

WHEN SAND MADE CASTLES by David Knuckles

Like caged animals we played their game, with middle aged angst and vile breathing on us through each chain link.

“I swear on the Bible that ball bounced!” One parent yelled to Donnie, for baseball and religion were one and the same in the Matthews community. And to them, in the late innings of that July night in 2004, it felt like some kind of unnecessary purgatory.

A crowd gathered while the sky grew dark, as all the other games that evening had come to an end. After winning their first game, Dilworth had found themselves a game away from advancing to the final four of the little league district tournament, which would be held on their home field, Whittington Field. But first we had to beat Matthews, a herd of twelve year old cattle. They had kids like Sam Fulginiti and Kurt Semeniuk, names that connote father of four, breadwinner. These children lifted weights, in the offseason they played on the same AAU teams, some of them even playing for their middle school on fields much bigger than little league regulations. They had the best equipment – \$200 gloves, \$300 bats, and thousands toward lessons and camps. They were spoiled to the core, all in the name of baseball. It started young, as it had for their older brothers; you first won districts, then played high school ball for Charlotte Christian where you would win multiple state championships and get recruited by a division one school that had a chance to make it to the College World Series to be noticed and drafted by a major league team. It was all a part of the plan – they just had to first beat Dilworth.

Familiar faces from around the league, from around our lives were there to support us. My doctor was even there. We held comfort in Donnie Haston being the game’s head umpire. Donnie was the owner of Andrew Roby Construction, a long time sponsor in Dilworth. He had coached Roby for twenty five years, winning eleven championships, the first one as early as 1974. His son Brandon had won the award for Most Valuable Player back to back years in the early nineties and his son Jonathan finished out the decade with an MVP of his own. During the Donnie Haston era, my mother had overhead a blood curdling cry from a woman who hopefully had a child playing for Roby. Her neck tilting back like a werewolf to the moon as she yelled out *ROBY NEVER DIES* – emphasizing each word as if it was her last. Since Donnie’s coaching days had ended, he had stayed involved, umpiring several games a week. He would drive up to Whittington in his bright red Chevrolet with Andrew Roby plastered across it’s doors, step out with his gold chain, tank top and cigarette and gear up while kids joyously hopped in his truck’s bed to greet him. A rumor that kids ran with was that he had one glass eye, his right eye, which would explain the infamous “Donnie Strike” – roughly a foot outside, usually low, disappearing from his sight line just before he heard it reach the catcher’s mitt. You could only hope such hearsay wouldn’t become validated in front of the Matthews parents.

Jim B. Whittington Field perched atop an elevated corner of Freedom Park. Its brick structure supported the stadium-like seating, while the underground dugouts added a professional feel. A white

wooden board of the league's history, past champions and MVPs permanently displayed for all to acknowledge. Whittington carried a grandiose spectacle other youth facilities didn't attempt to hold.

On week nights kids would show up to the field even if they didn't have a game. They would spend a majority of the time partaking in games involving a tennis ball. Wall ball, pickle, stickball, you name it. Pickle was played beyond the outfield fence amidst the trees. One base was an old tree while the other was unseen from its roots, as one would have to bypass another tree to reach a squared wooden pole that appeared to have sprung up about three feet from the dirt. Splinters were risked as one would attempt to stop themselves at full speed. Whoever was the "pegger" would throw the ball in the air to themselves, hoping an opposing participant would be so bold as to take off to the other base.

Beyond the pickle set-up was a grassy hill of about a hundred feet until it reached the sidewalk which separated the grass from the park's lake. Here lie the stick ball field, though usually played with metal bats and tennis balls, as kids aimed for the lake with each swing. First base was represented by not just a nearby oak tree but the entire wooded area in which it covered, second base was down the bumpy hill nearly all the way to the sidewalk, while third base required one to run back up the hill at nearly twice the distance.

At the turn of the century kids were growing up steeped in Major League Baseball's steroid era. Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa were perpetually on replay as we watched Barry Bonds break record after record. His home runs left the stadium, entering the San Francisco Bay where kayaks sat with fishing nets, awaiting memorabilia. The iconography seeped into the culture of our amateurism. Swings were mimicked; McGwire's one-handed follow through, Sosa's one-hopped celebration, Griffey's compact fluidity, Bond's irritable gaze of self assurance. The home run had never been cooler. Trees acted as a measuring tool for past home runs. *So and so hit it over that tree. Over the flagpole. You see that white house?* Stories that seemed mythical until witnessed. It was only the names on the board, bygone MVPs – it was as if they were the only ones who lived on.

I wore number two because of Derek Jeter. I tried to run like him, throw like him; I chewed gum like Jeter, even mimicked him when I failed. With enough time in the sun I even thought I looked like Jeter. He was the respected leader of the team that always won. Derek Jeter was on cereal boxes and in Gatorade commercials. He dated the likes of Mariah Carey and was helmed the King of New York, all for doing the same thing I was doing. Jeter wasn't overpowering, or too much bigger than the dads I knew, he just seemed to have a few things figured out.

He'd co-author a biography early in his career in which he talked about growing up wanting to do one thing, play shortstop for the New York Yankees. And so he worked really hard and well you know, dreams come true as they say. I started doing the math. Counting the years until I'd be in his position, while also trying to figure out how long he had left. I wouldn't dare want to take his place. And wait, if he wore number two, what number would I wear? I would need my own identity.

My sister won an MVP while playing softball for Dilworth. I found myself staring at her plaque years later. It looked just like ours, only they didn't have a white board. My dad coached my sisters for a decade or so. My earliest memories are of running around with the other younger siblings. My best friend, Mary Stuart, or Tootie as we called her, was usually there. We ran around, threw things, spied on people. We chased each other during the day and fire flies at night. If any other siblings were there we'd start up a game of wall ball or tag or something like that. James Snover was around a lot. He had

a little brother named Charles, crazy, would make eye contact with you and start running; he'd jump on your back like a wild mongoose until you found a nearby tree to pry him off.

The girls would play down at the lower fields of Freedom Park. A man they called Chick always mandated the fields voluntarily. He would help coach softball and baseball for decades, but seemed to be best at cutting grass. One Christmas my sisters got new roller skates, or maybe bikes. They went to test out their new wheels at the park only to find Chick cutting the then beige grass. Chick was a tall, wiry kind of guy that stood with a hunch. He was intimidating as hell; filled with fire, from another time – yelled things like *I've seen better hands on a snake!* He was never smiling but always joking.

