



# 300 At Tyke's by Rob Allin

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Sparky McGillicuddy was on his way to meet 300 people for the first time. They would shake his hand and buy a flimsy "action photo" from Tyke's Trinkets Memorabilia Shop for \$50 and he would sign it for \$50 more. His new wife Susan, the Captain Morgan Girl he first spotted dumping rum down the throats of slobbering double-chinned yuppies in the elbow-to-elbow sports bar built into his stadium of employment, wore Prada. His lawyer wore Armani. It was time to collect.

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Tim Tromay looked at the reddish-yellow chicken pox scabs in the mirror.

"They don't itch anymore," he told his mom.

He looked at the greenish crust oozing out of his ears and nose.

"Well, they do seem to be scabbing over a bit," Mrs. Tromay said. "I guess it would be okay!"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes..." Tim repeated as he ran to his room, where he grabbed his bright blue Sparky McGillicuddy t-shirt and pulled it over his scabby body.

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Paul Petowski pulled onto the highway and immersed himself in a sea of red taillights. He had two bottles of water and a full flask with his newspaper logo on it to accompany him on his epic journey to the suburbs at rush hour. Motivation: a radio ad heard during his lunch hour while driving to Mi Seow's Sensual Massage over on Western (where, the credit card statement will show, he paid for "1 hr. phys. therapy" and nothing more).

Tonight, fans had the opportunity to meet the home team's biggest pitching sensation in an intimate trading card shop. This would be no story if it were happening in the city. A few working dads would show up, maybe a few blue collars might stop in after their shift. But this was happening in the suburbs, the land of overbearing workaholic dads, moms with bad hair and worse 'tudes, and kids who follow sports with a Passion that would make Mel Gibson blush and, worse, haven't been told "no" since they tried to dump boiling pots of water on themselves as three-year-olds.

To Paul, this was gold. Sparky McGillicuddy's rise to future Hall-of-Fame status had been a bumpy one, paved with late nights, fist fights, broken furniture, and the cute little girl clown from the famous traveling circus. Paul adroitly chronicled it all. But it was

always second-hand source material. Sparky had yet to slip up in front of Paul and pave the way for a first-person report that would turn the Most Cherished Arm in Baseball into a groveling, begging noodle of a limb. But once, Paul was close.

Just a month before this rip-off-the-suburban-fat-cats exercise in capitalism, Paul had Sparky dead to rights at a hole-in-the-wall bar: the newlywed pitcher, barely a year removed from an E!-televised gush-fest with his luscious Captain Morgan girl, walked into Paul's view with an Indonesian kickboxing instructor on his left arm and a Filipina straight-to-video starlet on his right.

Sparky saw Paul, and for a moment he considered yelling "Stalkers!" to the bartender. But his wits, his iron-clad, World Series-caliber wits, prevailed. Sparky kept his 100 pounds of air headed American imported beauty on each arm. He didn't have to give up this score. Sparky knew Paul's kryptonite: drinking games.

The fifth shot clanged on the bar, spilling more contents than any self-respecting alcoholic could tolerate: the gauntlet was down. Paul eyed Sparky. His eyes were beginning to droop. It looked like something might come up. This stupid young punk, Paul thought, just let him pass out. Maybe he could still get a photog down here and snag a couple shots in time for the morning edition. Ha! Paul could see the headline: "FALLEN IDOL," puke running down Sparky's chin, catatonic dark-complected women napping on his \$60 million shoulder.

But Sparky, like the time he stared Giambi down on a 3-2 count, had an ace up his sleeve. Barry the bartender winked: "I call this one the tailing slurve," he said, in honor of Sparky's out-pitch. He set the concoction in front of the local sports expert who'd never played anything more exerting than Yahoo! Fantasy Sports. Paul closed his eyes, raised the glass, down the hatch. No problem.

Only that burn.

