



Sigh One, You're Out!

by Perry A. Chapdelaine and Roger Grimsley

Their two suns burned my skin like a blistered grapefruit, but I wasn't sweating just from radiation. When a .71 hitter like giant Henry O'Hara Steps out of the box twice before the first pitch, a manager gets nervous.

"Play ball!" That metallic monotone again!

The Adelbaran pitcher sucked the ball into its hideous folds of tubular flesh. Then a streak of white "phtted" toward O'Hara. The catcher's pillow-sized stomach absorbed the pitch. Before the metallic umpire could call a strike, the Stigelian's stomach pushed the ball back out so fast I only heard it "zuk" into the pitcher's tubes, ready for another throw.

Naturally I called time and charged out of the dugout yelling.

Two of the umpire's eye-stalks swivelled to follow me, and my voice cracked for a second. Even when you've brought a team from a hundred and first to world champ in just five years, you've got nothing to prepare you to jawbone a robot. This one was a chrome-plated, five-sided job with built-in bullheadedness circuits and an eye-stalk on each side, and another pair at an angle to each of those. Just the same, I pushed my face a couple of inches from his two wavering optics and bellowed my best.

"That pitcher ain't human! I didn't come two hundred light-years to see my boys hacked by a bunch of bug-eyed creeps!"

The umpire's back-side eye-stalk joined the watching pair. a protective flange rotated inward at his middle, exposing a small compartment from which the translated Official Book of Baseball Rules, 2116 Revision, slid forward, held by telescoping digits. Of course, he had these rules coded in his memory bank, and I'm sure the ritual of producing an actual honest go gosh printed book was for my benefit, kind of like a monstrous put-down.

He flapped through all the pages before his voice drummed, saying, "There's nothing in the rules against bug-eyed creeps. Play ball!"

I swear there was a malevolent gleam in those optic fibers!

It was hard, but I kept bellowing the best I could to keep my image up. "My boys can't hope to hit that ball. Humans don't have reflexes to match monsters!"

"Your Terran politicians didn't consider that before challenging the Galactic Empire?" there the opposition team's manager — it or whatever — sat, like a metal ammo dump with eyes.

As to the umpire, well, I've seen blocky, tough umpires before, but — well — what could I do? I stumbled back to the dugout and Willie Pedro, that small, wonderful Puerto Rican athlete, psied me some water. I held it over my head with mind-lift, and then let it roll over my hair, down my eyebrows, and across my face.

"Play ball!"

Hank stepped back into the batter's box. The Galactic Allstars' second pitch zipped by, too fast for any human.

"Strike two!"

"Phtt!"

"Strike Three!"

O'Hara, a hulking man who could anything on Earth, still hadn't swung.

"Damn the politicians!" I shouted, my mind leaving the play for a second.

The UN President's pitch had been simple. "Earth is new in space, and you've got the greatest baseball team in history. If you can beat a team of Galactic Allstars, Terran's status will rise perceptibly, and there's no way but up it can go."

Besides, there was the tempting offer of the billion dollars, which was sizeable despite a century of



inflation.

“Strike three!”

My attention snapped back, because the boys were already climbing over me to reach the field. Then I just sat there stupefied. Going down to nine straight pitches without a single swing had unnerved me, and obviously everybody else.

Lefty Juarez took the mound like he'd forgotten he'd just pitched eighteen consecutive perfect games in the World Series. His first warmup toss was so wild Loveill Arroyo had to chase it almost to the dugout.

Lovill spun to snap the ball to second in the style that gave him highest throw-outs in 1,002 consecutive attempts to steal from first. Instead of slamming in, the ball slipped off the end of his fingers and arced to second like a balloon filled with helium, it was that slow.

Ron Wilson, with the world's record for unassisted putouts, held out his glove and let the ball drop to the ground a foot in front of him. By then Johnny Schulte had made it to short still shaking his head over his first strike-out in three seasons.

Even Joe Walker, errorless in right field in 1,211 straight games, couldn't find the handle.

The rest were just as bad.

We were inferior, and we knew it.

Dick Garcia in center got hold of himself first. “Hey, hey, you guys! Get with it! All we gotta do is get three of ‘em out.”

Hlank O'Hara in left caught Dick's sharp throw, and, with returning confidence, whipped it to Schulte, now awake at short.

“O.K. Big Bat! Johnny and I'll get on next time around and you can add another homer to your 400 for the year.”

Don Dominick played along, pretending to take a lead off first the way he'd learned to when stealing most of his 312 bases.

I checked Willie Pedro at third. He'd never completely lost the kind of cool that had made him leader in assists for years.

We started feeling like the world's finest again. By the time the ump stepped behind Arroyo and called “Play ball!” somebody had even remembered that nobody on their team had ever seen a baseball before the galaxy had contacted earth for the first time just a year ago.

