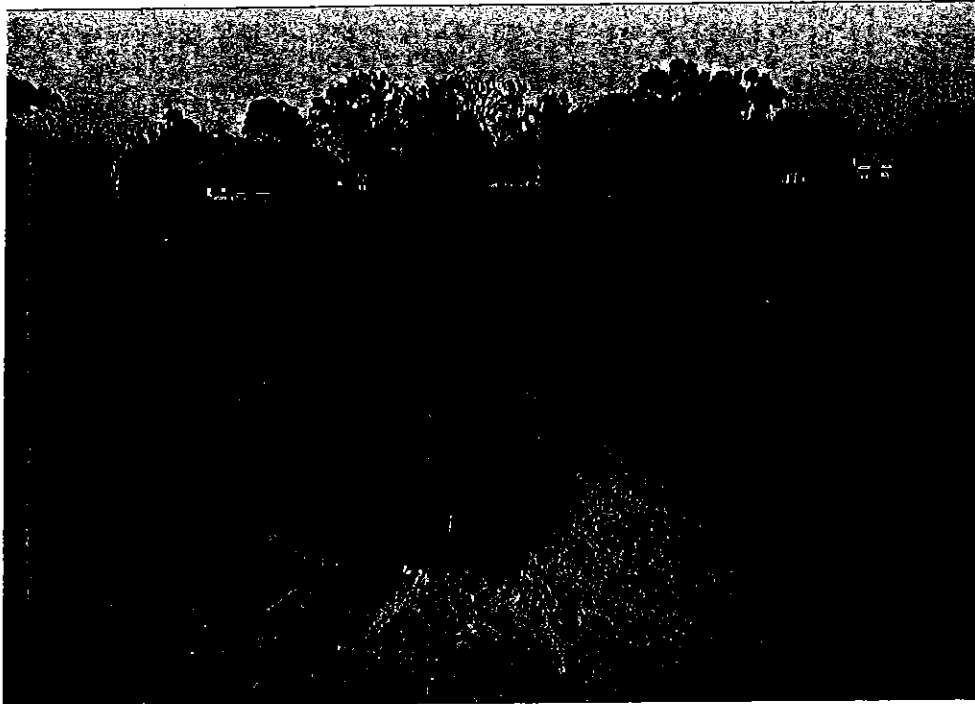


PHOTO BY ROCKY KNETEN



The Wizard repose on the pitcher's mound, where many a foe has succumbed to his heckling.

THE WIZARD OF HECKLING

What I did to poor, nineteen-year-old Buster wasn't nice. In fact, it was underhanded and unsportsmanlike. That's why it worked.

COUGAR FIELD, Houston vs. Notre Dame — Right from the moment the boy began his warm-up tosses, I got the magical incantation going, chanting his name softly, Bus-ter, Busss-ter, and then the fans behind our dugout joined in, followed by the entire grandstand, chanting softly, Busss-ter, Busss-ter, as if calling for a cat in the dead of the night. Buster was pitching for the Irish on St. Paddy's Day, in front of a rare standing-room-only crowd of 2,500 and an ESPN national television audience. In the first inning, Buster walked three batters and the Coogs stole three bases on him. I kept the entire grandstand chanting his name until the third inning, when both the strike zone and Buster disappeared completely.

What I did to poor, nineteen-year-old Buster wasn't nice. In fact, it was underhanded and unsportsmanlike. That's why it worked. The Coogs won, 14-4. The TV win boosted the Coogs' recruiting; the next morning Coach Roland Walton got calls from young prospects all over the country as well as high school coaches who were suddenly interested in sending their players to Houston. Poor Buster.

To the out-of-towners over on the first-base side, I'm the jerk in the third row who won't keep his trap shut. After I tell their favorite overweight lefty to mix in a strike, I suggest that he also mix in a salad. The out-of-towners get mad, and I can't blame them. They holler through cupped hands, calling me a disappointed ballplayer.

The home folk here on the third-base side call me the Wizard. As the local heckler, I'm their man, and I try to show the new folks what the home folk already

know — that a disappointed ballplayer can do more for his team than a disillusioned one.

My greatest thrill in heckling came on an afternoon when the Coogs found themselves down by two runs late in the game. There was the usual small crowd. I didn't even have to lean forward for the opposing pitcher to hear me. For seven innings he was in complete command, mowing down the Coogs and leaving me little room for insinuation. But I kept on him like a body puncher, hoping to wear him down.

