Chapter Two

HOW TO FIND A BALLPLAYER

YEARS LATER he would say that when he'd decided to become a professional baseball player, it was the only time he'd done something just for the money, and that he'd never do something just for the money ever again. He would never again let the market dictate the direction of his life. The funny thing about that, now he was running a poor major league baseball team, was that his job was almost entirely about money: where to find it, how to spend it, whom to spend it on. There was no more intensely financial period in his life than the few weeks, just after the regular season opened, leading up to the amateur draft. There was also no time that he found more enjoyable. He didn't mind living with money at the center of his life, so long as he was using it on other people, and not having it used on him.

He began that day in the summer of 2002 facing a roomful of his scouts. Billy Beane, now in his fortieth year on earth and his fifth as the Oakland A's general manager, had changed. He'd lost the ramrod posture of his youth. The brown mop of hair had thinned,

and been trained, poorly, to part. Otherwise the saggings and crinklings of middle age were barely discernable on him. The difference in Billy wasn't what had happened to him, but what hadn't. He had a life he hadn't led, and he knew it. He just hoped nobody else noticed.

The men in this room were the spiritual descendants of the older men who had identified Billy Beane, as a boy of sixteen, as a future baseball superstar. Invisible to the ordinary fan, they were nevertheless the heart of the game. They decide who gets to play and, therefore, how it is played. For the first time in his career Billy was about to start an argument about how they did what they did. Calling them in from the field and stuffing them into a dank room in the bowels of the Coliseum for the seven days before the draft had become something of an Oakland custom. It was the point of the exercise that was about to change.

A year ago, before the 2001 draft, the goal had been for the general manager of the Oakland A's and his scouts to come to some mutually satisfying decision about who to select with the top picks. Billy had allowed the scouts to lead the discussion and influence his decisions. He had even let the scouts choose a lot of their own guys in higher rounds. That changed about five seconds after the 2001 draft, which had been an expensive disaster. The elite players that Billy and the scouts had discussed in advance had been snapped up by other teams before the A's turn came to make their second and final first-round draft pick. All that remained were guys the scouts loved and Billy knew next to nothing about. In the confusion, Grady Fuson, the A's soon to be former head of scouting, had taken a high school pitcher named Jeremy Bonderman. The kid had a 94-mile-per-hour fastball, a clean delivery, and a body that looked as if it had been created to wear a baseball uniform. He was, in short, precisely the kind of pitcher Billy thought he had trained his scouting department to avoid.

It was impossible to say whether Jeremy Bonderman would

make it to the big leagues, but that wasn't the point. The odds were against him, just as they were against any high school player. The scouts adored high school players, and they especially adored high school pitchers. High school pitchers were so far away from being who they would be when they grew up that you could imagine them becoming almost anything. High school pitchers also had brand-new arms, and brand-new arms were able to generate the one asset scouts could measure: a fastball's velocity. The most important quality in a pitcher was not his brute strength but his ability to deceive, and deception took many forms.

In any case, you had only to study the history of the draft to see that high school pitchers were twice less likely than college pitchers, and four times less likely than college position players, to make it to the big leagues. Taking a high school pitcher in the first round—and spending 1.2 million bucks to sign him—was exactly the sort of thing that happened when you let scouts have their way. It defied the odds; it defied reason. Reason, even science, was what Billy Beane was intent on bringing to baseball. He used many unreasonable means—anger, passion, even physical intimidation—to do it. "My deep-down belief about how to build a baseball team is at odds with my day-to-day personality," he said. "It's a constant struggle for me."

It was hard to know what Grady Fuson imagined would happen after he took a high school pitcher with the first pick. On draft day the Oakland draft room was a ceremonial place. Wives, owners, friends of the owners—all these people who made you think twice before saying "fuck"—gathered politely along the back wall of the room to watch the Oakland team determine its future. Grady, a soft five foot eight next to Billy's still dangerous-looking six foot four, might have thought that their presence would buffer Billy's fury. It didn't. Professional baseball had violently detached Billy Beane from his youthful self, but Billy was still the guy whose anger after striking out caused the rest of the team to gather on the other end of the bench. When Grady leaned into the phone to take

Bonderman, Billy, in a single motion, erupted from his chair, grabbed it, and hurled it right through the wall. When the chair hit the wall it didn't bang and clang; it exploded. Until they saw the hole Billy had made in it, the scouts had assumed that the wall was, like their futures, solid.

Up till then, Grady had every reason to feel secure in his job. Other teams, when they sought to explain to themselves why the Oakland A's had won so many games with so little money, and excuse themselves for winning so few with so much, usually invoked the A's scouting. Certainly, Grady could never have imagined that his scouting department was on the brink of total overhaul, and that his job was on the line. But that was the direction Billy's mind was heading. He couldn't help but notice that his scouting department was the one part of his organization that most resembled the rest of baseball. From that it followed that it was most in need of change. "The draft has never been anything but a fucking crapshoot," Billy had taken to saying, "We take fifty guys and we celebrate if two of them make it. In what other business is two for fifty a success? If you did that in the stock market, you'd go broke." Grady had no way of knowing how much Billy disapproved of Grady's most deeply ingrained attitudes—that Billy had come to believe that baseball scouting was at roughly the same stage of development in the twenty-first century as professional medicine had been in the eighteenth. Or that all of Billy's beliefs, at the moment of Jeremy Bonderman's selection, acquired a new intensity.

On the other hand, Grady wasn't entirely oblivious to Billy's hostility. He had known enough to be uncomfortable the week before the draft, when Billy's assistant, Paul DePodesta, had turned up in the draft room with his laptop. Paul hadn't played pro ball. Paul was a Harvard graduate. Paul looked and sounded more like a Harvard graduate than a baseball man. Maybe more to the point, Paul shouldn't have even been in the draft room. The draft room was for scouts, not assistant general managers.

