

LEVELED BOOK • Y

Miltie Math-head Takes the Mound



Written by Jeffrey Fuerst • Illustrated by Joel Snyder

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Miltie Pitching?

If you live anywhere near Cobb County, you probably know my pal Milton Meyers as Miltie Math-head, boy-math-whiz-and-football-hero. He took out a rushing linebacker the size and speed of a runaway train in a championship football game that led our team to victory. How did a little guy, who admits to having two left feet and ten left thumbs, do it? Being a math whiz, he used math: angles, arcs, and algebra. Add in a double dose of guts and determination and you have the stuff of which legends are made.

Miltie's athletic ability hadn't improved much since we won that Pee Wee Football championship, but when you're told over and over that you're a sports legend, you start to believe it. Maybe that's why Miltie's **ego** had swollen up to the size of a basketball—which he still couldn't shoot into the hoop unless he stood on a stepladder, and even then, his chances were **abysmal**.

That didn't matter much now, this being baseball season. What did matter is that all the guys wanted Miltie on the team, and not just as the **statistician**, but as a player.

We're talking about the same Miltie who, according to his records, had a batting average of .100, which he explained is pronounced "one hundred."

"It has to do with the **decimals** going into the **thousandths place**, Dan." He explained, "That's an average of one hit for every ten times at-bat. By comparison, you have an impressive .400 average, which is four hits for every ten times at-bat. That can be crunched down to the **lowest common denominator**, which is precisely two for five."





Miltie's **computations** tell you that I'm good with the stick. However, most people know Dan-the-Man Dugan—that's me—for my powerful arm (I'm the quarterback on the football team and a pitching ace). Miltie could reel off my strikeouts-to-walks **ratio** and **ERA** (earned run average), no sweat, and would be delighted to show you how to do it, too, you know, compute those figures.

I don't care what the records say. I just do what's best for the team. Miltie managing? That's a no-brainer with his skills in math and knack for organization, but Miltie Math-head on the **mound**? Nope, especially not when marching at the head of the Founder's Day parade is at stake!

The Secret League

Every spring, kids from diverse neighborhoods across Cobb County put together their own ball teams to participate in an exclusive league: no matching uniforms, phony pep talks, or parents on the sidelines hollering, "Keep your eye on the ball, sweetie."

We just go out and play and have a great time. We settle any arguments like regular gentlemen and regular ladies (those who are girls, since the teams are co-ed).





The only adult who knows about our secret league is Old Man MacGruder, our **ump** and a pro from the way-old days. He shows us trick pitches and tells us about stuff that happened when Major Leaguers used to ride trains to their games.

The league has six teams, which play each other twice. The team with the best record wins the honor of marching, dancing, and laughing at the head of the Founder's Day parade. No trophies or names in newspapers, just **dibs**, and that's a big deal to us. Everyone who is in-the-know knows who's tops in town, and when everyone knows, you don't need any trophies or plaques or ribbons or names in newspapers.

Our special league team, the Hilltop Aces, is the one Miltie was managing and wanting to pitch for. When I objected, Jimmy-Don't-Look-Now Gordon, our speedy centerfielder said, "What's the matter Dan, afraid you won't be The Man?" Then Billy "Beefalo" Beffalini, our big first-baseman added, "Maybe you should bone up on your math if you want to pitch for us."

It takes more than some prodding to get me riled. Besides, Miltie and I have been buddies since second grade.

"If that's what you guys want, then I'm fine with it," I said, hitting everyone grounders while Miltie practiced pitching with Mary Beth, our catcher. Yes, Mary Beth is a girl and not very big either, but she is quick, tough, and smart.

"Fire-hard, Miltie-boy," she said, right before Miltie tossed a fastball that kind of wobbled into her glove. "Thataway, kiddo," she encouraged anyway. Miltie smirked and shouted, "Now here comes the heat."

I'm not exaggerating much when I say that Jimmy could have sprinted from the pitcher's mound to home plate faster than Miltie's pitch.

"Another strike!" cried Mary Beth.



"That's my eighth strike in ten attempts," Miltie announced to Mary Beth, louder than necessary. "That's an accuracy rating of 80 percent. Dan throws about 70 percent strikes."

"That means Miltie is 10 percent better," said Jimmy.

"Miltie, Miltie, Miltie," chimed the team, just as they did after the big football game and have been singing ever since. So I sighed and kept my mouth shut, knowing that there is more to pitching than throwing strikes.