Less often, Ryan Conrad would come around. He was a little older, had more things going on. He played basketball and baseball like the rest of his family. I had the feeling he was good, you could just tell. His sister Carrie was a superstar, played for my dad for years; always pitched, played shortstop, batted first, wore number one – we depended on her. I listened to my dad break down each game while previewing the next. *Is Carrie pitching? Okay good.* Ryan and Carrie came from a family of jocks; the older brother Branden played basketball at the University of South Carolina while their father Bobby was in Clemson's Hall of Fame for his time playing basketball.

I didn't know much about Ryan but I was already looking up to him. I didn't really know why. Maybe because he was already playing at Whittington, in the "major leagues" of youth baseball. They said it was a mile from the lower fields, or maybe it was half a mile. What happened up there? All I knew was everyone was huge and had really nice uniforms. What happened on the way there? At age five I began to grow curious, while venturing in that direction I joined a game of cricket run by adults struggling with my language. They were very nice, I tried to explain. They said I was good.

For many years Dilworth only had one softball team. They played the representatives of other leagues, often traveling to the podunk parts of town to face teams twice as devoted and half as hygienic. They didn't like some teams more than others. Dilworth hated Myers Park Trinity. Perhaps it was because they were our neighbors, the most like us.

In 2000, our softball team won the district tournament. The only Dilworth team to ever do so, to my knowledge. They'd advance to the state tournament in Fayetteville, the armpit of North Carolina, where Dilworth would lose to teams more serious. They would first beat Myers Park Trinity in the district championship. There had been rain delays – not much of a crowd. It was late. I had school the next morning. I can picture the end; the wet field, the ground ball in-between Ally Lacey's legs allowing Dilworth to score the winning run in extra innings. Ally Lacey. I heard that name a lot. She must have been good, or obnoxious. Her father co-hosted a popular morning radio show and her brother John Lacey was my age. I adopted the hate from the softball years each time I played Myers Park in All Stars, wanting to strike out John in particular.

Dilworth's softball program would eventually combine with Myers Park to make enough for a team, fizzling out a few years later. The championship in 2000 wasn't included on the white board but I've seen the pictures so it must have happened. I've seen the final play too. The one that replays in my mind. It's late, the field is wet, and Ally Lacey just missed it.

In the spring of 2001 I was nine years old and eligible to be drafted to a major league team. Two coaches would reach out showing interest in me, Mitch and Rick Payne. Mitch coached FN Thompson, the team that would end up winning the championship that year, and Rick coached UVest, Ryan Conrad's team. But there was an opportunity for my dad to coach me in the minor leagues and we

figured that was probably the best fit at the time. Only two nine year olds got a head start in the majors that year anyways. Mitch drafted a kid named Wilder and Rick Payne took Odell Turner. I wasn't ready, I couldn't possibly have been ready. But were they? Everyone else was with me down in the minors. We had a nice little team that year, called ourselves the Bulldogs for some reason. Guys I'd play with for years to come were on that team, like Forest Wirz, our dads played basketball together every Sunday, and Rick's son, Hunter Payne who was a year younger than I. Metromont was the best team in the minors that year. They wore all black and had an eleven year old named Quan Anthony. Quan dominated with leisure, laughed at us the entire year. Why wasn't he in the majors? There must have been some kind of misunderstanding.

The following fall I'd play in the major leagues. Though my permanent team wouldn't be known until the spring season, I'd finally be playing at Whittington Field, for Coachman Cleaners. Coachman wore orange jerseys, and I even had an orange mouthguard to match. I'm not even sure why I wore one, no one else did. Maybe because Tootie's dad was a dentist? I don't know. I would say that I had chosen the orange mouthguard because of Coachman but I had it in previous seasons, where my team's colors would clash with my highlighter smile. Maybe I had a prolonged orange phase, destined to fit in with Coachman.

Coachman had some good young players, like J.D., they seemed to be set up well for the next couple years. Pronounced as three letters and written as four, J.D. Ey had a name more suited for a private detective, or perhaps a new vacuum cleaner; not a ten year old boy, but it fit him, it fit him more than it probably ever would. J.D. was barely older but was no peer of mine. Our one year difference felt like ten, just as the two years behind Ryan Conrad felt like fifteen. J.D. seemed to do everything well, therefore had the confidence to do it. I recognized then that he was the exception. I couldn't compare myself to J.D., none of us could.

Our coach was Steve Spradling; I liked him a lot, made me feel comfortable in an intimidating environment. His son Tyler Spradling would be twelve in the spring and Steve would stop coaching once he aged out. But even with Steve's future replacement unknown, I was ready to continue my career, playing for Coachman.

2002: The (Im)perfect Season

I remember taking a bath. The phone rings – a conversation of good news – my mother knocks on the door to tell me that I've been drafted.

By who?

Ste–

I remember the *Ste–*

I anticipated the *Ste–* that's who she had been talking to after all... Steve Spradling.

Steel Fab!

Steel Fab? Who the hell was on Steel Fab? I felt nothing.

It had been inferred to me that if possible Spradling would draft me. I tried to figure out how each team did the previous season to determine the draft order. Had Steel Fab done better than Coachman? Or did they pick before, not giving Spradling the chance.

While each team held the name of a local if not national company, ours happen to supply fabricated structural steel. Steel Fab was coached by Frank McHugh, with Bob Shefte assisting. During my first practice, Frank asked my teammate John Ash to explain how the spring season was constructed, how a champion was decided. There were twenty games split into two halves of ten, and the winner of each half would meet at the end for the championship, John explained to me. Frank was like that, he suggested things, would meet us halfway and let us kids figure it out ourselves. One time we were getting beat pretty badly, enough to escape the moment with Frank in the dugout as I began to think of its end. He found me in the back of the dugout gathering my equipment. I wasn't scolded or given some sports cliché about how it wasn't over until it was over, but instead he asked if I knew what superstitious meant. I said no. He told me to look it up when I got home.

There was some talk about the previous season in which Steel Fab had almost won a half to make it to the championship. There was also talk about the dark cloud that was Frank's relationship with Donnie Haston. Coach McHugh had been thrown out of a game the previous season for arguing with the former Roby coach, perhaps adding gasoline to the glass eye rumor. The following years we'd see a more zen Frank McHugh, cursing under his breath before each gleaming inhale. I wondered where he had come from. I couldn't have guessed his age. I heard he had a son much older and a wife no more. I would later learn that Frank wasn't well liked among the other coaches. They'd say he was lazy, but I liked him. He didn't seem lazy to me, just kinda over it.

I was drafted with three other ten year olds, Frankie, Sammy Realon and Avery. I'd been playing with Frankie since tee ball and would play with Sammy and Avery for years to come. In 2010 I would watch Avery's youngest brother lead Steel Fab to their first championship.