Barry smirked from behind the bar. It was the house specialty, given only to those out to make Star Patron Sparky look bad: Nyquil, Tabasco, liquid Ex-Lax. Half an hour later Paul was chained to the bar's brownish white throne, held captive by his tormentor's dose. No story would be written tonight. Write it tomorrow? Please. We live in a 24-hour-or-less news cycle. Tomorrow, the story would be old and implausible, in the public's eye a thoroughly fictional concoction worthy of Jayson Blair's most vivid wet dream.

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Sparky was under siege. Three-hundred people at Tyke's? Try three-thousand. They even had a hospitality tent set up outside, serving up brats and beer and fueling the latent frustrations of fathers living vicariously through their twelve-year-old All-Star team captains. The average grade-level of screaming throng was six, and the average t-shirt was Sparky McGillicuddy...or Harry Potter.

"And there was a benefit at Key Nine Zero Zero tonight!" Captain Morgan Girl McGillicuddy whined as the limo idled, waiting for a wave-through from security.

"You signed a commitment, Sparky," the lawyer in Armani said. "If you only want to sign three-hundred, you have recourse there. But you have to go in."

Sparky swallowed hard.

"They have a back entrance don't they?"

They didn't.

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Some dads were getting impatient, and the line lurched like a castrated dog in the vet parking lot. But the Hogwarts set didn't mind. They were about to meet Sparky McGillicuddy—to quote the radio ad, LIVE AND IN PERSON!

"Sparky! Sparky!" yelled a peeling-chapped-lips chubby kid. "I wrote you a letter! It says all about you and how you made me what I want to be when I grow up! I want to be a big league pitcher like you, Sparky!"

The peeling-chapped-lips kid forced a frosting-stained envelope into Sparky's hands. Sparky nodded politely, thinking "Eliminating Ho-Ho's from the diet, and grabbing some Blistex, would be a step in the right direction."

"You're my best favorite player of all-time, Sparky!" the kid bellowed, as he was lead away by his red-faced father, who really more resembled an inflatable chair with a couple beer holders than a respectable man. Sparky discreetly slid the envelope onto a quickly overflowing wastebasket between his monstrous thighs. "Forty-two down, two-hundred and fifty-eight to go," whispered the lawyer in Armani.

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A lonely-looking older woman handed Sparky a worn pair of team emblem boxers that smelled a little like the Dirties bin in the stadium's changing area. Dirt and Tobacco Spit and Blood and More Tobacco Spit. Sparky guessed her husband treated the family hamper like the Dirties bin. But Sparky had to sign those boxers.

An entrepreneur pulled trading cards out of his jacket and had Sparky sign them. Then, without leaving the line, he tried to disguise himself by "discreetly" slipping on a pair of sunglasses and a fake mustache and choking out a contrived accent worse than Schwarzenegger's Californian. Sparky just nodded at his lawyer in Armani, who had the man whisked away as if his library record showed excessive borrowing of Osama bin Laden's "Guide to Gathering a Bunch of Guns and Crazies with Your Parents' Money."

A fourteen-year-old girl, wearing a tube-top with Sparky's number in the cleavage and ballplayer eye black in lieu of mascara, leaned forward seductively and began to slip out a breast. Sparky looked over his shoulder for his Captain Morgan Bride as he readied his pen. The girl's father was too transfixed with Sparky to notice what his daughter was doing until the woman next to him clocked him in the head with her purse. "Sir! Your daughter!"

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Two hundred and ninety-nine down. Chicken pox-scabbed Tim Tromay to go.

Tim's face was puffy, like a day-old bowl of cereal. His mom pushed him gently in the lower back. She'd waited four hours for this. Let's get it on, kid.

Tim stepped forward. Looked at the ground. Looked up. Cleared his throat. It was still a little scratchy. But sitting at the table, like a Great King on a folding cafeteria-table throne, was his hero. Sparky McGillicuddy.

Sparky looked up. His heart jumped a bit, like the organ is prone to do when the eye registers something alarmingly unusual. He'd heard the Garbage Pail Kids were being revived, but did they have to send a live one? This kid had puss-oozing yellow craters all over his face. And green fluid plugs stuck out of his nostrils like champagne corks made of seaweed.