It was Paul's computer that Grady dwelled upon. "What do you need that for?" Grady asked Paul after the meeting, as if he sensed the machine somehow challenged his authority. "You're sitting over there with your computer and I don't know what you're doing."

"I'm just looking at stats," said Paul. "It's easier than printing them all out."

Paul wanted to look at stats because the stats offered him new ways of understanding amateur players. He had graduated from college with distinction in economics, but his interest, discouraged by the Harvard economics department, had been on the uneasy border between psychology and economics. He was fascinated by irrationality, and the opportunities it created in human affairs for anyone who resisted it. He was just the sort of person who might have made an easy fortune in finance, but the market for baseball players, in Paul's view, was far more interesting than anything Wall Street offered. There was, for starters, the tendency of everyone who actually played the game to generalize wildly from his own experience. People always thought their own experience was typical when it wasn't. There was also a tendency to be overly influenced by a guy's most recent performance: what he did last was not necessarily what he would do next. Thirdly—but not lastly—there was the bias toward what people saw with their own eyes, or thought they had seen. The human mind played tricks on itself when it relied exclusively on what it saw, and every trick it played was a financial opportunity for someone who saw through the illusion to the reality. There was a lot you couldn't see when you watched a baseball game.

For Billy Beane, it was a little different, a little less cerebral and a little more visceral. Billy intended to rip away from the scouts the power to decide who would be a pro baseball player and who would not, and Paul was his weapon for doing it.

Grady did not know about that. Grady had ignored Paul's prodding to scout the players his computer flushed out. Paul had said

the scouts ought to go have a look at a college kid named Kevin Youkilis. Youkilis was a fat third baseman who couldn't run, throw, or field. What was the point of going to see *that*? (Because, Paul would be able to say three months later, Kevin Youkilis has the second highest on-base percentage in all of professional baseball, after Barry Bonds. To Paul, he'd become Euclis: the Greek god of walks.) Grady and his scouts had ignored Paul when he said they ought to check out a college pitcher named Kirk Saarloos. Saarloos was a short right-hander with an 88-mile-per-hour fastball. Why waste time on a short right-hander? (Because, Paul would be able to say less than a year later, Saarloos is one of only two players from the 2001 draft pitching in the big leagues.)

Raw violence had gotten Grady's attention. It was only baseball tradition that allowed scouting directors and scouts to go off and find the ballplayers on their own without worrying too much about the GM looking over their shoulders. And if there was one thing Grady knew about Billy, it was that he could give a fuck about baseball tradition. All Billy cared about was winning. A few days after the 2001 draft—with Billy away and still not speaking to him—Grady crept into Paul's' office. In conciliatory tones, he allowed as how he still needed to sign a pitcher to fill out the A's rookie league roster in Arizona. There was this kid Paul had mentioned who, along with Youkilis and Saarloos, Grady had ignored. David Beck was his name. Beck had gone completely undrafted. Thirty big league teams, each with fifty draft picks, had passed on him. Oddly enough, Paul's computer had spit out Beck's name only because one of Beck's teammates at Cumberland University in Tennessee, a big kid with a 98-mile-per-hour fastball, had made everyone's list as a potential first-round draft pick. Paul had noticed that on the same pitching staff as this consensus first-round pick was this complete unknown, a six foot four left-hander, who had even better numbers than the first rounder. A lower earned run average, fewer home runs allowed, more strikeouts, and fewer walks per nine innings. And Paul just wondered:

maybe the kid had something going for him that the scouts were missing.

He was left wondering. Months passed without any word of Beck from the scouting department. Paul finally asked Grady about him. And Grady said, "Oh yeah, I forgot, I'll have one of the scouts go have a look." But he didn't do it, at least not seriously. When Paul asked again, Billy Owens, the A's scout responsible for covering Tennessee grudgingly came back to him with the word that Beck was "a soft tosser." Soft tosser was scouting code for not worth my time. Paul still had the impression that no one had bothered to scout David Beck.

When he came to see Paul after the draft, Grady was in a different mood about David Beck. Should we sign your guy? he asked.

What guy? asked Paul. He'd forgotten about Beck.

Beck, said Grady.

Grady, he's not *my* guy, said Paul. I just asked you to check him out.

Grady was eager to make peace with the front office, and he thought he could do it by throwing Paul a bone. He ran off and signed David Beck, sight unseen. A few days later, Beck reported for duty at the A's training facility in Scottsdale, Arizona. Most of the scouts, and Paul, happened to be there when Beck warmed up in the A's bullpen. It was one of the most bizarre sights any of them ever had seen on a pitcher's mound. When the kid drew back his left arm to throw, his left hand flopped and twirled maniacally. His wrist might as well not exist: at any moment, it seemed, his hand might disengage itself and fly away. The kid was double-jointed, maybe even crippled. At that moment David Beck ceased to be known to the scouts as David Beck and became, simply, "The Creature." A scout from another organization came right up to Billy Owens, chuckling, and asked how he came to sign The Creature. Billy O pointed over to Paul and said, "I didn't sign him. Paul made me do it."

Whereupon The Creature went out and dominated the Arizona

rookie league. He and his Halloween hand and his 84-mph fastball shut down the opposition so completely that the opposition never knew what happened. In the short season The Creature pitched eighteen innings in relief, struck out thirty-two batters, and finished with an earned run average of an even 1.00. He was named the closer on the rookie league All-Star team.

The Creature was the first thing to come out of Paul's computer that the A's scouting department signed. There were about to be a lot more. The 2002 draft was to be the first science experiment Billy Beane performed upon amateur players.