Then the sun started going down behind the press box. The pitcher, squinty-eyed and bent over, couldn't read the catcher's signs or see his return throws to the mound. He tried to block the sun with his glove. But on the next pitch he threw a fastball when the catcher expected a curve, and when the catcher gave the return throw a little extra umph, the pitcher lost it in the sun and the ball plunked him on the hip.

I told the catcher to take it easy on him and I even offered to get the pitcher a batting helmet. When the catcher hit the pitcher three or four more times, I pleaded with the ump to stop the fight.

He walked the next two batters, which brought up Riley Epps, the potential go-ahead run; but more importantly, the pitcher began throwing glances my way and muttering to himself. At this point, I was standing on the bleachers, waving my arms and shouting. I called him "rabbit ears" for listening to me and told him to concentrate on the batter and get his mind off the jerk in the stands.

He finally cracked. Standing atop his little dirt mound, he looked at me and, using "the finger" in the familiar gesture usually reserved for poorly lit barrooms and the 610 Loop, he showed me and the world who was number one. That one finger was my trophy, and when Riley Epps hit the next pitch out to Cullen Boulevard, I almost circled the bases with him.

Last season, the Cougars's home won-lost record was 40-5 under my derision. Their record away from home? A meager 4-12.

Heckling has always been magical.

The chief function of the Arabic poet was to "get all over" the tribal enemy. His words were thought fatal, and his people followed him confidently into battle as he hurled his vituperations.

But society no longer holds hecklers in high esteem. No broad thoroughfares, no junior highs are named after us. No one even brings us fruit. Nowadays people are too skeptical of words and have lost faith in their magic. No one, except the faithful at Cougar Field, takes a heckler's powers seriously.

In heckling history Claude Lucker stands out as one of the finest. Lucker, a man who lost seven fingers as a pressman, was not afraid to go after baseball's fieriest competitor, Ty Cobb. What Lucker said to the immortal Cobb at the Polo Grounds on May 15, 1912, was never reported, but it provoked the Georgia Peach to lose his head. The headlines of the *Sunday Times* read: TY COBB, WHO BEAT A DEFENSELESS CRIPPLE, IS SUSPENDED. Cobb's teammates sent telegrams to their friends on other teams asking them to strike and go on a lucrative barnstorming trip. There was talk of forming a union, not because of low wages or unfair labor practices, but because of hecklers' abuses. Had Cobb not been the most hated player in the league, the union probably would have been formed.

After the league office suspended him, Cobb spoke the words that warm the heckler's heart: "I feel a great injustice has been done." Lucker responded the only way a great heckler could: "It all seemed good-natured to me."

Good-natured fun? Heckling is about winning. A good heckler will infect the opposition with frustration and dissension by pointing out the many injustices inherent in the game. As a disappointed ballplayer, I've learned about these injustices firsthand.

Take the strange relationship between pitcher and catcher. Their coach has taken them aside separately and told them to "take charge." For the pitcher, this means "shake off" a catcher's sign to remind him who has the ball. For the catcher, it means

throw the ball back unreasonably hard, just to keep the pitcher in the game. So they are adversaries of sorts, even though together they must work to deceive the opposing batters.

The two positions also differ in social status. The aristocratic pitcher is in the limelight with his "stuff," while the proletarian catcher, the real brains of the operation, slaves away unnoticed in the shadow of the umpire. The catcher must also handle the pitcher, and he must do so subtly so as not to alert the pitcher that he is being handled, for the pitcher must always believe that he is in charge.

What if the catcher *thinks* they have the hitter set up for a slow change-up, but the hitter gives the pitcher's innocent delivery a four-hundred-foot disillusionment? It's the pitcher who has egg on his face and on his record. The catcher, red under the mask with embarrassment, simply asks for a new ball and squats back down into anonymity.

