



Tales From Chet Waggoner

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“...when Harry arrived, [Coach] Downs allegedly approached Keith Reese, 8, the hardest thrower on the team. ‘Mark told me to warm up with Harry,’ Keith testified. ‘Mark told me that if I hit Harry in the face with the ball, he’d pay me \$25, and then Harry would be out of the game.’”

“A Pennsylvania Tee-ball coach is charged with conspiring to injure a disabled child,” *Sports Illustrated*

This explains so much.

I’d always blamed myself before, chalked it up to my shortcomings, my lack of size, my two left feet, my inability to maintain the discipline necessary for an effective steroid regimen. What if I’d only wanted it more? What if I’d only tried harder? Maybe I could have had a shot at a scholarship and “the Show” instead of fizzling out as a fourth grader on the bench of PressGamey Associates. Instead, I blew it. Or so I thought.

Now it’s clear that it wasn’t my fault at all. There’d been a plan. It wasn’t *me* who’d muffed that fly ball at the Chet Waggoner Little League “Majors” Tryouts. It wasn’t *my fault* that the ball hit me in the face, causing me to stumble around the outfield as the imaginary ghost runner sauntered round the bases. And while I may have borne some responsibility for the girlish throw to the infield that followed, it goes without saying that I might have had a little more zip in me in I hadn’t been convinced I was going to be spending the rest of my life burdened with a glass eye, undoubtedly within the confines of Chet Waggoner’s “Minors” system.

The fix had been in. Someone with low motives and a little money had gotten into the pockets of the man who hit the balls, and the resulting spin, well paid for, had taken my potential for the bigs right with it.

Unfortunately, the pattern didn’t stop there. Reminiscing further, I realize that other things have gone wrong during my lifetime, things that I chalked up to bad luck at the time, but that in hindsight chill me with their intricate planning and cold efficiency.

The lay-in I threw into the bottom of the basket during fourth grade basketball tryouts? Ms. W. must have slipped me a non-regulation ball. The bunt I was too scared to lay down while trying to make the seventh grade team? I bet Mr. R. had some incentive, perhaps liquid, to fireball my knuckles. It seems telling that the only sport I had some success in was youth soccer, which must have flown under my mysterious malefactor’s radar as thoroughly as it did the American public’s.

This negative influence occasionally extended beyond the athletic sphere. How else could the Clay High School Pom Squad’s stubborn refusal to seduce me be explained? In whose pocket lies the real reason for my rejection from Harvard Medical School? And why, I must ask, isn’t this article funnier?

Indeed, although the Harry described in the article and myself may not have much in common, I can fully understand his plight. After all, couldn’t the definition of disabled reasonably be extended to not being able to compete at the lowest levels of youth sports? Hath not I a foot to dribble a basketball off? If I misplay a grounder and it smacks me in the nose, do I not bleed?

Reading the article further, my outrage only deepened, particularly when the detail regarding young Harry’s “thick glasses” surfaced. What kind of a coach tells a player to intentionally hurt a disabled kid with glasses by hitting him *in the face*? Doesn’t he know how pissed off your parents get when you break those things? Probably not, I’d guess, as anyone who’s grown up wearing glasses has generally been teased enough to be able to let the less fortunate they encounter in their lives go by without hitting them in the face with things.

I mean, if you're looking to take out a disabled kid, and he's wearing glasses, wouldn't it have been easier to just take the glasses? Or lock him in a bathroom? Or maybe throw his cleats into a tree? Couldn't the coach, a grown man and presumably disabled only in the emotional sense, have come up with a plan that didn't involve assault? Even the kid enlisted to be the hatchet-man shied away from the face-smashing side of things, having the inherent decency to hit Harry in the groin instead. No one was ever yelled at by his parents for crushing his testicles.

In the end, what I took away from the article is that we all have our own Coach Downs hiding in the shadows, paying children to engineer our defeats. And the only thing that we can do, particularly as children, is wait to grow up and move on to better lives. And then, one day in the far future, a special realization will come to us, that realization being that Coach Downs is now an old, defenseless man. And then we can kick his ass.

For Harry's sake.