IT WASN'T QUITE TEN in the morning and everyone in the draft room except the Harvard graduates had a lipful of chewing tobacco. The snuff rearranged their features into masks of grim determination. Anyone whose name wasn't two syllables, or didn't end in a vowel or a spitable consonant, has had it changed for the benefit of baseball conversation. Ron Hopkins is "Hoppy," Chris Pittaro is "Pitter," Dick Bogard is "Bogie." Most were former infielders who had topped out someplace in the minor leagues. A handful actually made it to the big leagues, but so briefly that it almost hadn't happened at all. John Poloni had pitched seven innings in 1977 with the Texas Rangers. Kelly Heath had played second base in the Royals organization, and had exactly one major league at bat, in 1982, after the Royals regular second baseman, Frank White, decided in the middle of a game that his hemorrhoids were bothering him. As one of the other scouts put it, Kelly was the only player in history whose entire big league career was made possible by a single asshole. Chris Pittaro had played second base for the Tigers and Twins. Back in 1985, during Pitter's rookie year, Detroit's manager Sparky Andersen was quoted saying Pitter "has a chance to become the greatest second baseman who ever lived." It hadn't turned out that way.

All of them had lived different versions of the same story. They

were uncoiled springs, firecrackers that had failed to explode. The only bona fide big league regular in the room was Matt Keough, who'd won sixteen games for the A's in 1980. In his rookie year, 1978, he'd pitched in the All-Star Game. Matty, as he is known, easily was the most detached of the group. He had the air of a man taking a break from some perpetual Hawaiian vacation of the soul to stop by and chat with his old buddies. The rest of them weren't like that.

There was no avoiding just how important the 2002 amateur draft was for the future of the Oakland A's. The Oakland A's survived by finding cheap labor. The treatment of amateur players is the most glaring of the many violations of free market principles in Major League Baseball. A team that drafts and signs a player holds the rights to his first seven years in the minor leagues and his first six in the majors. It also enjoys the right to pay the player far less than he is worth. For instance, the Oakland A's were able to pay their All-Star pitcher Barry Zito $200,000 in 2000, $240,000 in 2001, and $500,000 in 2002 (when he would win the Cy Young Award as the best pitcher in the American League) because they had drafted him in 1999. For his first three years of big league ball, Zito was stuck; for his next three years he could apply for salary arbitration, which would bump him up to maybe a few million a year but would still keep him millions below the $10–$15 million a year he could get for himself on the open market. Not until 2007, after he had been in the big leagues for six years, would Barry Zito, like any other citizen of the republic, be allowed to auction his services to the highest bidder. At which point, of course, the Oakland A's would no longer be able to afford Barry Zito. That's why it was important to find Barry Zito here, in the draft room, and obtain him for the period of his career when he could be paid the baseball equivalent of slave's wages.

This year was the best chance they might ever have to find several Barry Zito's. In 2001, the A's had lost all three of their top free agents to richer teams. First baseman Jason Giambi had left for the

Yankees for $120 million over seven years. Outfielder Johnny Damon had gone to the Red Sox for $32 million over four years. Closer Jason Isringhausen had signed with the Cardinals for $28 million over four years. The $33 million the three players would make each year was just $5 million less than the entire Oakland team. The rules of the game granted the A's the first-round draft picks of the three teams that had poached their top talent, plus three more "compensation" picks at the end of the first round. Together with their own first round pick the A's had, in effect, seven first-round draft picks. In the history of the draft going back to 1965 no team had ever held seven first-round picks. The question for Billy Beane was what to do with them. What he *wasn't* going to do with them was what Grady had done last year, or what old baseball men had done with them for the past thirty-seven years. "You know what?" Billy said to Paul, before the draft-room meetings. "However we do it we're never going to be more wrong than the way we did it before."

Already the scouts had whittled, or thought they had whittled, the vast universe of North American amateur baseball down to 680 players. They'd pasted all the names onto little magnetic strips. They now had one week to reduce that pile of magnetic nameplates to some kind of order. They would do this, more or less, by a process of elimination. Erik would read a kid's name off a sheet. The scout who knew the kid then offered up a brief, dispassionate description of him. Anyone else who had seen the kid play might then chime in. Then the floor was open for general discussion, until everyone was satisfied that enough had been said.

They begin that first morning by weeding out the pile. Some large number of amateur ballplayers were, for one reason or another, unworthy of serious consideration.

"Lark," says Erik, for instance. Erik is Erik Kubota, the new young scouting director Billy hired to replace Grady. Erik used a giant wad of Copenhagen to disguise the fact that he was a brainy graduate of the University of California Berkeley, whose first job

with the Oakland A's had been as a public relations intern. That Erik had never played even high school ball was, in Billy Beane's mind, a point in his favor. At least he hasn't learned the wrong lessons. Billy had played pro ball, and regarded it as an experience he needed to overcome if he wanted to do his job well. "A reformed alcoholic," is how he described himself.

Lark is a high school pitcher with a blazing fastball. He's a favorite of one of the older scouts, who introduces him in a language only faintly resembling English. "Good body, big arm. Good fastball, playable slider, so-so change," he says. "A little funk on the backside but nothing you can't clean up. I saw him good one day and not so good another."

"Any risk he'll go to college?" asks Erik.

"He's not a student type," says the older scout. "I'm not sure he's even signed with a college."

"So is this guy a rockhead?" asks Pitter. Pitter (Chris Pittaro) is a graduate of the University of North Carolina who roomed with Billy when they both played for the Minnesota Twins and who Billy had long ago identified as a person willing to rethink everything he learned, or thought he had learned, playing baseball.

