



The Three Strikes of Life

The Organic Produce Little League team was taking pre-game batting practice. The stars were smacking the ball hard. Everyone else was missing. After a bit, an old man in brown suit pants put his fingers through the chain links of the backstop. He looked eighty, though his shoes looked only half that.

"You kids want to hit the ball better?" he asked. The better players laughed. What did an old man know about hitting? But a handful of the lesser players tentatively put their hands up. They were willing to try anything.

"Listen up," the old man said. His hands trembled until they fastened around an aluminum bat. Then they seemed strong. His eyes were red, and complexion was mottled, with a stubble of white whisker.

"You get three strikes," he said. "Each one's different. Each strike, you change who you are."

The kids squinted.

"The first pitch is your rookie pitch. The pitcher doesn't know you. Anything can happen. Maybe you close your eyes, you get

lucky, and beat one back up the middle.

"But usually you don't. You miss, and all the weaknesses of the rookie come down on you. You're thinking about failing, and getting ready to fail. You're scared of the pitcher, scared of the ball. You get revved up. You forget what your coaches say and swing crazy, hoping to get lucky. Or you stand like a statue while the umpire calls a strike.

"Most young hitters give up now. They swing at the next two just to get it over. They don't grow in the at-bat. The bat's a white flag, and they're waving it to surrender.

"To have a good rookie pitch, you have to be good inside. Good rookies go up to the plate respecting the pitcher, and humble about their odds. They respect the ball, and shut out everything else.

"You need courage on the first strike pitch, because you're a stranger in a strange land. You put yourself in harm's way, close to the ball, close to the plate.

"Maybe you'll get drilled. It'll hurt. But only a bit. You stand close anyway, because good things happen when you put yourself in a little danger.

"You need faith that if you do it in the right spirit, things will work out.

"That's the rookie pitch.

"By the second pitch, you're in your prime. Now you know what the at-bat is about. You've seen the pitch. You know what you have to do to turn on it. The first strike filled you with adrenaline. Now you're strong. You feel electrified. You feel good. You grip the bat tight.

"The prime pitch is when good things usually happen. You're

ahead of the pitcher, even with the first strike. Because you know what he's got, and you feel good. If you fail on the prime pitch, it's maybe you felt too good. People in their prime get overconfident. They swing too hard. They miss.

"That's the prime pitch." The old man spat, and the spit dripped out at about five points, and he had to wipe some off his lip.

"Third pitch. Now you're a veteran. You're at the end of your rope. If you fail now, there won't be another pitch. It's life or death. You're like an old prizefighter, and you stand almost perfectly still, waiting for your moment. The bat's loose and tight at the same time.

"You're not relying on luck, like the first pitch. Or talent, like the second pitch. Now you're calling on your guts, and everything you've learned.

"You mess up on the veteran pitch when you're angry at the pitcher for making you miss the other two pitches. The bad veteran is always making excuses. He's making up excuses for missing before he misses.

"But the good veteran welcomes the battle. It's serious, but it gives him joy, too. He knows that baseball means pain, and he welcomes the suffering. He may go down, but he's grateful he ever got up. If he goes down, it will be swinging."

"Sir, what if you strike out?" asked one kid, shielding the sun from his eyes with his glove.

"You just hope there's another game, and you're in it." The old man scanned the horizon to the western. "I gotta go, kids. Good luck out there." And he turned and was gone.

The kids mumbled as they got their equipment together. Did anyone know who that guy was? Maybe a retired sportswriter, someone suggested. Or an ex-player. Maybe even a Hall of

Famer, one wishful thinker said.

"No, it's just my dad," said a slender infielder. "He was in the Sixties."

The players nodded sagely and they took the field. In the game, the Organic Produce team skunked the Subway Sandwich team 14-3. And every kid who listened got a hit.

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