Never before had our status held such importance. Never before had we been thrown amongst kids so much older, to be expected the same. You were either a rookie, not a rookie, or a twelve year old. We all wanted to be twelve year olds, they were to be revered. During my first year at Steel Fab, we were not all equals. Rookies were the runt of the group. After each practice and game we were told by kids who had been rookies the previous season to pick up the equipment or tend to whatever other chore was needed. I didn't blame them, they were probably excited to not be rookies anymore. It probably felt good to have their turn. I would do the same the following seasons. Baseball was the unified trait of the clique that was Dilworth Little League, and talent was the main measurement of acceptance. At least if you were good then you had confidence to converse with the others. You just couldn't be bad. If you weren't bad, then you were a part of it.

Coming off a championship, Mitch would draft a few kids my age, Forest being one of them, making John Wirz an assistant coach along with Chick whose son Charlie was also on FN Thompson. The following year he would draft John Blackmon who left another league to come play with his cousin. John would win Rookie of the Year and now has two boys of his own, soon old enough for Mitch's consideration. Mitch was a wise soul, seemed to speak in fables. He knew exactly what he was doing. He'd instruct you with a nod, let you know the two of you were in sync as long as you trusted him. Mitch wore these crazy shorts too – zebra print, polka dots, you name it – he even had them in pants too. Where'd he get these things? He must've had a dozen. Mitch could come across as intimidating to a rookie but once you saw his shorts all that went away.

Dee Hoover coached Long's Cleaners. Instructing by way of various idiosyncratic drills and techniques he must have learned from an old monk in a previous life, Dee was infamous around the

league for his unorthodox methods. He coached us during All Stars my first year in the league. We prepared with two-a-days in the dead of summer. We met in the parking lot before each game where he'd squirt honey and stuff a half a banana in each of our mouths. He'd have a secret language with his team. Shouting from the dugout you'd hear, *Chicago! Larry! Larry! Twenty-three! Michael Jordan!* I didn't know what he meant by any of that. Perhaps no one on Long's did either. I'm not sure it mattered.

With the first pick that year, Roby would take Quan Anthony who would go on to be a no-brainer for Rookie of the Year. As good as Quan was he couldn't fix all Roby's problems, he'd only be there for one year. The Donnie era had ended and it looked like Roby might in fact be dying. Bob Morehead was now their coach whether you wanted him to be or not. Not too much bigger than his players, Bob made it his trademark to dress in full uniform; an attempt at commingling with the kids, or perhaps he saw it as a more professional approach. Roby had these ridiculous all red uniforms at the time too, even the pants. They couldn't hide if they wanted to. Poor guy – it didn't help that his team was so bad, but he had to take it so goddamn serious. Bob Moorhead had facial hair that blended in with his face, like an old terrier. He barked like one too. An outwardly humorless guy, old school, made you miss tee ball. I felt for his son, Saxby. It seemed to be one of those father-son coaching deals that hadn't worked out. Saxby was good, but had some real duds for teammates. Had a rookie named Alex Olynick who when they'd run laps, the twelve year olds would pick up and throw over the fence. It was a different time.

I would earn my stripes my rookie season, eventually batting first in the order. Playing Roby one Saturday, they had to stop play for a few minutes after I hit the first pitch of the game directly off Saxby's shoulder. Saxby was in pain, yes, but it felt like a moment of silence for me, a chance for all to welcome me to the league.

Sponsored by UVest Financial Services Group Incorporated, UVest donned yellow shirts under their mesh green vests and had white beltless pants with green pinstripes. Rick Payne had been coaching UVest since his eldest son played in the mid-90s, where he had won two championships already. Rick was a dignified presence around the league. I realize now the intimidation lie merely in his success, as Rick couldn't have been nicer. He wore Oakley sunglasses, a greying brown mustache, and long jean shorts. I was taken aback when finding out Coach Payne wasn't being paid for this and had a full time job outside of UVest. He seemed to live and breathe it – his wife even worked for UVest Incorporated. And now, at nine years old, Hunter was playing for UVest. Hunter had a similar upbringing thus far in that he had been tagging along going to his father's games and practices for years before being old enough to play for him. We'd distract each player before being shoo'd away by our dads. We were mascots. I spent a couple summers with Hunter, saw his basement full of Dilworth memorabilia. He had stories from the past, first hand accounts of former MVPs. About how Ryan Conrad swung his bat over and over as he spit, trying to make contact with his own saliva to improve his bat speed; or how Jerwalter Patterson, a UVest alum and two time MVP from the nineties, now worked down the street at Lupie's Cafe.

Hunter would hit a home run his rookie season. He shocked the entire league – hit it off a twelve year old on Long's named Hart. No one really believed it. He was pretty puny at that age and many twelve year olds couldn't manage to get one over themselves. A picture on the front page of the

website informed me the next morning. Hunter's mouth wide open in shock as he ran around the bases. Hunter didn't mind bringing up the incident throughout the next few years. It gave me assurance, that if Hunter hit a home run when he was nine, surely I would get my moment.

2002 was competitive for only a few teams, a couple teams held hope, but only one stood a chance. UVest was led by a now twelve year old Ryan Conrad. His expressions more mature than his stature, Conrad fit the ideology of a drifter; a folkloric figure who had hopped a freight train from parts unknown, chiseled a bat out of some lumber and molded a mitt from spare leather. Something classically mythical was in his grace. Performance aside, he had a leg up, that was understood. Often times little leaguers separate themselves from peers by mere genetics. They have thus far developed faster, therefore are stronger than the other kids. Athletic ability is an add-on, for even the remotely coordinated are found to have their moments if granted a size advantage. Usually these players reach their peak at an early age, perhaps when the playing field expands and the competition heightens. This didn't seem to be the case with Conrad. Size was not on his side; it seemed to be a baseball IQ, a competitive nature, or simply a swagger that gave him the upper hand.

There was no need for a championship that spring for UVest had gone 20-0, winning both halves. Since such an ending had felt dissatisfying to all involved except UVest, a tournament was constructed – just for fun of course, as UVest had solidified themselves as league champions. The tournament brought everyone to Whittington; wall ball and pickle games broke out, as attendance from players was plentiful. All participated in such juvenile activities, even Conrad, who as the tournament began, was involved in a heated pickle game in which he was struck in the eye. The injury was serious enough for him to miss the remainder of the season, allowing Roby to upset UVest in the championship game to win the impromptu tournament. I can still see Quan stepping on second base to end the game. No one quite sure on how to celebrate.