"Ah," says the older scout, thinking about how to address the question. It's possible for a baseball player to be too stupid for the job. It's also possible for him to be too smart. "He may be too smart," is a phrase that will recur several times over the next week.

"He's a confident kid. But—"

"But," says Erik.

"There might be some, uh, family issues here," says the old scout. "I heard the dad had spent some time in prison. Porno or something."

No one on either side of the room seems to know what to make of that. You can see thirty men thinking: *is porno a crime?*

"Can he bring it?" someone finally asks. The air clears.

"I can see this guy in somebody's pen throwing aspirin tablets

someday," says the older scout. "The guy has a cannon." This old scout is pushing fifty-five but still has a lean quickness about him, as if he hadn't completely abandoned the hope that he might one day play the game. The old scout likes high school kids and refuses to apologize for that fact.

"I'm worried about the makeup," says someone.

"What does his profile say?" asks someone else.

A young man sits quietly off to one side at the room's lone desktop computer. He punches a few keys. He's looking for Lark's results on the psychological test given by Major League Baseball to all prospects.

"Not good," he says, at length. "Competitive drive: one out of ten. Leadership: one out of ten. Conscientiousness: one out of ten." He keeps on reading down the list, but no matter what the category the kid's score is always the same.

"Shit," Bogie finally says, "does he even have a *two* in anything?" Bogie is the oldest scout. In 1972, scouting for the Houston Astros, Bogie administered what he believes to have been the first ever baseball psychological test, to a pitcher named Dick Ruthven. (He passed.)

"Bad makeup," says someone else and no one disagrees.

The scouts used several catch phrases to describe what they need to avoid. "Rockhead" clearly isn't a good thing to be, but the quality can be overcome. "Soft" is also fairly damning—it connotes both "out of shape" and "wimp"—but it, too, is inconclusive. "Bad makeup" is a death sentence. "Bad makeup" means "this kid's got problems we can't afford to solve." The phrase signaled anything from jail time to drinking problems to severe personality disorders. Whenever a player is convicted of "bad make-up" another young man reaches into a cardboard box for a tiny magnetized photograph of a former A's employee named Phil Milo. Milo had worked as one of Billy Beane's assistants for a brief spell and in that time offended pretty much everyone in the organization. When I ask Paul how it was possible for one man to per-

sonify so many different personality disorders, Paul says, "Put it this way. On the day I was hired, Milo came over to meet me. The first thing out of his mouth was, 'I got to be honest with you. I'm really not pleased we hired you.'" Milo was just that kind of guy.

During the first few days of the draft meetings the tiny photos of Phil Milo fly like confetti. And the conversations that ended with Milo's picture plastered beside a prospect's name told you something: not just what baseball men distrusted in a player's character, but how little they really knew the people they were about to rain money on.

A high school pitcher:

"Where's he going to college?" asks Billy, idly.

"He's not," says the scout who knows him best. "He's a Christian kid and he was given a free ride to UC Irvine. Coach set him up with a couple of his players. Took him to a party and all it was was drinking. Kid was offended and he left and said, 'I'm not going to school.'"

"Oh, then he'll fit right into pro ball, won't he?" says Billy.

"Put a Milo on him," says Erik.

A collegiate right-handed pitcher:

"He's a cocky guy," says Matt Keough, who is arguing on the pitcher's behalf. "He'd shove it up your ass. And taunt you. So you hate the guy. He's had a couple of ejections."

"But no drugs?" asks Erik.

"No drugs," says Matty, then thinks about it. "There are rumors of some hash."

An old scout laughs. "Corned beef hash?"

"It's unsubstantiated," Matty protests.

"Where there's smoke, there's fire," says another old scout.

Erik looks up: "Is he the guy who was selling wacky tobacky in high school?"

"Hell," says Matty, now genuinely indignant. "That was three years ago!"

Everyone groans. "Put a Milo on him," says Erik, and spits tobacco juice.

A power-hitting outfielder:

"I'm not sure he wants to sign. He said he'd like to go to law school."

"Law school?"

"He's getting pressure from his girlfriend, I think."

"He's looking for love, it sounds like."

"Put a Milo on him."

Another collegiate left-handed pitcher:

"The guy's got no grades," says a scout.

"You mean bad grades?" asks another.

"No, I mean no grades," says the first.

"How can a guy have no grades at Chico State?" asks the other.

"He really has no desire at all to be in college," says the first scout, almost admiringly. "This guy was designed to play ball."

"I'm not really jazzed about a guy who has no desire whatsoever to go to college," says Billy. "That's not a badge of honor."

"Put a Milo on him."

Billy doesn't interfere much in the search for bad makeup, and Paul says nothing at all. The meetings, from their point of view, are all about minimizing risk. They can't afford to have guys not work out. There's no point in taking risks on players tempera-

mentally, or legally, unsuited to pro ball. At one point Billy looks up and asks, "Who's that fucking guy we took last year we had to release because he robbed a bank?" The others are too absorbed in weeding out the bad makeup to reply, or to even consider how remarkable the question is.

Most of the first few days were devoted to culling the original pile of 680 players. Other than an excessive affection for one's girlfriend, or a criminal record, or other signs of bad makeup, there were just two reasons why the Oakland A's did not waste further time on a player. One was age: with rare exceptions the new scouting directors toss all high school players immediately onto the dumping ground, leaving the younger scouts who spent their days following them wondering why they bothered. The other is what is delicately known in the draft room as "expectations."

"What are his expectations?" Erik Kubota asks, of a promising college pitcher.

The scout who knows him best says, "His dad said, and I quote, '$4.2 million is a good place to start.'"

"Put him over there," Erik will say. When his name is tossed onto the dump heap nobody in the front office cares.