Their first batter, a Reilander, wheeled into the box, and Lefty put everything he had in a first pitch strike. Usually my big mouth works faster than my brain, but I couldn't speak. That ugly swung what looked like seven or eight bats parallel across the plate and the ball was lost beyond the left fence before we even heard the sharp “cruunk.”

I jumped onto the field, shouting, “Those aren't bats, they're arms and legs!” I bellowed even louder as I plunged like a shark toward the umpire. “Illegal! He didn't have a bat! He ain't playing baseball!”

Eye-stalks swiveled toward me even as The Book popped out again. There was a quick pretend scan, then a sarcastic voice: “There's no rule saying that a player cannot grow bats.”

“Listern, you — “ I stopped short, remembering that robots have no mothers. Then I recovered. “There's no rule because everyone knows baseball is played with manufactured bats, constructed to specification.”

I suppose there was thinking during the pause, but I prayed for gears to clash or electrons to jolt.

“Yes — there are such inferences,” it grudgingly confessed. “Every picture in my storage bank shows the batter swinging a manufactured bat. HMMMM — Even weights and sizes are specified. Still —.” It thumbed backward through the rules again, and I kept my trap shut.



“Ah, yes. it says, ‘If batter is hit by pitched ball, batter takes first base.’”

In thunderous tones, the umpire ruled, “Home run not allowed. Batter struck by pitch takes first base.”

I just stood there stunned.

The next batter — I swear it — was a jelly-shaped platter standing on end. He/it extended a pseudopod to swallow a manufactured bat and beat both against the ground several times before disgorging it part way and then slurping up to the plate.

Lefty’s pitch was high. Even so, the batter stretched spaghetti-tall and picked it off easy. The ball arched high toward centerfield fence. I leaned back, confident that Dick Garcia would grab it. When the ball hit the fence’s edge and bounced into play, in one motion Dick scooped it up, pivoted and hurtled it to Willie Pedro, who tagged the Reilander out short of third and then threw to second.

Ron Wilson tagged the jelly-plate for the double-play.

I felt better when the stands warbled, croaked, screamed or whatever. Maybe those politicians hadn’t been so dumb, I thought, watching some of the fans flying around the field in their excitement.

The Galactic Allstars’ third batter looked oddly fuzzy even under field glasses. Lynwood Comiskey, our batboy, snapped a Hologram and we both gawked at it. This fellow’s atoms must have been loosely packed and traveling fast, because the shutter speed was a 1/1250 and the image was still blurred.

I signaled Juarez for his fast ball, figuring that high velocity would counteract the vibrations.

It may have been my imagination, but I swear that the ball split into plastic core and covering, and both pieces were still climbing when they sailed over the center-field fence.

From then on each of their players rolled or oozed or materialized to bat, and one pitch was all it ever took for another of their home runs.

I went to the mound to talk to Lefty, but there wasn’t any reason to pull him. No one else could have done better than he was doing. Every pitch he’d thrown was exactly what he and Arroyo had agreed to do.

Two hours into the bottom of the first they still had one out to go. Then, at 117 to 0, Don Dominick made a diving catch that was something superhuman to behold, when a creep got cute and bunted, and we were finally up to bat a second time.

Managers aren’t supposed to have feelings, so I hid mine when Lovill Arroyo stepped to the plate, expecting three quick “phhtts.” The ball rocketed in and Arroyo went down, out cold, like a stone.

I yelled, “My God! They’ve killed him!” and I charged from the dugout.

Lovill got up with a grin, knocking dust off as he turned to trot to first. “Ask Willie,” he whispered to me.

Pedro explained that they had put a layer of shin-guards under their uniforms. “The Reilander stuff made it legal,” he said.

Joe Walker and Don Dominick leaned into their pitches too. With bases loaded, no outs, and Willie on deck, the whole dugout heaved a long sigh of relief. Like yawning, I guess, it was catching. When Willie stepped up to the plate, overstuffed with shin-guards, his chest heaved and his breath came out in a low, barely audible sigh.

“Earth forfeits the inning!” the barrel-headed umpire shouted. Several of its eye-stalks waved wildly. An armored door opened, and out popped the ubiquitous rule book, again for my benefit, I presume.

“Rule ten specifically forbids sighing!” it blandly explained.

Now I’d followed baseball since before the union of the American and National Leagues and never, never in all that time had I heard of a team penalized for expressing a sigh of relief! In fact, there



wasn't even a rule against expressing loudly about an opponent's parentage!

On the run toward the umpire, I grabbed my copy of The Rule Book, and flipped it open to rule ten. Nothing there had changed. Rule ten merely said that "Any use of psi, deliberate or accidental, shall be penalized by immediate forfeiture of the inning in which the offense occurs, erasing even those runs which may have been legally scored during the inning."

That rule hadn't been invoked for eighteen years. If anybody was to use mind-lift to influence a game, fans would psi the stands down.

I wasn't really mad when I bellowed at old Chrome's fifth eye: "'Psi' and 'sigh' are two different words, you grid brain!"