Tim stepped forward. Held out his hand. Sparky weakly reached for it, instinctively. Just one more, he thought. But Tim pulled the hand back at the last second. Took his hand and wiped loose drool from the corners of his mouth, then took the slimy hand right up Broadway, right over those squishy nose plugs. The back of his hand glistened in the fluorescent light. Then, he shot it back towards his hero for a shake.

Apparently, Sparky was the only one who saw this breach of etiquette. The Armani lawyer and Captain Morgan Girl were engaged in close conversation. Everyone else was facing Sparky's table, looking at Sparky, wondering why Sparky was stonewalling this poor kid, this kid who looked so sick and my God did he have cancer or something and maybe Sparky will say something to inspire us and melt our hearts and—

Sparky looked at Mrs. Tromay. He remembered Armani lawyer's advice: "If you're ever in a lose-lose situation, one you can't get out of, and you know the next thing you say may damage you irreparably, find the closest woman in the room. Pretend she's your mother. And just speak to her. Speak to her like you would your mother."

Sparky's voice quivered. Mrs. Tromay's eyes glistened.

"Can I have some ice cream?" he peeped.

Mrs. Tromay wrinkled her brow.

"Um....my son just paid \$50 to meet you. I think he wants an autograph."

Now Armani lawyer was involved. He saw eyes in the room slicing through his client. He heard angry murmurs gurgling about the ocean of eager Sparky watchers. He saw Paul Petowski, that bastard columnist, inching his way to the front like a slug through moist trash. With a digital camera.

"Hold on," Paul squeaked. "This will be perfect for the paper." Revenge is a dish best served—

Paul centered the camera. Sparky stood up suddenly, fleeing the slime-coated hand in front of his face. Armani was by his side, fully aware of the crisis at hand.

"You're doing good," he whispered in his stud pitcher's ear, standing on his tip-toes. "And it looks like he's scabbed over. You'll be OK. Pat him on the back."

Sparky looked back in horror.

"Scabbed over?" The whisper was no longer containable. "This kid has chicken pox?"

Armani lawyer kept it low.

"Talk to mom, talk to mom, talk to—"

Mrs. Tromay stepped forward. Tim had a lost look in his eyes, still mesmerized by Sparky's presence.

"Don't do this to my boy. Look at him, look how happy he is," Mrs. Tromay said, patting her son's curly hair. "And he's scabbed over."

Paul peeked out from behind his camera's viewfinder. Squinted a little, though he wasn't really looking at anything but Captain Morgan Girl's Prada-concealed rack.

"Yeah, definitely scabbed over," Paul yelled, wondering what color bra Sparky's wife was wearing.

The crowd murmured in agreement.

Sparky was cold. Sweating. Definitely not the guy who, just two nights ago, stared down the league's home run champ like a starving lion contemplating the Trix Rabbit. For his adoring masses, this was like seeing the Pope stepping out of a porn booth.

Sparky whispered in panic to his lawyer in Armani, "Mom said I'd die. I've got this weird immune thing. If I get chicken pox I might die. I spent first and second grade in private tutoring 'cuz they were afraid I'd catch it."

Big bad security men led Sparky's mad dash for the parking lot. He met Captain Morgan Girl McGillicuddy in the limo and she held his head all the way back to the city as he sobbed. Paul got his exclusive, and his headline: "McGillicuddy Hits Showers Early with Sick Child at Plate."

But Paul's sweet revenge only lasted until Sparky's next scheduled start. Then, the team's loyal denizens were caught up in a different panic. Sparky missed two months with a mysterious ailment: he thought he had chicken pox and was going to die. Finally, team management demanded the equipment staff dismantle all mirrors in and around the clubhouse. With no place to closely examine every reddish mark on his body, Sparky McGillicuddy pulled his cap down tight and took the mound. He threw a no-hitter that night, and went on to fulfill his Hall of Fame promise. Paul Petowski was digging dirt in the minors within two years.

Sparky took a trip to Niagara Falls to celebrate his Hall induction. On the Maid of the Mist boat, an 8-year-old unleashed a massive sneeze, and the wind blew a few choice germs up Sparky's nose. He caught chicken pox, and died three weeks later.