By the end of the third day the scouts have organized the players into two groups: the prospects not worth considering further, and everyone else. The second group, maybe four hundred players, they parse further by position. They'll rank 120 right-handed pitchers; they'll list 37 catchers, 1 through 37, and 94 outfielders, 1 through 94. But before they do, they turn their attention from eliminating players to selecting them. Billy's already made it clear that this year he has only a secondary interest in pitchers. The past few years he has stocked up on arms. It's the bats he needs. On the white board closest to Billy, the "Big Board," there was space for sixty players. Only one slot had been filled, the first:

SWISHER

Nick Swisher, a center fielder from Ohio State. For the past six months, Billy's been sure about Swisher, and he knows he won't get the slightest disagreement from his scouts. Swisher is a rare point of agreement between Paul's computer and the internal compass of an old baseball guy. He has the raw athletic ability the scouts adore; but he also has the stats Billy and Paul have decided matter more than anything: he's proven he can hit, and hit with power; he drew more than his share of walks.

Oddly enough, Billy has never actually seen Swisher play. He had wanted to fly across the country to watch a few of Swisher's games, but his scouting department told him that if he did, word would quickly spread to the rest of Major League Baseball that Billy Beane was onto Nick Swisher, Swisher's stock would rise, and the odds that he'd still be around when the A's made this first pick—the sixteenth of the draft—would plummet. "Operation Shutdown," the scouts called their project to keep Billy as far away from Swisher as they could.

Operation Shutdown has had some perverse effects. One of them is to lead Billy to speak of Swisher in the needy tone of a man who has been restrained for too long from seeing his beloved. Swisher is his picture bride.

"Swisher is noticeable, isn't he?" says Billy, hoping to hear more about what Swisher *looks* like. How Swisher *really is.*

"Oh, he's noticeable," says an old scout. "From the moment he gets off the bus he doesn't shut up."

"His background is interesting," says Billy. "His dad was a major league player. That's huge. A great chip in his favor. Those guys succeed." (Swisher's dad is Steve Swisher, who caught for the Cubs, Cardinals, and Padres.)

"He does have a presence," agrees an old scout.

"Did Operation Shutdown work?" asks Billy.

"Too well," says an old scout. "Guy from the White Sox called me yesterday and said he knows you must be in love with Swisher because you haven't been to see him."

Billy laughs. "Out of this room, Swisher is hush-hush," he says.

The conversation turns from Nick Swisher, and the moment it does it becomes contentious. Not violently so—these are people with an interest in getting along. The tone of the conversation is that of a meeting in a big company that has just decided to drop a product line, or shift resources from marketing to R&D. Still, it's a dispute with two sides riven by some fundamental difference. The two sides are, on the one hand, the old scouts and, on the other, Billy Beane. The old scouts are like a Greek chorus; it is their job to underscore the eternal themes of baseball. The eternal themes are precisely what Billy Beane wants to exploit for profit—by ignoring them.

One by one Billy takes the names of the players the old scouts have fallen in love with, and picks apart their flaws. The first time he does this an old scout protests.

"The guy's an athlete, Billy," the old scout says. "There's a lot of upside there."

"He can't hit," says Billy.

"He's not that bad a hitter," says the old scout.

"Yeah, what happens when he doesn't know a fastball is coming?" says Billy.

"He's a tools guy," says the old scout, defensively. The old scouts aren't built to argue; they are built to *agree*. They are part of a tightly woven class of former baseball players. The scout looks left and right for support. It doesn't arrive.

"But can he *hit*?" asks Billy.

"He can hit," says the old scout, unconvincingly.

Paul reads the player's college batting statistics. They contain a conspicuous lack of extra base hits and walks.

"My only question is," says Billy, "if he's that good a hitter why doesn't he hit better?"

"The swing needs some work. You have to reinvent him. But he can hit."

"Pro baseball's not real good at reinventing guys," says Billy.

Whatever happened when an older man who failed to become a big league star looks at a younger man with a view to imagining whether he might become a big league star, Billy wanted nothing more to do with it. He'd been on the receiving end of the dreams of older men and he knew what they were worth. Over and over the old scouts will say, "The guy has a great body," or, "This guy may be the best body in the draft." And every time they do, Billy will say, "We're not selling jeans here," and deposit yet another highly touted player, beloved by the scouts, onto his shit list. One after another of the players the scouts rated highly vanish from the white board, until it's empty. If the Oakland A's aren't going to use their seven first-round draft picks to take the players their scouts loved, who on earth are they going to take? That question begins to be answered when Billy Beane, after tossing another name on the slag heap, inserts a new one:

TEAHEN

The older scouts lean back in their chairs, spittoons in hand. Paul leans forward into a laptop and quietly pulls up statistics from college Web sites. Erik Kubota, scouting director, holds a ranked list of all the amateur baseball players in the country. He turns many pages, and passes hundreds and hundreds of names, before he finds Teahen. "Tell us about Teahen," says Billy.

Mark Teahen, says Erik, is a third baseman from St. Mary's College just down the road in Moraga, California. "Teahen," says Erik. "Six three. Two ten. Left right. Good approach to hitting. Not a lot of power right now. Our kind of guy. He takes pitches."

"Why haven't we talked about this guy before?" asks the old scout.

"It's because Teahen doesn't project," says Erik. "He's a corner guy who doesn't hit a lot of home runs."

"Power is something that can be acquired," says Billy quickly. "Good hitters develop power. Power hitters don't become good hitters."

"Do you see him at third base or shortstop?" asks another old scout, like a prosecuting attorney leading a witness.

"Let's forget about positions and just ask: who is the best hitter?" says Billy.