The Losing Streak

The Hilltop Aces started-off impressively, scoring three runs in the top of the first inning of the first game. Miltie then graced the mound and hurled strike after strike across the plate. However, Old Man MacGruder didn't get to call a one because the other team whacked and walloped Miltie's slowballs. When the game ended, they had scored 13 runs, and Miltie's ERA was squarely in the dumpster.

"We'll get them next time," said Mary Beth.

"Sure," said Miltie, sounding as if some of the air had escaped out of his basketball-sized head, "I'll keep practicing, and we'll recover."

"We will, pal, we will," I said. We did improve, but not sufficiently. We lost 9 to 7 in the next game, and then got clobbered 14 to 2 by the Mudflat Maulers—our cross-town rivals and the squad we beat to win the football championship.

"Hey, Math-head," barked their captain, Maurice, "The 618 Express," whom Miltie took out in the final play of the football game. "Why don't you do the math? As a pitcher you're a zero—ha!"

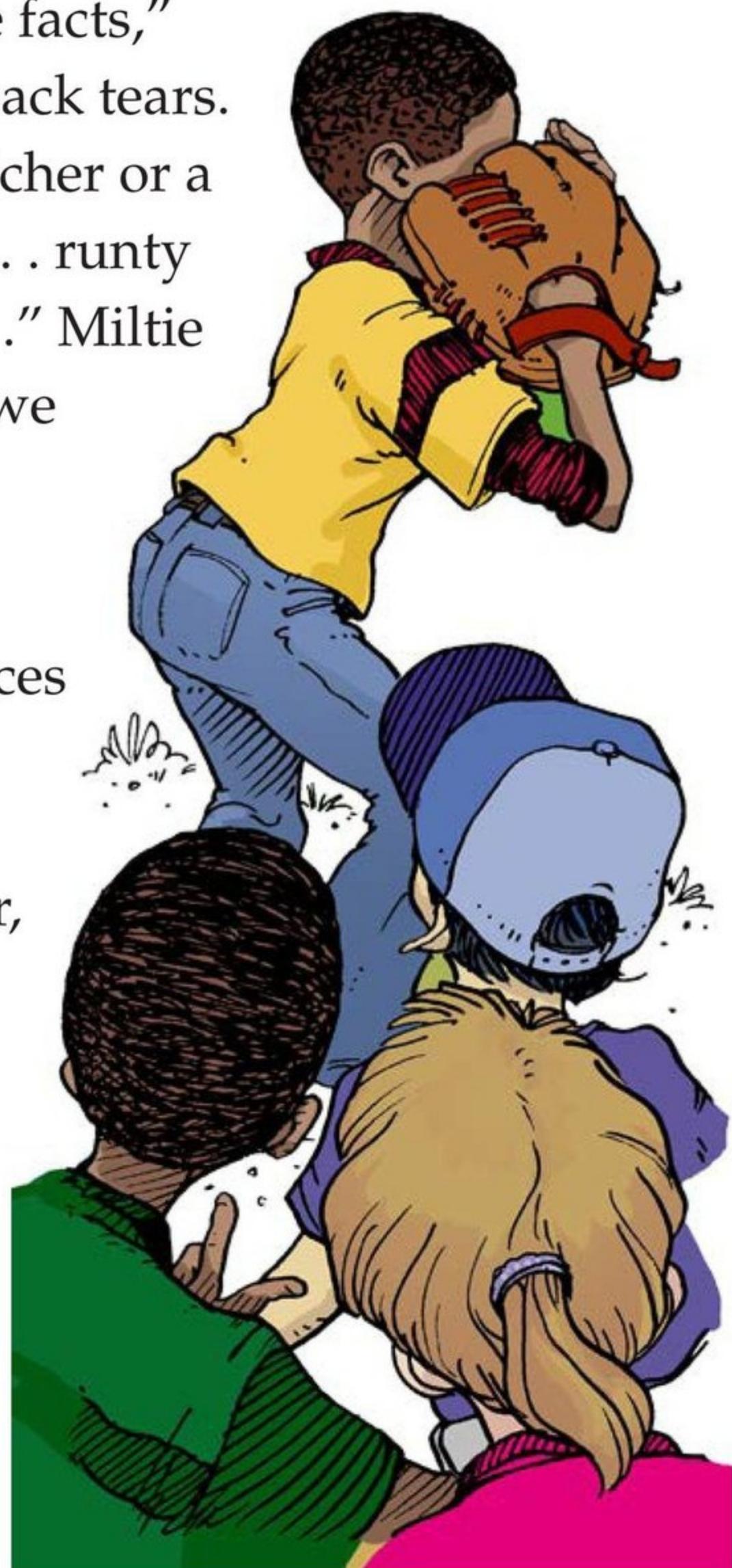