"Does not compute. A 'psi' is a 'sigh' in my phonetic programming."

I raised my voice above the ordinary bellow, as though I was talking to someone born without ears, which in a way I was. "Pedro was just breathing out." Breathing out is a 'sigh'." I pointed to the rule book, "This kind of 'psi' means moving things just by thought, you know, with bio-magnetically generated forces, like without the use of hands, er, appendages."

It trundled over to a globular robot standing near the dressing room door, and plugged into an opening. Several seconds later it trundled back, saying, "Sorry. The commissioner and I have scanned our memory banks in tandem and have found no reference to this so-called 'psi' phenomenon.

"Play ball!"

At the end of the seventh inning the score stood at 957 to 0. Nothing had left the stands, as all beings were still cheering, although we couldn't understand their weird enthusiasm over such a lop-sided game.

The boys' spirits had descended to rock-bottom, and I was about to throw in the bat, conceding the game. Then Lefty stepped up to the plate with that foolish grin that puckers up half of his face.

The ball started too fast for Earth muscles to tackle, saying, "pheet" instead of "phtt" so I figured the creeps were getting sadistic, using an even faster ball.

Instead, the ball slowed down and walked — I mean actually sashayed side to side — in slow motion toward lefty.

Lefty's grin widened. He waved his bat back and forth a few times defying that slow-moving ball to come until he was good and ready, then "Smack!"

That ball whistled over the center-field fence, and the crowd went wild, screeching, shrieking, and all.

I could hear the opposing manager calling foul as he jerked his way on insect legs toward the ump.

I rushed out, too, snatching my cap from the bench with mind-lift, just in time to hear that we were accused of "forcing a crawler."

The Book popped out for the ump's scan before he said, "No rule against ball crawlers. Besides, it was your pitcher's throw."

Lefty had already played the busher, rounding bases, waving his cap in the air, dancing a jig on third base, and turning somersaults home. That made the score 957 to 1, but I slumped back against the dugout wall, dreading the ruling on Juarez's use of psi.

None came.

Well, that did it!

Every one of the boys opened up their minds. By the time we made our third out, the score stood even — 957 to 957 — and the Galactic Allstars had run through twenty-eight pitchers.

By over confidence, and human error, we let the Allstars score five runs in the bottom of the eighth. So we still trailed by five entering the ninth.

Their new pitcher, from Biallia, had long, curving appendages, each tipped with rotating claws, an enormous advantage for curve balls.

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But mind-lift straightened every curve for five quick runs before their pitcher was yanked. The new arm was a tricky lump of dough from Mizellia. With each throw he created a jumble of images in the batter's mind.

O'Hara, by sheer luck, struck the real ball and sent it out over the left field fence. Later O'Hara explained that it was like watching a dozen lamp posts swung around during a good drunk, which he was quite used to, he said.

Their next pinch-hitter, a Herrerian, was a stretcher. It didn't matter much were we to mind-loft the ball, or how we held it. The Herrerian reached out and smacked it. It simply reached out and smacked it. We could shift him to fouls, but Lefty couldn't get the ball by. Worse yet, the Herrerian could stretch its leg from home plate to first without the rest of its body moving.

Finally Dominick learned to mind-lift its foot, making it go up and down like a long flay-swatter with first base as the wary fly. Don kept that foot-stretching up long enough for us to drop the ball to Walker for the throw to first and the out.

Their manager was learning to bellow like any Terran pro — almost as good as me, but of course I'd had a lot of practice over the years.

Grinning, I just psied more water over my head and leaned back, quite relaxed. With two more outs we'd be Galactic champions!

Old many-bats was next, but we made him trip over its feet until it had three strikes called against it.

Jelly-shape came up to bat stretching like a plastic sheet, determined to get nicked by a pitch so it could take first. Arroyo — bless his soul — psied holes in it over the plate and Lefty's fast balls streaked straight through the monster.

We had the game!

The intergalactic crowd made noise like the philharmonic tuning up. Even the umpire grated out a reluctant congratulations.

The Allstars oozed and rolled and one way or another got over to us to thank us for a great game.

When their manager waved a feeler in a genuinely friendly goodbye, we came straight away right to the Terran embassy.

There were a few things we felt that our Ambassador should know.

Line-up for Terran Ballplayers

Henry O'hara
Left Fielder

Dick Garcia
Center Fielder

Joe Walker
Right Fielder

Johnny Schulte
Shortstop

Ron Wilson
Second Baseman

Willie Pedro
Third Baseman

Lefty Juarez
Pitcher

Don Dominick
First Baseman

Lovill Arroyo

Batting Order



Lynwood Comisky
Batboy

Catcher

SIGH ONE, YOU'RE OUT! 6

Henry O'Hara Don Dominick
Johnny Schulte Willie Pedro
Dick Garcia Ron Wilson
Lovill Arroya Lefty Juarez
Joe Walker