

# SMITTY AT THE BAT

## By David J. LeMaster

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Coach Amenson points his bony finger directly at me and dribbles sunflower seeds as he speaks. “Smitty?” he says. “Think you can get on?” “Yeah,” I says. “I can get on. “All right,” he says. “Get a bat.” I’ve been sitting here all night picking splinters from my butt, thinking about how I used to hit cleanup. That’s before Esteban, that steroid-driven Gargantuan, who’s all of 22, arrived on the team hoping to force me into early retirement. He sits next to Amenson and snickers as I rise and wipe my hands across my pants. “Let’s go!” Amenson barks. I glance back at him and spit - it’s not as dramatic nowadays since we don’t pack a chaw any more, but it gets my point across before I saunter over to grab a bat and helmet. I’m supposed to be thinking, “Make contact, baby. Quick bat. Get the ball in play.” But what I’m really thinking is “Smash yourself a long ball that’ll knock Amenson off his rocker.” I’m Mark McGuire, baby. I’m Babe Ruth. Heck, tonight I’m Kirk Gibson in the ninth inning of the World Series. I’m the opening highlight on Sports Center. Send me up there to start a rally? I don’t work that way, pal. I’ll tie it with one stroke or we’re going home.

I hear Amenson bark from the dugout as I walk toward the plate. “Just make contact!” he shouts. “You’re our last chance. Put the ball in play!” And what happens if I get on? Then what? You think the top of the order can drive me in? You think these knees got enough gas to get around the bases on a couple of singles? Nope. And he’s got nobody left on the bench. He plays all the babies and keeps me counting splinters since Esteban’s using Creatine and hits the ball like Willie Mays. Esteban’s no Willy Mays. None of these punks is the “Say Hey Kid,” but they’re putting up 30, 40, 50 dingers a year, like Mayes and Mantle, and the rest are just amateurs. Yeah right - if I shot up like a circus freak, I’d hammer ‘em out every night, too. “Let’s go, Smitty!” Esteban giggles. I want to turn around and bash the bat over his head. He’s thinks Amenson will wave me if I don’t get on, and he’s right. They’ve been waiting - Snow comes off the DL next week, and they’re out of options on the young right fielder. Vet’s the first to go nowadays. I’ll end up on the waiver wire, and nobody wants to pick up two mil a year from a guy who can’t hack any more.

I've got that Kirk Gibson swagger, the way I imitated ballplayers when I was a kid. You know - back yard, back pocket of your jeans full of baseball cards. But in my mind I never heard some two-bit punk like Esteban shouting fake encouragement. "You can do it," he shouts again. But what he's really saying is, "This is it, you poor bastard. You're gonna end up in the major league pension fund, cuz I'm gonna put you there." And that's what I hear. He's speaking in code, but that's what I hear.

The pitcher is one of those phenoms. He knocked out ol' Ben Best, the lefty I spent six years with in St. Louis. Best got waived, and I hear he's coaching Little Leagues now. Esteban tells me they've got a spot waiting for me, too. The phenom's twenty and looks about twelve, and he's got a goatee down the side of his chin like he can't grow a full beard. Even if he could, he'd still look like a twelve year old playing with stage makeup. He grins at me like a retard and rubs the ball into his hip as I step to the plate.

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