We were now zero and three, yet you don't have to be a mathematical genius to deduce that we had a problem and who it was. The guys started grumbling, but like I said before, I kept my mouth shut. Mary Beth led another "Miltie, Miltie, Miltie" cheer after 618's taunts, but no one joined in.

"Let's examine the facts," said Miltie, choking back tears. "Clearly, I'm not a pitcher or a ballplayer but just a . . . runty math-head with a . . ." Miltie then darted away so we wouldn't witness his blubbering.

"Ah, the Hilltop Aces are better off without him," said Beefalo.
"Dan, you'll take over, won't you?"

"Sorry, Billy, but you'll have to get on without me. I've got to find something before I lose it."



Can a Fatball Help?

I searched all over for Miltie and finally spied him—and Mary Beth—chatting with Old Man MacGruder.

“The ultimate key to pitching isn’t speed or power or strength, my boy,” said Old Man MacGruder, “it’s how you control the at-bat.”

Like I said as you recall, there’s more to pitching than throwing strikes. Pitching is a brain game, not a game for the feeble-minded. I knew Miltie could grasp it—eventually.

“Did I tell you about the time I struck out Mickey Mays, spinning him around, making him look foolish?”

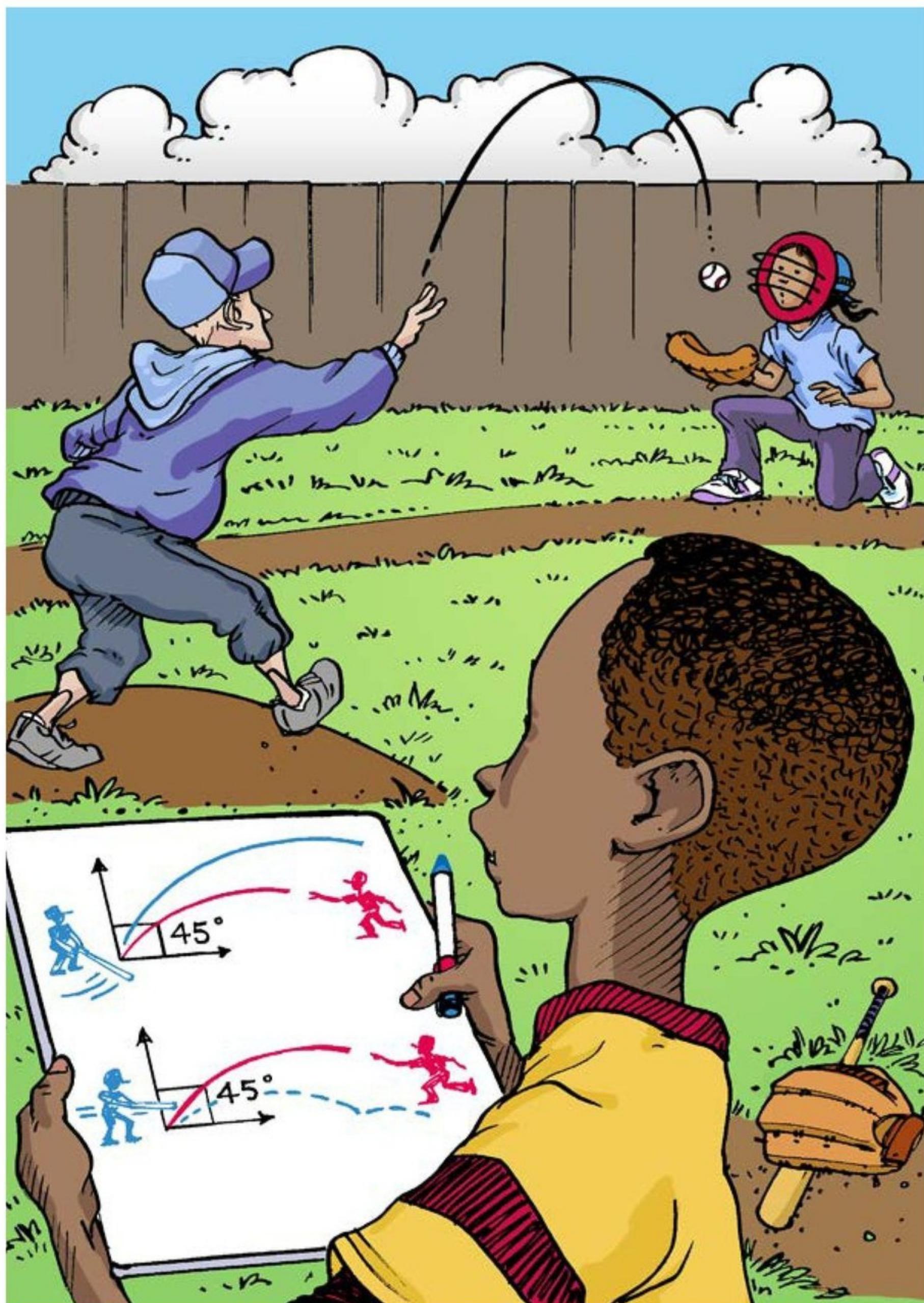
“Mickey Mays,” said Mary Beth, “the Hall of Famer?”