Paul looks up from his computer. "Teahen: .493 on base; .624 slug. Thirty walks and only seventeen strikeouts in one hundred ninety-four at bats." It's hard to tell what the scouts make of these numbers. Scouts from other teams would almost surely say: who gives a shit about a guy's numbers? It's college ball. You need to *look* at the guy. *Imagine* what he might become.

Everyone stares silently at Teahen's name for about thirty seconds. Erik says, "I hate to say it but if you want to talk about another Jason Giambi, this guy could be it." Giambi was a natural hitter who developed power only after the Oakland A's drafted him. In the second round. Over the objections of scouts who said he couldn't run, throw, field, or hit with power. Jason Giambi: MVP of the American League in 2000.

More silence. Decades of scouting experience are being rendered meaningless. "I hate to piss on the campfire," one of the scouts finally says, "but I haven't heard Teahen's name *once* all year. I haven't heard other teams talking about him. I haven't heard his name *around here* all year. It wasn't like this guy was a fifty-five we all liked." The scouts put numbers on players. The numbers are one of the little tricks that lend scouting an air of precision. A player who receives a "55" is a player they think will one day be a regular big league player.

"Who do you like better?" asks Billy.

The old scout leans back in his chair and folds his arms. "What about Perry?" he says. "When you see him do something right on a swing, it's impressive. There's some work that needs to be done. He needs to be reworked a bit."

"You don't change guys," says Billy. "They are who they are."

"That's just my opinion," says the old scout, and folds his arms.

Once Teahen has found his slot high up on the Big Board, Billy Beane takes out a Magic Marker and writes another name:

BROWN

The four scouts across from him either wince or laugh. Brown? *Brown?* Billy can't be serious.

"Let's talk about Jeremy Brown," Billy says.

In moving from Mark Teahen, whoever he is, to Jeremy Brown, whoever *he* is, Billy Beane, in the scouting mind, had gone from the remotely plausible to the ridiculous. Jeremy Brown made the scouting lists, just. His name appears on the last page; he is a lesser member of the rabble regarded by the scouts as, at best, low-level minor league players. He's a senior catcher at the University of Alabama. Only three of the old scouts saw him and none of them rated him even close to a big leaguer. Each of them has about a thousand players ranked above him.

"Jeremy Brown is a bad body catcher," says the most vocal of the old scouts.

"A bad body who owns the Alabama record books," says Pitter.

"He's the only player in the history of the SEC with three hundred hits and two hundred walks," says Paul, looking up from his computer.

It's what he doesn't say that is interesting. No one in big league baseball cares how often a college players walks; Paul cares about it more than just about anything else. He doesn't explain why walks are important. He doesn't explain that he has gone back and studied which amateur hitters made it to the big leagues, and which did not, and why. He doesn't explain that the important traits in a baseball player were not all equally important. That foot speed, fielding ability, even raw power tended to be dramatically overpriced. That the ability to control the strike zone was the greatest indicator of future success. That the number of walks a hitter drew was the best indicator of whether he understood how to control the strike zone. Paul doesn't say that if a guy has a keen

eye at the plate in college, he'll likely keep that keen eye in the pros. He doesn't explain that plate discipline might be an innate trait, rather than something a free-swinging amateur can be taught in the pros. He doesn't talk about all the other statistically based insights—the overwhelming importance of on-base percentage, the significance of pitches seen per plate appearance—that he uses to value precisely a hitter's contribution to a baseball offense. He doesn't stress the importance of generalizing from a large body of evidence as opposed to a small one. He doesn't explain anything because Billy doesn't want him to. Billy was forever telling Paul that when you try to explain probability theory to baseball guys, you just end up confusing them.

"This kid wears a large pair of underwear," says another old scout. It's the first time in two days that this old scout has spoken. He enjoys, briefly, the unusual attention accorded the silent man in a big meeting. The others in the room can only assume that if the scout was moved to speak it must be because he had something earth-shatteringly important to say. He doesn't.

"Okay," says Billy.

"It's soft body," says the most vocal old scout. "A fleshy kind of a body."

"Oh, you mean like Babe Ruth?" says Billy. Everyone laughs, the guys on Billy's side of the room more happily than the older scouts across from him.

"I don't know," says the scout. "A body like that can be low energy."

"Sometimes low energy is just being cool," says Billy.

"Yeah," says the scout. "Well, in this case low energy is because when he walks, his thighs stick together."

"I repeat: we're not selling jeans here," says Billy.

"That's good," says the scout. "Because if you put him in corduroys, he'd start a fire."

Clutching Jeremy Brown's yellow nameplate, Billy inches

toward the Big Board with the "Top 60" names on it. The scouts shift and spit. The leading scouting publication, *Baseball America*, has just published its special issue devoted to the 2002 draft, and in it a list of the top twenty-five amateur catchers in the country. Jeremy Brown's name is not on the list. *Baseball America* has more or less said that Jeremy Brown will be lucky to get drafted. Billy Beane is walking Jeremy Brown into the first five rounds of the draft.

"Billy, does he really belong in that group?" asks the old scout plaintively. "He went in the nineteenth round last year and he'll be lucky to go there this year." The Red Sox had drafted Brown the year before, and Brown had turned down the peanuts they'd offered and returned to the University of Alabama for his senior year. It was beginning to look like a wise move.

The older scouts all share their brother's incredulity. One of them, the fat scout, when he returned from the trip Billy made him take to the University of Alabama, called Billy and told him that he couldn't recommend drafting Jeremy Brown. Period. There were fifteen hundred draft-eligible players in North America alone that he would rather own than this misshapen catcher. Like all the scouts, the fat scout had the overriding impression that Brown was fat and growing fatter. He had the further impression that Brown didn't look all that good when he did anything but hit. "Behind the plate he's not mobile," the fat scout now says. "His throws are all slingshot throws." Throws from catchers with a slinging motion tend not to follow a straight line but to tail off toward the first-base side of second base.