Was this a hit? Was someone on Roby to be blamed for targeting the league's Most Valuable Player? Perhaps they were fed up with losing and saw an opening. Rumors swirled the league then while conclusions on possible interior motives remain pending. The tournament was designed so that closing ceremonies would take place directly after the championship concluded. A photo of Conrad being presented his MVP plaque has been burned in my memory. Wearing sunglasses to bury the elephant in the room, to put on a happy face. There was something eerie about that photo, something sinister. Lynchian tonally as shady undercurrents were rising up, becoming too ugly to innocently gleam at the Rockwellian scene before us. Not unlike Al Capone getting his picture in the paper for opening up a soup kitchen – *something is off here.*

2003: The Chosen One

Returning to Steel Fab the following fall I wore our team's jersey to the first practice. Thick, embroidered navy blue cotton darkened under the late summer sun. Frank McHugh gave me a brief lesson on certain colors' resistance toward ultraviolet radiation. I understood, I suppose I wanted to make sure everyone knew I wasn't a rookie anymore. I finally had something I could wear that'd properly represent my status, that of a major leaguer.

J.D. was the league's knight in shining armor in knocking off UVest to disrupt what could have been a glutenous dynasty. Standing just under six feet tall, John Douglas Ey held a resemblance to Bobby Kennedy. He awaited his turn to lead. Everyone knew he was next, it was only a matter of what he would do with the opportunity. Rumors circulated the league in the fall of 2002. Many were saying that during his eleven year old season, J.D. had thrown too many curveballs (always a dicey subject when it came to the future arms of children), and therefore during the upcoming spring season he'd be wary of that, cutting out breaking balls entirely and losing a hair or two on his fastball. This was rather concerning for all anticipating his attempt to defeat UVest, who except for Conrad and a couple others, seemed to have everyone from their undefeated season returning. Perhaps the closest UVest came to losing in 2002 was against Coachman. Both Ryan and J.D. had pitched six shutout innings, forcing the game to go into extra innings. As the two stars had reached their weekly limit, pitching changes were made in the seventh. That's when Conrad hit a solo home run over the center field fence to win the game 1-0. Now with Ryan out of the picture, it was J.D.'s league.

During my eleven year old season I would try my hand at pitching. Melting in the southern air, confidence wailing, as mind and body not yet intertwined shook the nerves of inadequacy. What seemed like countless pair of skeptics' eyes rest on prepubescent shoulders. Time was called as Frank would walk to the mound and inevitably give me the adult version of what I already knew. And I suppose he did. Frank took a deep breath, prompting me to do the same, looked off into the distance and said *it's a beautiful day for baseball*.

Every team had great twelve year olds in 2003. We had Will Perlick, Miller Groome, and John Ash. Will was a good catcher, hit a few home runs too. He came from a militant family and was pretty hard on himself. His father Paul Perlick was the president of the league for a while and at one point had operated on President Reagan's hand. Miller was a great hitter and could play any position. He'd turn out to be one of my favorite teammates I'd ever have. He was loose, there was something in his water. It looked as if he would never age. No one had more fun than Miller. I'd usually bat behind John Ash, would try and emulate him. Our three veterans were comparable in talent but John seemed to represent us, he made Steel Fab cool. He was close with Ryan and J.D. and Saxby and all those older guys. As John accepted me the rest would soon notice.

Years later I would be sitting in a high school chemistry class when my teacher wouldn't grant me permission to go the bathroom. I suddenly remembered being told a story of my former teammate. John Ash was in a similar situation at his respected high school. Feeling like the boy who cried wolf when his teacher would not let him relieve himself, John decided to take up an offering on how much his classmates would give him if he proved the teacher wrong and went right there in his seat. Unknown to the final amount of his collection, but considering the reputation of his private alma mater and the end result, it was enough. The pockets of John's wet pants grew fatter that day as this stunt would allow him to live forever. Perhaps if I did the same, the story would somehow reach John Ash. Perhaps I too could live on. While the collection surpassed more than I knew, I froze in the moment and the story stopped there.

Long's was represented by Stewart Caldwell whom everybody called Pookie. Not out of jest, that was just his name. His father had money and a field named after him. Pookie's brother now coaches Steel Fab with Bob Moorhead as his assistant.

Along with J.D., Coachman had two other great twelve year olds. Toby Swimmer and Quint Mather. Toby was the spark plug, fast, batted first. And Quint was the best catcher in the league not

named J.D. I would later find out that Shefte and Frank would disagree on drafting Will Perlick. Bob wanted to go with Quint while Frank felt pressure in drafting the son of the league's president. What if Shefte had gotten his way? Perhaps we would have been better than Coachman. Could we have knocked off UVest? I have my doubts.

Coachman also had Rossi Brown, an eleven year old. I can only assume this is who Spradling drafted instead of me. And I can't fault him for that. Draft Rossi and you also got his younger brother, Ahmad. Or was Rossi already on Coachman as a nine year old? I don't remember him playing in the minors, nor do I recall being his teammate while on Coachman. Where had he come from? Rossi was better than me. He was the player I thought I was – Rossi was Jeter.

UVest had barely lost a step. They were now led by Jake Watson and Mason Todd. They were two sides of the same coin. Jake was polished, a continuation of Ryan; he looked like he'd been taking lessons with the Matthews kids. Or maybe he was just born with it. Probably both. Mason was all over the place, a wild card, but great – threw hard as hell, gas, as the kids say.

Wall ball turned into pickle which turned into friendly games of throwing tennis balls at moving vehicles. It was quite simple, a group of kids would back up, standing behind whoever was throwing. The kid holding the tennis ball would hide behind trees, awaiting the next passing car driving away from the field. As the car approached, the child would throw it as hard as he could ahead of the car, having it drive into the tennis ball. A car might then slam on its breaks – that's when you'd witness a stampede of children running serpentine through the trees feverishly brainstorming an alibi.

One time an ice cream truck was hit. The ice cream man stopped, got out, and ran after whoever was to blame. When found between two bushes, the ice cream man grabbed his arm as hard as he could, demanding to be brought to the perpetrator's parental guardian. The kid was staying with the Payne's at the time, therefore his guardian was Rick Payne. Hunter backed away slowly as the kid shook his head, refusing while his arm lost circulation, accepting whatever other punishment may come from the dirty old man with the dirty old truck, for nothing in that moment could be worse than the humiliation brought upon by the silent wrath of Coach Payne. The ice cream man soon gave up, not wanting to spend anymore time in the bushes holding onto the boy, who was me, the shrill siren forever tainted.