“I got him with my fatball.”

“Don’t you mean fastball, Mr. MacGruder?” questioned Miltie.

“Nope, fatball. It’s really a super slowball that you lob in, like a softball, so it comes flopping down shoulder high, looking as plump as a stuffed turkey just before Thanksgiving.”

"A high arcing pitch," said Miltie, his brain gears whirring, "has the ball come crashing in at a 45-degree angle. If you upper cut it, you can crush the ball far, but with a solid, level baseball swing, you're more likely to hit a weak grounder."



Then I saw Miltie's eyes get all squinty. He was doing **calculations**—I told you that boy had a brain! “Our team can still lead the Founder’s Day parade, Dan, if we can win nine games in a row.”

An improbable long-shot, I thought, but said, “Sure, we can do it.”

“Of course we’ll do it,” said Miltie. “You’re pitching from now on.”

“What?”

“I’ll still be manager,” said Miltie, “and a reserve player, but it’s best for the Aces.”

I didn’t argue and neither did anyone else. We stormed through the other teams over the next few weeks and bumped our record up to eight and three, going into the last game against the Maulers, who were also eight and three. Therefore, the winner of this game would have dibs.



Pitching Changes

It looked like a cinch for us because I was in fine form, holding the Maulers to one run in five innings, knocking in three runs and scoring twice myself.

“Dan,” said Miltie, “do you realize that you have factored in 100 percent of our runs?”

At this point, I wasn’t interested in numbers, only in letters—particularly, a W. But it was the top of the final inning and we stacked the bases loaded with two outs, and I was up to bat.

“Time out!” called The 618 Express. “Now pitching is 618.”

Some people gossip or whisper among themselves that 618 got his nickname from his batting average. He was the greatest slugger in our league, but he certainly wasn’t a pitcher, so what was this **substitution** all about?

I found out on the first pitch: 618 plunked me on the elbow of my pitching arm. I collapsed in pain.

“Sorry,” said 618, but his eyes were saying, “Ha-ha.”

“Take your base,” said Mr. MacGruder.

Jakey-boy scored a run and then the next batter popped out. I went to the mound for my warm-up tosses, thinking the Hilltop Aces were ahead 6 to 1 and only three outs away from triumphantly marching at the head of the parade. But I could barely clutch the ball much less heave it. Old Man MacGruder took a jaunt out to the mound, where Miltie and Mary Beth gathered shortly thereafter.

"Son," said Mr. MacGruder, "you're a talented pitcher with a heck of an arm, but right now your body is telling you 'no more pitching' no matter what your heart is saying. Now I'm saying you need to wrap some ice on that elbow and rest."

"Now?" I said.



"Now," said Miltie, "Beefalo, you're pitching."

"Yes!" came a cry from the Mauler bench, and I didn't have to crane my neck to see that it was 618. The guy had beaned me on purpose, just to boot me out of the game, even if it meant sacrificing a run. What a stinker. His plan worked, and the Maulers put together a rally and knocked in two runs. Beefalo, rattled, got one out but gave up two walks.