Billy takes a step toward the Big Board, sticks Brown's name onto the top of the Big Board's second column, the seventeenth slot, and says, "All right, push him down, guys." Jeremy Brown is now a high second-round, or even low first-round, draft pick. If baseball scouts were capable of gasping, these men would have gasped. Instead, they spit tobacco juice into their cups. That was

the moment when the scouts realized just how far Billy Beane was willing to go to push his supposedly rational and objective view of things.

"Come on, Billy," the vocal scout says.

"Finding a catcher who can hit—there's not one of them out there who can hit," says Billy. "This guy can hit."

Erik looks across the table and says, "This guy's a senior with, like, a huge history."

The scouts don't see the point of history. In their view history isn't terribly relevant when you're talking about kids who haven't become who they will be.

"Come on," says Erik, "you guys have all played with guys who were bad bodies and good baseball players."

"Yeah," says Billy. "I played with Pitter." Everyone laughs, even Pitter. "Another thing about Brown," says Billy; "he walks his ass off."

"He's leading the country in walks," says Paul. Walks!

"He better walk because he can't run," says one of the scouts.

"That body, Billy," says the most vocal old scout. "It's not natural." He's pleading now.

"He's got big thighs," says the fat scout, thoughtfully munching another jumbo-sized chocolate chip cookie. "A big butt. He's *huge* in the ass."

"Every year that body has just gotten worse and worse and worse," says a third.

"Can he hit, though?" asks Billy Beane.

"Wanna hear something," says Paul, gazing into his computer screen at the University of Alabama Web site. "In the past two years: 390 at bats; 98 walks; 38 Ks. Those numbers are better than *anyone's* in minor league baseball. Oh yeah, 21 jacks." Jacks are home runs. So are dongs, bombs, and big flies. Baseball people express their fondness for a thing by thinking up lots of different ways to say it.

The fat scout looks up from his giant chocolate chip cookie and

seeks to find a way to get across just how unimpressed he is. "Well," he says, exaggerating his natural drawl, "I musta severely unnerestimated Jeremy Brown's hittin' ability."

"I just don't see it," says the vocal scout.

"That's all right," says Billy. "We're blending what we see but we aren't allowing ourselves to be victimized by what we see."

This argument had nothing to do with Jeremy Brown. It was about how to find a big league ballplayer. In the scouts' view, you found a big league ballplayer by driving sixty thousand miles, staying in a hundred crappy motels, and eating god knows how many meals at Denny's all so you could watch 200 high school and college baseball games inside of four months, 199 of which were completely meaningless to you. Most of your worth derived from your membership in the fraternity of old scouts who did this for a living. The other little part came from the one time out of two hundred when you would walk into the ballpark, find a seat on the aluminum plank in the fourth row directly behind the catcher, and see something no one else had seen—at least no one who knew the meaning of it. You only had to see him once. "If you see it once, it's there," says Erik. "There's always been that belief in scouting." And if you saw it once, you, and only you, would know the meaning of what you saw. You had found the boy who was going to make you famous.

Billy had his own idea about where to find future major league baseball players: inside Paul's computer. He'd flirted with the idea of firing all the scouts and just drafting the kids straight from Paul's laptop. The Internet now served up just about every statistic you could want about every college player in the country, and Paul knew them all. Paul's laptop didn't have a tiny red bell on top that whirled and whistled whenever a college player's on-base percentage climbed above .450, but it might as well have. From Paul's point of view, that was the great thing about college players: they had meaningful stats. They played a lot more games, against stiffer competition, than high school players. The sample size of

their relevant statistics was larger, and therefore a more accurate reflection of some underlying reality. You could project college players with greater certainty than you could project high school players. The statistics enabled you to find your way past all sorts of sight-based scouting prejudices: the scouting dislike of short right-handed pitchers, for instance, or the scouting distrust of skinny little guys who get on base. Or the scouting distaste for fat catchers.

That was the source of this conflict. For Billy and Paul and, to a slightly lesser extent, Erik and Chris, a young player is not what he looks like, or what he might become, but *what he has done.* As elementary as that might sound to someone who knew nothing about professional baseball, it counts as heresy here. The scouts even have a catch phrase for what Billy and Paul are up to: "performance scouting." "Performance scouting," in scouting circles, is an insult. It directly contradicts the baseball man's view that a young player is what you can see him doing in your mind's eye. It argues that most of what's important about a baseball player, maybe even including his character, can be found in his statistics.

After Billy said what he had to say about being "victimized by what we see," no one knew what to say. Everyone stared at Jeremy Brown's name. Maybe then they all understood that they weren't here to make decisions. They were here to learn about the new way that decisions were going to be made.

"This is a cutting-edge approach we're taking this year," says Erik, whose job, it is increasingly clear, is to stand between Billy and the old scouts, and reconcile the one to the other. "Five years from now everyone might be doing it this way."

"I hope not," says Paul. He doesn't mean this in the way that the old scouts would like him to mean it.

"Bogie," says Erik, calling across the table on the vast moral authority of the oldest scout of all, Dick Bogard. "Does this make sense to you?" Erik adores Bogie, though of course he'd never put it that way. When Erik announced he wanted to leave the A's advertising department and get into the baseball end of things, even though he himself had never played, Bogie not only did not laugh at him; he encouraged him. "My baseball father," Erik called Bogie.