Tomfoolery would come to a halt whenever anyone notable was batting. Kids would appear from the trees; J.D. was up to bat, Jake Watson was up. The bigger the star, the more kids lined up. We would lean against the outfield fence until one of us dropped a tennis ball onto the field or the umpire stopped to wave us off. Ready to run, chase, for a returned game ball was worth one freeze pop. So we watched carefully, sure to not miss our chance at witnessing something beyond our abilities. If we told someone about what happened, then we too would be a part of the story.

You'd see the same faces at Whittington. Some faces I had seen long before Whittington. And they'd see you. Makes a kid feel famous when so many adults know him. Parents, young and old. Older siblings, former players. A middle aged man in a wheelchair, alone, watches every game, they say he once played for Roby. A team of volunteers working the concession stand wearing custom pink Dilworth shirts with CONSESSIONS TEAM confidently slapped on the back with one too many s's. The dad whose wife is dying of cancer but cracks his voice when shouting Go Dilworth to make us laugh.

Tim Simcox was our volunteer photographer while also handling the website. He had a kid on Coachman but held that role for years after his son aged out. We'd look over during a game and see that Tim had climbed atop the batting cage or was nestled in a tree to get the best shot of us. He was there

for every game, I guess he'd say he had to be. When we got bored we'd go look for Tim, talk to him for a while. It was sad when he moved away, hard to understand.

UVest and Coachman would each win a half and meet in the championship for a best of three series. I can remember Toby missing the championship. I believe soccer to be the reason. I can remember Hunter striking out to end the first game. And I remember J.D.'s arms extended in the air, holding up one finger as Coachman beat UVest again. It was LeBron James winning a championship for his hometown, minus the footage and fanfare, it was Leonidas leading three hundred Greek soldiers during the Second Persian War, minus the death and defeat. It was what everyone wanted to happen. Apocryphal with time, J.D. Ey was sure to live on. I'd go to high school with J.D., but the clearer image of him is in orange.

After the loss, I can remember Hunter expressing his disappointment in not winning all four years that he was league eligible. Having been only ten at the time, he was already foreseeing championships his final two seasons.

Every year a looming man with white hair and a Hawaiian shirt named Bill Cappleman would hold our attention, taking all the eleven and twelve year olds under a tree or a gazebo where no distractions could influence. We never saw him any other time but at the end of each year when he would explain to us fate and how it now rested in our hands. And pay attention because that white board is permanent and so is history. One day you will understand and let's hope you don't have regrets when you do. He would hand us a list. Recognizing each name, we'd find our own, making sure the universe had noticed. Rank your peers, we were instructed to do in so many words. This would not only determine your All Star team but the player with the most votes would be your league's Most Valuable Player.

J. D. Ey – 1, Jake Watson – 2; David Knuckles – 3, in case everyone else forgets about me.

The Class of 2003 were all cut from the same cloth – not just athletically, but psychologically. They seemed to enter a room with the same confidence. They didn't all play like J.D., or Jake Watson for that matter, but they were all good, seemed to be on the same level. Maybe this was how twelve year olds acted. This was how you felt when you were better than everyone else at something. They were close, looked as if they had been playing together since tee ball; they did things as a group, went to the same baseball camps. I went to a summer camp held at the Myers Park Trinity fields after the 2003 season. The camp was made up of only Dilworth and Myers Park kids. With separate lunch tables the two sides kept their distance all week, rarely conversing with the other, scrimmages breaking out at the end of each day between the two bloodlines.

I was the only eleven year old from Dilworth at that camp, luckily grouped with the twelve year olds – it was the whole All Star team. By the end of the week I felt like one of them, but not quite. One of them told me I should have made the All Star team, I think it was Saxby. Odell and Wilder were the only eleven year olds to do so. Would it have been different if I went to the majors when I was nine like Odell and Wilder did, instead of playing with my dad in the minors? Did Rossi make the All Star team too? I can remember closing ceremonies. Announcing Odell, Wilder, sometimes Rossi, sometimes not.

At camp the guys would talk about the approaching tournament, weighing their chances. We all knew their chances. Probably the best Dilworth had in a while, maybe the best chance we'd ever have.

I went to all their games – everyone did. They made it to the final four, allowing us to watch the remainder of the tournament at Whittington. It would be the most people I'd ever see there. Parents from every other league, pulling up in their minivans painted with players' names and numbers for all to judge; the usual Dilworth crowd, scattered among the masses. They would make it to the championship, inevitably playing Matthews. This seemed to be our only hope, as talent was sure to drop off tremendously in years to come. We held on until the last pitch when a large right hander wearing goggles hit one midway up the trees in right center field off Mason Todd for Matthews to win again. It was deflating, for me. I can't speak for Mason or anyone else on the team, but it felt like the beginning of the end. I stood next to the dugout and watched them sulk. *What now?*

That summer Hunter and I had been grousing about how the league was sure to not be the same once a new crop of twelve year olds such as myself took charge. "There aren't any more good pitchers." Hunter observed. "Except for you." He politely corrected himself. No, he had it right the first time. Or at least I think I knew what he meant – he didn't have to face Odell after all. There were fewer stars than ever. The color was fading as an era had ended.

2004: A Man Among Boys

During the 2001 Little League World Series, a kid from the Bronx named Danny Almonte received a substantial amount of media attention for being better than everyone else, and then an overbearing amount when it was revealed that Danny had surpassed the age limit and was a fourteen year old playing amongst twelve year olds. He was publicly caught living out a fantasy until multiple birth certificates surfaced and Almonte was outed as a cheater, while his mastermind coach hid in the shadows.

Mitch had a nine year old one year whose name escapes me. He was a tiny kid; hard for me to pitch against, the strike zone was so small. I ended up hitting him, right in the helmet. He was fine, though he went down hard. I stopped seeing him in uniform but instead he would show up to the field alone with a tennis ball. When I asked why he didn't play anymore he cited me as the reason. That shot to the head did it – he was out for good. I apologized but felt some sort of sick pride from it. I wanted others to know about this, that I ended someone's career, that I shouldn't be trifled with. Maybe this is how I'd live on.

Frank McHugh wouldn't be coaching my final season with Steel Fab. Instead, Bob Shefte would be taking over. He was the opposite of Frank, always irritable. Even in previous years as an assistant, John Ash would make up these stupid little songs and sing them until Shefte had fumes coming out of his ears. Bob was a jack-in-the-box, perpetually winding up.

I would see Frank at one game in 2004. His head peered above the fence in the distance as we ran toward him like a dad splitting custody. Shefte played nice, waving, tapping his foot until we returned. Frank looked okay on the other side, now retired. He was just another guy, alone, glistening in the past, looking for something.