Miltie called a time-out and said, "Now pitching is . . ."

"Jakey-boy?" said Beefalo.

"Mary Beth," said Miltie. "She's been practicing."

"But she's a girl!" said Beefalo so loud you could almost not hear another deafening "Yes!" ring out from the Mauler bench. When Mary Beth struck out the first batter, it looked like another genius move by Miltie Math-head, but then she gave up two runs, making it 6 to 5 with 618 due up. Miltie called, "Time," and walked to the mound nearly as slowly as one of his pitches. He whispered something to Mary Beth, who handed the ball over. What's weird is that instead of looking disappointed, she beamed with pride. What now?

The Final Pitching Change

"Now pitching," said Miltie, "is Milton Meyers."

"No!" cried Beefalo.

"No!" cried Jimmy.

"Yes!" cried 618, strolling in from the on-deck circle. "The 618 is right on time."

If there was one guy you didn't want to face with the bases loaded and the game on the line, it was 618, and here was Miltie Math-head on the mound. If only my elbow didn't hurt so much . . . maybe I should pitch with my other arm . . . maybe I should . . .

"Go, Miltie!"
I cried.



Miltie looked in for the sign from Mary Beth, who had gone back to catching. Then he went into his **windup** and threw . . . a blooper pitch? The ball arced high and floated down to the plate like a snowflake, and the Mauler's 618 froze, not quite believing what he was seeing.

"Strike one!" cried Mr. MacGruder.

"What was that?" said 618.

"That's Miltie Math-head's Super Blooper," said Mary Beth. "Both of us have been practicing pitching."

"Try that again and let's see what happens," snarled 618.

Miltie floated another blooper, but this time, 618 stepped toward the ball and smacked it 300 feet, only it went foul by a good 30 feet.

"Strike two," said Mr. MacGruder with a giggle, though if you asked him about it, he'd tell you he was just clearing his throat.

"Maurice," said Miltie, "that pitch was way inside on purpose and even though you hit it well, it had no place to go but foul. If you did the math, you'd understand that."

"If you're such a hot-shot, Math-head, then throw the next one over the plate."

"Okay," said Miltie.

The minus side of playing for dibs in our special, secret baseball league is that if you talk about what happens, then adults and other people will end up knowing about it. Then there would be trophies and names in newspapers, and marching at the head of the parade wouldn't mean that much. So we never talk about what happens, and that's too bad, especially when what happens is the stuff of legends.

So, even if you live near Cobb County, you probably won't hear how Miltie, being a straight-up guy, did exactly what he told 618 he'd do. He fired a strike right over the plate.

He just didn't throw the type of strike 618 was expecting. You see, Miltie threw his fastball. I still think Jimmy could have run from the mound to the plate faster than the pitch, yet compared to the bloopers Miltie had been throwing, his fastball actually seemed fast.

The 618 Express, laying back for the bloop with his bat held low, simply couldn't adjust his swing in time to catch up with Miltie's fastball.



"Strike three!" cried Old Man MacGruder.
"The Hilltop Aces win."

Dibs! We were going to lead the Founder's Day parade all because of Miltie Math-head.

"Miltie, Miltie, Miltie," the team shouted, as we carried him around the bases in a victory lap.

"Thanks, but I couldn't have done it without all of you," said Miltie, his ego looking just about the right size again.

"And, of course, math," I added.

"Actually, Dan, this time I used psychology—there's a lot more to pitching than just throwing strikes."

Glossary

abysmal	very bad (p. 5)
calculations	working things out using math (p. 16)
computations	calculations (p. 6)
decimals	fractions, or parts, of numbers (p. 5)
dibs	slang for claiming exclusive right to something (p. 8)
earned-run average (ERA)	a baseball statistic that reflects a pitcher's success rate (p. 6)
ego	one's idea of oneself (p. 5)
lowest common denominator	the smallest number that can be divided exactly, without a remainder (p. 5)
mound	the raised ground a player pitches from (p. 6)
ratio	a comparison between two numbers or quantities (p. 6)
statistician	one who records the number facts of the game (p. 5)
substitution	an exchange (p. 17)
thousandths place	three places after the decimal point (p. 5)
ump (umpire)	one who officiates a baseball game (p. 8)
windup	the movement a pitcher goes through before releasing the ball (p. 21)

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