Bogie is not merely the oldest of the scouts; he is the scout who has worked for the most other teams. He is a walking map of his own little world. In spite of his age, or maybe because of it, he knows when an old thing has died.

"Oh definitely," says Bogie, motioning to Paul's computer. "It's a new game. Years ago we didn't have these stats to look up. We had to go with what we saw."

"Years ago it only cost a hundred grand to sign them," says Erik.

The other older scouts are unmoved. "Look," says Erik, "Pitter and I are the ones that people are going to say, 'What the hell were you doing? How the hell could you take Brown in the first round?'"

No one says anything.

"The hardest thing," says Billy, "is there is a certain pride, or lack of pride, required to do this right. You take a guy high no one else likes and it makes you uncomfortable. But I mean, really, who gives a fuck where guys are taken? Remember Zito? Everyone said we were nuts to take Zito with the ninth pick of the draft. And we *knew* everyone was going to say that. One fucking month later it's clear we kicked everyone's ass. Nobody remembers that now. But understand, when we stop trying to figure out the perception of guys, we've done better."

"Jeremy Brown isn't Zito," says one of the scouts. But he is. A lot of people in the room have forgotten that the scouting department hadn't wanted to take Barry Zito because Barry Zito threw an 88-mph fastball. They preferred a flamethrower named Ben Sheets. "Billy made us take Zito," Bogie later confesses.

"Let me ask you this," says Billy. "If Jeremy Brown looked as

good in a uniform as Majewski [a Greek Kouros who played outfield for the University of Texas], where on this board would you put him?"

The scouts pretend to consider this. Nobody says anything so Pitter says it for them: "He'd be in that first column." A first-round pick.

"You guys really are trying to sell jeans, aren't you?" says Billy. And on that note of affectionate disgust, he ends the debate. He simply takes Jeremy Brown's nameplate and moves him from the top of the second column on the Big Board to the bottom of the first, from #17 to #15. Jeremy Brown, whose name had somehow failed to turn up on *Baseball America*'s list of the top twenty-five amateur catchers, who serious scouts believed should never be a pro baseball player, is now a first-round draft choice of the Oakland A's.

"Since we're talking about Brown anyway," says Paul, which wasn't exactly true, since the scouts were now distinctly *not* talking about Brown, "there's a list of hitters I want to talk about. All of these guys share certain qualities. They are the eight guys we definitely want. And we want *all* eight of these guys" He reads a list:

Jeremy Brown
Stephen Stanley
John Baker
Mark Kiger
Shaun Larkin
John McCurdy
Brant Colamarino
Brian Stavisky

All eight are college players. Most of them are guys the scouts either did not particularly like, or, in a few cases, don't really know. A young man rises to put their names on the board. Paul

quickly organizes them, like a dinner guest who has spilled his wine and hopes to clean it up before the host notices. When he's finished, the board is a market but from a particular point of view, that of a trader who possesses, or believes he possesses, superior knowledge.

With that, the coup was complete. Paul's list of hitters were distinctly not guys the scouts found driving around. They were guys Paul found surfing the Internet. Some of the names the older scouts do not even recognize. The evaluation of young baseball players had been taken out of the hands of old baseball men and placed in the hands of people who had what Billy valued most (and what Billy didn't have), a degree in something other than baseball.

"There's some serious on-base percentage up there," says Billy. No one else says anything. The room is filled with silence.

"We got three guys at the top of the board that no one has ever heard of," Pitter finally says, with just a trace of pride.

"There isn't a board in the game that looks like this one," agrees Bogie.

Bogie brought into the draft room something unique: vast experience to which he had no visceral attachment. He'd been in the game for nearly fifty years. He'd seen a lot, perhaps everything, and he was willing to forget it, if asked. As it happened, one of the things he had seen, back in 1980, was a high school game in San Diego. That was the year that the Mets took Darryl Strawberry with the first overall pick in the draft. But that year there was another high school player, who, in his ability to conjure fantasies in the baseball scouting mind, rivaled Strawberry. Bogie had gone to see him at the behest of the Houston Astros. Great body, plus wheels, plus arm, good instincts, and the ability to hit the ball over light towers. To top it off, he'd scored higher than any other prospect on the psychological tests. Bogie had phoned Houston and told the front office that he had found a better prospect than Darryl Strawberry: Billy Beane.

When asked which player, on the Oakland A's draft board, most

resembled the young Billy Beane, Bogie said, "Shit, man. There *is* no Billy Beane. Not up there." When asked why, he'd said, "Billy was a guy you could dream on," and left it to you to understand that Billy Beane, the general manager, had just systematically eliminated guys "you could dream on." But when asked what became of those still unforgotten dreams, Bogie hesitated. He looked over and met the eye of the grown-up Billy Beane.

"That's enough!" said Billy. He'd only been pretending not to listen. Bogie just smiled, shrugged, and said no more.

Chapter Three

THE ENLIGHTENMENT

THE METS had had only the greatest expectations of him. They'd wanted to hold a big press conference in Dodger Stadium to announce his signing. Billy asked them not to. He had a claustrophobic unease with ceremony of any kind, and a press conference was nothing but a ceremonial event. It'd make him feel trapped. Plus he didn't want to make a big deal about becoming a pro baseball player. It was less a decision to celebrate than a vaguely uncomfortable fact to get his mind around. The Mets failed to consider the cause or implications of his reticence. In the belief that Billy was more ready for pro ball than Darryl Strawberry, they sent Strawberry to the low-level rookie team with the other high school kids and Billy to the high-level rookie team, in Little Falls, New York, with the college players. Little Falls, New York, could not have felt farther from San Diego, California. His teammates might as well have been a different species than the high school kids he was used to playing with. They had hair on their backs and fat on their stomachs. They smoked before