The previous two seasons with Frank, Steel Fab had beautiful navy blue jerseys with a baby blue border, accompanied by classic grey pinstriped pants. For one reason or another, Bob Shefte decided to switch things up after taking office, replacing them with a new jersey that gave the allusion

that we were wearing vests. Grey pinstripes down the chest with navy sleeves, capped off with thick navy blue pants. It was fitting, UVest being the only ones with beautiful vests. And here was Steel Fab – *are those vests? Oh god no.* They were embarrassing. The clashing pants reminding one of Bob Moorhead's Roby. Shefte should have worn the uniform he so proudly designed.

I ought to make the most of these uniforms, salvage them somehow, for I'll be remembered in them forever. Now twelve years old, all numbers were available to me. I wore five the previous years as someone else had number two. But it could be mine now if I wanted it. I felt like a number one though. Ryan Conrad wore one, as did John Ash. After all, I would be our leader this year – I would be representing Steel Fab.

I arrived at the first practice not wearing the team's uniform, but immediately taking charge. I grabbed a bat and started hitting ground balls to Sammy Realon while the rest of the team warmed up in the outfield. I wanted everyone to know where I stood, apart from the rest. Sammy's dad had turned into a hitting guru seemingly overnight, and with a brand new bat, Sammy would hit a handful of home runs. I hit one off the fence against Roby once. We would win our first four games that spring and subsequently face each team's best pitcher. The wheels slowly started to come off, as our true identity was being revealed, that of a mediocre team.

Bob Shefte had a daughter named Shea who refused softball and decided that she was a catcher. Mitch briefly had a girl on his team but besides that Shea was the only one in the league. The rest of the league looked down on her, or at least sideways. They were just a little confused, that's all. I think I was too. And Shea wasn't bad, just not very good. I can't fault her for not trying though, Shea was tough as hell. Every game she was the dirtiest one, fumes followed her long blonde hair wherever she went.

We also had Will Lynch, a year younger than I, he wore white cleats and looked like he had never played baseball until Coach McHugh drafted him. Over time it was discovered that Will had quite the arm, and if his control got better he'd be a pretty good pitcher. During opening ceremonies, Whittington's parking lot was filled with catering and carny games as every kid from tee ball to UVest ran around until their names were announced. There was a targeted net in the corner with a built-in radar to measure each pitch's speed. In little league, if you hit sixty you threw hard. Danny Almonte threw in the seventies. Everyone lined up, hoping to make headlines. Will Lynch threw 60, I was clocked at a measly 52. Will Lynch would be our ace my twelve year old year.

During his final year with UVest, Odell Turner was 6'2" and built, as I can recall comparing a youth sized football to his flexed right bicep. Big O was competing against coaches he was head and shoulders above and children he could step over. When pitching, his size and reach gave the harmless Odell the fear of a grown man, disabling each kid's ability to become comfortable in the batter's box; limbs flailing in our adolescent view, distracting us until the ball appeared before us, forcing an uncalculated guess as to whether to swing or not. Odell didn't mean to, he was just born with it – *why was Paul Bunyan's ox blue?* Odell didn't have to try and he was accused of precisely that. It was as if UVest was down a player, so they hollered out to a loitering adult in the parking lot to see if he'd fill out their roster. He reluctantly agreed, to which his new teammates gleefully celebrated by hugging his legs.

I can remember my final chance in beating UVest. I was playing shortstop while Will Lynch pitched and Shea caught. Odell made his way to third base. Each time Shea would throw it back to Will

Lynch, Odell would take a couple steps (15-20 feet) toward her, teasing the idea of him stealing home. With Rick Payne in his ear, after each pitch Odell would go a little farther down the line. Shea began to stare back at Odell (a sheep to a wolf), right arm in the air as he taunted her. She would take a couple steps down the third base line towards him. He would barely flinch. Finally it was clear to Shea that she wouldn't be able to chase Odell down so she threw it over his shoulder back to third base, only to have Big O lunge twice toward home plate and score. An uncomfortable cheer was heard from the stands. Laughs from the UVest bench. The optics weren't good, but Rick Payne didn't care. Maybe that was his secret. He was staking his claim, ignoring what all else thought and winning, however he saw possible. But mainly, he just didn't like Bob Shefte.

I wasn't alone. For years, Graham Keever would break down how his final meeting with UVest ended. With vivid detail he'd highlight the errors each Long's teammate made behind him while he pitched into another loss. I wondered if he'd remember it with as much fire if his teammates had helped him out to finally beat UVest. The story would probably be shorter.

I sat around my teammates after the game, awaiting Shefte's remarks. I shouldn't even be here, I wanted to tell them. Rick Payne wanted me, Mitch wanted me, Spradling wanted me. Any of those options would have gotten me a championship. I don't belong here – the timing, it was all wrong. I'm not sure they'd understand.

Odell had the help of Yates Marr, Gabe Sprinkle and Dillon McConnell, while James Snover and Hunter Payne were crafty eleven years olds behind them. Yates and Dillon looked like football players and Gabe a soccer player, but they seemed to cherish it. Yates referred to his bat as Big Berta and they'd refer to Dillon as Big Red, while I can still hear Rick Payne now, shouting out Weather Man to get Gabe's attention on account of his uncle being the local meteorologist. The three of them would stick around Dilworth for a while, they were essential, as was the spit perpetually hanging from Yates's chin. 2004 gave us no J.D. in sight to stop UVest from winning again. Except for Rossi, Rossi was still great, just didn't have any help of his own.

I was pitching against Rossi on a gloomy weeknight. Had two strikes on him. A changeup to finish him off. No, that's what he's expecting. Another fastball. He then responds by hitting it high, far and long over the fence, over the foul pole, over the batting cages – foul. Okay, surely I've learned from my first mistake. He has your fastball timed and now it's time to get him off balanced with your changeup. No, you see that's exactly what he's expecting, I again thought. Another fastball. He responds again. Not wanting to turn around as everyone oo'd and ah'd at Rossi's moonshot, I finally did, I had to know. I turned around just in time to watch it soar far over the trees, close enough to the top of the flagpole to be considered over the flagpole. Time was called, too humiliating for one to continue. I could hear Rossi's teammates celebrating him, this time with a little extra. He jogged around the bases wearing the same number I wore while on Coachman. I tried to ignore what could have been. I walked out to center field as my replacement warmed up. My chin dragging in the grass as I tried to comprehend what had just happened. Why hadn't I thrown a changeup? Was I already overthinking everything at age twelve? I had him. I want to explain to everyone there that I had him. That shouldn't have happened. That it wasn't a matter of his talent exceeding over mine, he just outsmarted me – not even that, I outsmarted myself. It was the type of home run they'd talk about. I understand a redo is out of the question but if they knew the circumstances, if they knew my side of the story, they'd understand. They'd be gentler.

