



The Unnatural

It was the damnedest career the game ever saw. Or didn't see. Or sort of saw, but never quite took note of.

Thad Flessum barreled in from the Midwest League in '66 with a fistful of write-ups and a grin on his face. Mention Thad Flessum to the folks back in Ohio, the people who saw him play the sandlots, and their mouths just dropped open.

He was so swift and so strong that ordinary words could not describe him. Instead people got this faraway look, and for a while you thought it was the awestruck expression of rapture, but it was sadder than that, a look that grasped at what might have been.

He was the original bonus baby, the fundamental phenom. But things kept happening, and he never got his look. His first week in Florida, playing against the Red Sox, he went deep on a well-hit line drive. People say they never saw an outfielder cover so much ground so quickly.

Back to the ball, he looked over his shoulder and lost it. By the time he hit the Robert Hall sign ("Hit Me and Win a New Suit!"), he must have been clocking 28, 29 miles per hour. "That wasn't running," one scout said; "that was a rocket to hell."

Asked in the hospital what threw him off, he said he lost the ball in the white of the moon.

Hobbled until July, he took the field for the

second game of a double header against Cleveland, and just before he could make a diving shoestring catch to his left, he stepped into a gopher hole and snapped his shin like a piece of barnwood, and spent the remainder of that season in Ashtabula, clipping hedges by his mother's house on Lake Erie.

In the late innings of an exhibition game in Montreal the following spring, when Flessum was trying desperately to get noticed, he rapped a grounder to third base and headed for first. What he did not know was that the catcher had grabbed a stray thread from his uniform, which rapidly unraveled as he raced down the baseline. He would have been safe had his pants not collapsed around his ankles, crashing him jaw-first into the hard clay. A bit on the modest side for a modern athlete, Flessum draped himself in a few fistfuls of thread and dashed through the opponent's dugout to the locker room, and did not venture out again until the last sportswriter had retired for the bar.

A platinum screw connecting his leg to his ankle, Thad Flessum battled back, through Utica, through Providence, and back to the show. He had lost a step of his speed but he still had that

amazing power to the opposite field. He set a record in the Carolina League that still stands for hitting the greatest number of foul tips (22) before tipping one into the catcher's mitt for an out.

In a June game against the Athletics, batting from the right side, he hit a ball so high that Euclidian mathematicians estimate its eventual trajectory would have exceeded 540 feet from home plate, had it not punctured a hole in the Goodyear blimp, causing 20,000 fans to run screaming down the ramps to their cars as the giant gray skin draped itself, deflating, along the upper mezzanine. The game was forfeited, and Flessum, branded a jinx and a misfit by his team and by the league, was shipped back to the minors.

He was once attacked in the outfield in Fort Worth by a swarm of Africanized bees, suffering stings on ninety percent of his body. He swelled up so bad, and so fast, that the team physician had to read the number on his back to place him.

One lightly attended twinighter, late in the game, with the flags ripping in a left-to-right wind, Thad followed a hooking, streaking line drive into the

dead part of the ballpark, a shadowy zone where no ball had ever been hit in a night game. The ball presumably landed in Flessum's glove, in a corner between the jutting stands and the outfield wall where no umpire or TV camera could make it out. Though Flessum emerged from the dark, lofting the ball proudly in the web of his glove, no one saw it, and the opposing manager fumed until the second base umpire ruled it a ground rule double.

In a single game in August of 1969, Flessum batted for the cycle in a game in Sioux City called on account of hailstones the size of ducks' eggs. During the Plains League championship series, he leaped five rows into the stands in the tenth inning to snag the winning home run ball -- only to stumble on the seats and experience a severe concussion when his head struck a lead pipe railing, with the ball rolling stillborn from his glove. Witnesses described the sound of Flessum's forehead striking the pipe as something out of "The Three Stooges."

Flessum lay in a coma until Thanksgiving of that year. It was not until he was awakened by the smell of frying bacon at the next bed that he was informed that his team had lost and he had passed

waivers for good.

Arthritic and forgetful, Flessum spent the next two years out of organized ball, but worked the summer carnie circuit across Montana, Idaho, Wyoming and parts of the Dakotas, demonstrating a big league swing to youngsters who would pay twenty five cents to watch with fascination as the battered ballplayer rolled up his pant leg and lowered his head to show them his scars.

But the thing was, Flessum appears on no team photograph published during the fourteen years he spent in professional baseball. Either he was stuck in traffic while the team picture was being taken, or the player in front of him lifted a glove just as the shutter snapped. Even the high school where a showcase of glittering championship trophies recalled the victories he led his team to burned to the ground one cold February night. As did the town's newspaper, later that May.

"I reckon I gave baseball as much as it gave me," Thad Flessum would tell visitors who stopped him on his riding mower on the big lawn overlooking the lake.

"But the hell of it is, I think I belonged, and there ain't no evidence I was even there."

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