the blame, except for Homer, the new guy, who they consistently reminded of being responsible

for the lack of snacks and for the tremendous losses, though the latter began long before Homer's time.

Fans recognized Homer's name and number from the programs and welcomed him routinely to sarcastic applause and verbal abuse. They were unforgiving, diehard Biscuiteers who were brutally expectant and held dire hopes for their team. Every game they showed in force. They'd scream and spit and pelt players with concessions when they didn't get their way, which was often, and cheered enormously for every win, which was less often. With Homer they were merciless.

Homer temporarily used the storage closet in the hallway to change because his locker combination still didn't work. (He tried daily with persistent efforts at 37-8-26 when really it was 38-13-20.) Besides, at least in the storage closet he didn't get welcomed every day with dip spat on his shoes. Rasmus was the only one who spoke to Homer in July. Homer wish he ignored him too because of his depressing pep talks.

"Look on the bright side," Rasmus said after a 10-0 loss to Jackson. "At least the guys in Jackson probably like you."

"Rectitude," was the only meaningful advice Rasmus gave Homer during his troubling time, even though Rasmus meant "redemption," not "rectitude," which he elaborated on after 12-4 loss to Pawtucket. "Baseball's a game of rectitude, kid. Gotta have a clean memory. Short memory. Every game's a chance to come back."

Homer finally accepted his apathy and squeezed in with Rasmus and Skip at the shadowy end of the bullpen. His stomach grew as did the hair on his face and his face itself. He became invisible and in dire straits for any sense of gratification. He hadn't had any since the day he left Hastings.

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"Fran tells me you're the famous Phantom Lank." Mr. Childress sat hands folded at his desk. "I've heard a lot about you. Don't like to listen to coaches, eh?"

Homer's palms sweat. He'd been here before. Another office inside a ballpark. Another suit across the table.

"I guess so," he said.

"I came down to see it for myself, you know. Changed numbers did ya?"

"Well, not exactly. I borrowed one."

"I see." The suit stood up and sat on the edge of the table as if he were Homer's father. "Haven't seen much since then. But I liked what I saw. What happened?"

"What changed?" Homer looked to the floor. "Nothing, sir. I mean, just was on that night I guess."

"And you haven't thrown heat like that since high school, according to your scouting report."

"Guess so."

“And that delivery. Wild stuff.”

“Felt natural, I guess. I won’t do it again I –”

“Who told you to pitch like that?” Mr. Childress’ voice was firm. Homer’s heart sank.

“No one, sir. Won’t happen again.”

Mr. Childress sighed, bowed his head, and didn’t speak for several minutes. His fingers were bone white and his hair combed over to one side in a failed attempt to cover a bald spot. A signed Ken Griffey Jr. jersey hung like a shrine behind him. Papers were strewn about his desk carelessly. Not one of them about baseball. Tax reports, receipts, bills, schedules, memos, vendor contracts and an unfinished letter. A birthday card from his mother was placed proudly next to a family portrait – him, his wife and three kids.

“We really appreciate what you’ve done for this club,” Mr. Childress said. He handed Homer one of the pieces of paper on his desk, a seemingly random one he grabbed under a pile of expense reports. Homer picked up his head. His mouth fell open and he stammered.

“I—I’m not ready, sir. I can get my ERA down. My cheese can be fixed, I can work on my spinner – I can change, sir. I can change. I can change. Whatever you need me to do, I’ll do it.”

“Homer, relax.”

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The next day, Homer walked into the clubhouse carrying three cardboard boxes stacked taller than himself and plopped them down in the center of the room. His teammates moved cautiously to see what was inside. Lupe looked first, and his face illuminated as he pulled out a handful of snack-sized bags of Chex Mix. Another thrust with his left hand revealed the orange wrapping of Reese’s Pieces. The team swarmed around Homer and the boxes, grabbing as much as they could in each hand. With mouths full of salty baked snacks and chocolate and nougat and pretzels and gum, they thanked him and laughed and celebrated like they struck gold.

“Glad to see you came around, Walker,” Yuri said.

“I think we’ll finally win a few,” Skip assured, stuffing his face with Reese’s Pieces.

Homer stood proudly over his teammates bathing in snack foods. Rasmus patted him on the back and admired the chaos with him.

“Nice touch, kid,” Rasmus said. Homer smiled. The two walked out of the clubhouse and met Mr. Childress in the parking lot.

“Did you tell ‘em?” Mr. Childress asked.

“Kind of,” Homer said. He and Rasmus laughed.

That night Coach Masterson and the Biscuits, snacks in laps and gunk stuck in molars, watched the Tampa Bay Rays play the New York Yankees from the clubhouse. A primetime game on



ESPN. They laughed and rough-housed and threw pretzels at the TV and booed the Yankees like loyal prospects of the Rays ought to. They cheered and cheered until they saw a familiar form with a stranger's name come out of the bullpen. And they froze. A graphic flashed on the screen that erased any doubt.

*Kid Walker, 23, 6-foot-8, 170 pounds, from Hastings, Nebraska.*