I look up to see a woman leaning against the outfield fence, as she had stopped to watch some of the game. The hair, the glasses – was this my neighbor? Jen? For the love of God, did she see it too? I watch her, waiting for her to wave. I get my story straight as I walk closer. Maybe I can at least explain to her while the game is still paused. One on one, she would know what happened, why it happened. Or maybe she won't notice it's me. I'll put my hat down and once I turn around toward the game she'll never be the wiser. A few minutes later I peak over my shoulder to realize that it isn't my neighbor, at all. But it felt like even she would soon find out about Rossi's latest masterpiece.

Rossi seemed to be just as good as Odell that year, minus the razzmatazz. He seemed to have tried. If Rossi was voted MVP, would his home run off me be the thing passed down? In the years to come, would I too be a part of that story?

Rossi Brown – 1, Odell Turner – 2; David Knuckles – 3, in case everyone else forgot.

Steel Fab would have its team party at Sammy's house. We had done so the previous year in which we had thrown a fully clothed Frank McHugh into the pool. I suppose we'd do the same with Shefte and he'd act surprised. But first he would hand out a couple awards. Shefte had taken us under a tree before the final game of the season and had us write down who we thought the team's Most Valuable Player should be, it was entirely up to us. I thought my name to be the right answer but felt the guilt before pen hit paper. That's just something you weren't supposed to do, vote for yourself, an unwritten rule I thought. So I wrote down Sammy Realon, confident that wouldn't make the difference. I regretted it the second I handed it in – I should have proofread. And now Shefte has an engraved MVP trophy with Sammy's name on it. I felt bad for myself, watching the party's host accept the award. I could feel the eyes on me, critiquing my composure. Shefte then pivoted into one final, unexpected award. A "Steel Fab Award". I saw what was coming.

As I was leaving the party Shefte wanted to make sure that I knew he was the one who told Frank to draft me. It was over, and yet it was like he was still trying to win me over. *It was the first round, right?* I want to ask him why he didn't take Rossi, or if he had a chance. He could've had Ahmad too. *What pick exactly.*

Sammy voted for himself, he had to of. I believed that much to be true. It had to have been close, right? If there were twelve people on the team, twelve votes, how many went to me if less than six? If five, then our votes were the difference, assuming he voted for himself. He must've. Wait, maybe Will Lynch got votes too. Or did everyone except me just vote for themselves and Sammy was the winner with two votes? There were too few voters to have risked it, I should have known. No one in their right mind would have been nice in that situation. Not if they wanted the award. Not if they thought they were worthy. And it's not like anyone else would have known my vote. It just didn't feel right, writing my own name down. This didn't either. Was I worried that Shefte knew my handwriting and would judge me? My penmanship has been complimented my entire life but I doubt Shefte had been made privy to this trait of mine. Sammy had awful handwriting, I knew that much. His handwriting was probably more bad than mine was good. So it would be more obvious that he had voted for himself than I had – if I had.

I casually bring this up to Sammy years later. Not the voting, just the winning. He scratches his head, trying to remember who won. Would he have reacted the same if I had won? Maybe I was ashamed of writing down my name because I questioned my own validity. Sammy had hit better and I lost my spot as our number one pitcher. Was I just acting like the leader the whole time, assuming my place as the team's best player? I wanted something to hold, something tangible. I wanted something

with my name on it – perhaps to prove that it all happened. I was given the Steel Fab Award, that had my name on it. I didn't know what this award meant. Even after Shefte had explained it. He didn't know either. That I represented Steel Fab the best? I wasn't sure if that was a compliment. It was a pity award, he felt bad for me. But not bad enough to award me MVP. Why are you relying on the vote of children? Of course they are going to remember the home runs. Was I the first recipient of an award passed down from year to year? Did Shefte give someone the Steel Fab Award the following year?

There is no fucking way.

Though he was the best player in his age group each year, Odell never even gave us the hope of him playing All Stars. Each year as the season would come to a close, we would ask if he planned on playing with us and he'd merely shake his head and reply coyly, "I don't know, we'll see..." *What will we see Odell? We're twelve years old!* He was generous enough to share his talent with us for the entirety of the regular season, and now that it was over it was time for him to explore other options? Or was this because to be eligible for All Stars, you had to produce a birth certificate? As this remained unclear year after year, suspicion continued to grow. Odell seemed too innocent to partake in this kind of illegality. But so did Danny Almonte. Was there someone else pulling the strings? Perhaps someone who would prioritize the success of UWest over all?

I'd have classes with Odell in high school. I can remember us pretending that the floor was lava, all six foot whatever of him standing up on his desk like his life depended on it. He'd have a birthday. I'd ask him which birthday this was. I wouldn't get a straight answer. Was he still hiding this? I almost didn't want to know.

Rossi and Ahmad had attended a majority of the All Star practices. Rumor would have it that the brothers would not be on the roster once the tournament began due to a verbal dispute between Rick Payne and Big Rossi. Big Rossi was the father, an imposing figure often found behind the backstop arguing with the umpire. The disagreement shared with Rick Payne was regarding Rossi and Ahmad's continuous late arrival to practice. And as they could not legally drive at the time, the blame was directed toward Big Rossi. Rick Payne made it clear that this here is All Stars and that he was Rick Payne. Big Rossi was keen on doing things his own way so the two of them agreed to disagree, leaving the brothers off the team. The alternate, Graham Keever, would fill out the roster as we attempted to compete without Ahmad, Rossi, and the league's Most Valuable Player.

In 2005, Hunter went on to play his final year for UWest amidst a lesser league, living out the Danny Almonte fantasy, easily winning MVP and a third championship. I saw Hunter on a similar level as I, talent wise. Was he ahead or was I behind? I wondered how it would have looked if I too had a fourth year.

Once I aged out my father would have the choice in taking over Coachman or Andrew Roby. He chose Roby and has been coaching them ever since. Roby never dies after all. He and Mitch talk on the phone most days and both agree they'll probably coach until the other decides to stop. Donnie would eventually leave Andrew Roby professionally and start his own company, Haston Construction. He

would pay for Haston to succeed Coachman in becoming a new sponsor in the league. Once seen at a Haston game, Donnie was complimented for coming out to support his team. He quickly refuted, *that's not my team*.

After All-Stars we'd age out of little league and begin playing on fields of extended dimensions. The one's Jeter played on. Many of the same Dilworth guys continued on. Odell didn't look quite as big all of a sudden. We played against all the other misfits, not polished enough to be taken seriously. We would meet at an old middle school nearby, playing on infields filled with an excessive amount of sand and pebbles we'd throw at each other during games. The patchy outfield grass was filled with divots; right field even included a giant hill, fair territory protruding along with its surface. It became a meeting spot for us for years, baseball aside, it was the center of our own universe. A quiet place, glowing in its faults. It was the anti-Whittington. The home runs would come but no one chased after them. No one would be there to take our picture for the website. I once hit a walk-off grand slam. I later watched a grainy video a parent took of it, so it must have happened. Uneven terrain made it difficult for any fans at all to enjoy a decent view. Fans – I mean parents, drifters, middle schoolers wasting time. After our games John Blackmon, Graham Keever and I would drive our Hondas a mile or so to Whittington to watch Roby games. The pressure was off, there was no more white board, Frank McHugh would have thrived.

In my final year of eligibility, we too had to combine with Myers Park Trinity to make enough for a team. We went undefeated that year. There wasn't a tournament as there weren't enough teams in our area – so our coach crowned us state champions, just told us congratulations. Come to find out there was another undefeated team on the other side of the state so we just called ourselves *Western State Champions*. Coach Bateman got us into a regional tournament in Tennessee where we'd lose to teams more serious.

John Wirz oversaw our season, helped organize it. Tony Bateman was so grateful for his contributions he insisted on our massive championship trophy to be kept with John Wirz forever. Mr. Wirz reluctantly took back the trophy he had just had made and presented himself to Tony, knowing he had not attended more than a game or two all year. We all looked at each other as the two man ceremony took place, beaming with amazement, many of them not even knowing who John Wirz was. We were instead promised makeshift participation trophies. Standing in the parking lot of a decrepit middle school, too old to care anymore. And that was it. We all drove away empty handed, even Sammy Realon.

Quan Anthony had a relative on UVest and would show up to Whittington for a few more years. His dreadlocks longer and a different color every time I saw him. He was older and much cooler but would still play around with us, showing off how athletic he was.

I had a dream last night. I was at Whittington, everyone was leaving. I got Quan's attention as he was walking away. He turned around, looking twelve years old again. I ask him if he remembers when we played in the minor leagues. He laughed, said yes, then disappeared. I suppose this could mean that I feel alone in my repeated thinking of this time, that everyone has moved on, rightly so, but Quan gives me reassurance, justifying my remembrance as the others might do the same. Though I should have asked him who hit Ryan with the tennis ball. The moment was too pure for accusations.

By 2011 John Lacey would be dead and so would Tyler Spradling.

After their MVPs, J.D. and Odell would soon choose basketball, eventually playing for small colleges. Ryan Conrad would play baseball and basketball for a small college before the hip surgeries and broker's license.

Jake Watson would become a star at Charlotte Christian amongst former Matthews players. He would be recruited by the University of South Carolina, but left off the team's national championship run. I would see Jake at a concert. He told me that I should keep playing, that I was good. After glowing in his compliment I snap out of it. I want Jake to tell me my options but it's too late. What was he basing this off of – his memory of me when I was eleven? I want to tell him to be careful who you say that to. Hadn't *he* quit? I must have missed something.

I seem to be able to picture everyone but myself. I do not know what I was like. I cannot visualize how smooth or disjointed I was. How I talked or even what I sounded like. An old picture will turn up every once in a while but I do not know what to make of it.

“I swear on the Bible that ball bounced!”

Right when the darkness had set in and everyone seemed to get a little restless, James Snover had hit one deep into the unknown. With the bases loaded, the ball kept carrying in right center field – into baseball mythology. The foreground and background of the outfield's chainlink fence had merged; muddling the distinction between a ground rule double and home run. And in that very moment, everyone saw what they wanted to see. While Matthews fans were steadfast on the placement of the ball's bounce, calling it a ground rule double, Donnie twirled his fingers around, calling it a home run, a grand slam rather. Later coined the ground rule slam, Snover's infamous hit would give Dilworth the lead. A confused eruption of mid-summer bewilderment ignited on both sides forming an echoing chamber of hysteria. Dilworth meekly showed gratitude with every breath, while Matthews sulked in their family heritage while cursing the system that left them shackled. After several heated discussions, Donnie was seen by his Chevy, sporting his signature tank top. He needed some air. Just a minute, or what felt like forever, to catch his breath. The moment was spinning awfully fast. The game he knew so well was passing him by, or at least that pesky eye of his was. Matthews had sniffed out Donnie's allegiances and were well aware of his past. And he could feel it.

Play resumed and we had found ourselves with the lead. Knowing they had grown angry, disrespected, we held on for dear life, trying to speed up time. The complications that came with exceeding expectations were more than we could handle. The hope soon slipped away as shortly thereafter me and Hunter watched from the outfield Sam Fulginiti hit one over our heads onto the adjacent field, leaving only a smile between us to fathom the moment.

I nod confidently to Hunter, pointing to the ground. “I think that bounced.”

I often picture myself as an older man.
I am wearing a bathrobe, sitting at a large mahogany desk, polishing off my Will.
A young man whom I have paid interrupts me.
"Mr. Knuckles."
"What is it, Chester?"
"There's a man here to see you. Says he has a few questions."
"Questions about what?"
A gangly creature with a suit and tie appears from beyond the shadows.
"Who threw that tennis ball in 2002?"
I know exactly what he's referring to. It's as if I was waiting for him.
"I wasn't there."
He takes note of my answer by quickly scribbling something down.
"Snover's ground rule slam... did it bounce?"
I first respond with a match, lighting my cigar. I take several puffs as I stare the man down.
I nod before I speak.
"I think it bounced."
Again he jots himself a note.
"Thank you sir."
He reaches down to shake my hand but I salute him instead.
"There's one more thing."
He reaches into his briefcase and pulls out a document of some sort, handing it to me.
I ask Chester to hand me my glasses.
He scampers into the other room.
"Quick Chester, this seems important!"
"Where did you have them last?" Chester shouts from the other room.
I look up to ask the gangly creature if he could just read it to me, on account of Chester ruining the moment. But the man is gone.
Chester runs back into the room, huffing and puffing and holding my reading glasses.
I hand Chester the document. "Read it to me."
He gasps. "Mr. Knuckles."
"What is it Chester?"
"Odell Turner's birth certificate!"

I then realize that this moment will never occur, for I am the gangly creature.