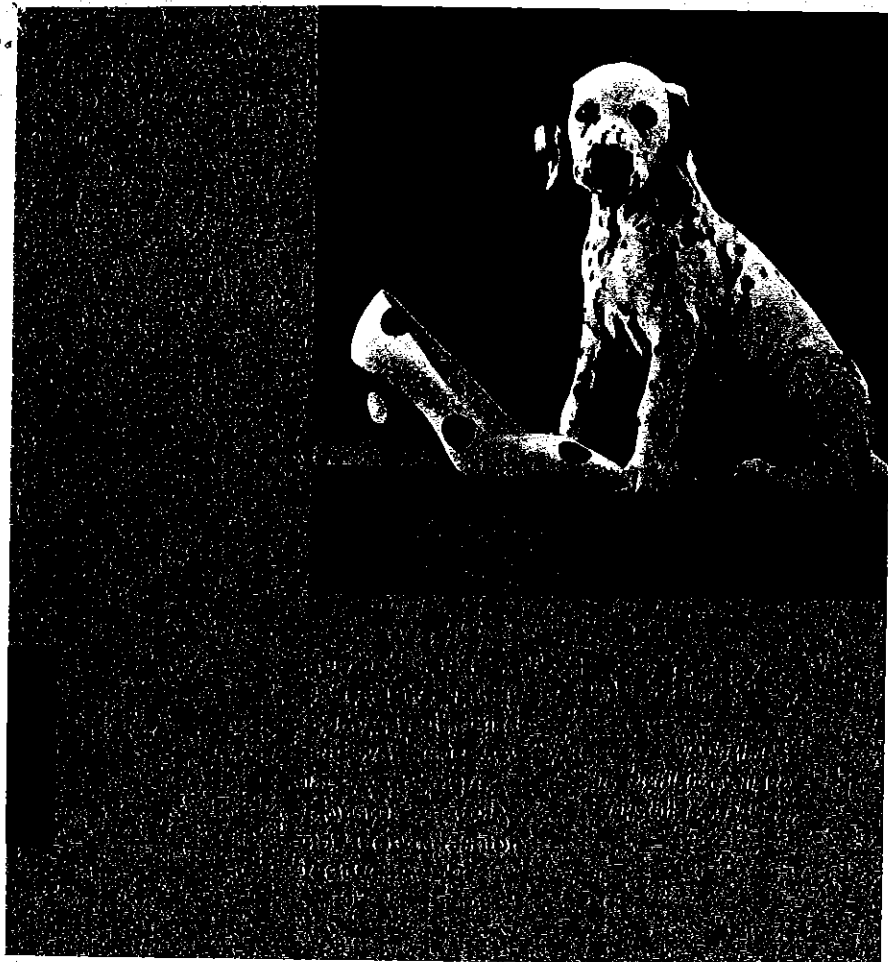
The pitcher will have his chance once a batter reaches base. Even though any great base stealer will tell you that he steals off the pitcher, not the catcher, throwing out runners is the measure of a catcher's arm. It's not fair, but that's what goes in the book. If the pitcher doesn't hold the runner close, the catcher doesn't have a chance, and instead of eating the ball, a young catcher will often rush his futile throw, sending it distressingly into center field for an error.

Seeing all this, and knowing that the pitcher's failure made the catcher look bad, I must inform the catcher, *facit indignatio versum*, that he can't throw out the garbage.

Because of the way it preys upon the nuances of the game, heckling can be criticized for being nothing more than a parasitic art. But I've lived the parable of the hard-luck pitcher: the guy who pitches the game of his life, riding the fragile crest of his big-league dream, only to give up a scratch hit in the ninth, hit a batter, and have some ambitious sophomore come in and pin a loss on his back. When I remind a pitcher that there's a guy warming up in the bullpen who wants to give up his runs, a guy who ran five miles a

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day last winter to keep his dream afloat and who would love to have his spot in the starting rotation, it's because I've been there.

I'm just a disappointed ballplayer, a teaching assistant, a grad student, a writer struggling with words dead on the page, until I reach Cougar Field and make my way to my third-row seat with the season pass they've given me. I'm always nervous about shedding the etiquette expected of a regular citizen, but somewhere, as I walk behind the backstop and across the bleachers, I become the Wizard. "We need you to get on 'em," someone will say. I can almost see our players keeping one ear up in the silence, waiting for the comfort of the Wizard's obnoxious voice. For the spectators, even if they aren't aficionados, heckling serves as a comic interlude, a breather to keep the home team loose while putting the opposition on edge. I'll yell something at the pitcher. "That all you got? My dog's got more heat than you, pal." And then I'll be right at home.

There will be a coach's wife waiting for me as I leave. Some stranger will be holding the wife's baby so she can shake *both* fists at me.

"You abbreviated piece of nothing," she'll say. "You chowderhead, you empty plate, you're nothing but an animated cuspidor, you lightweight, you box-ankled hound, you drugstore cowboy..."

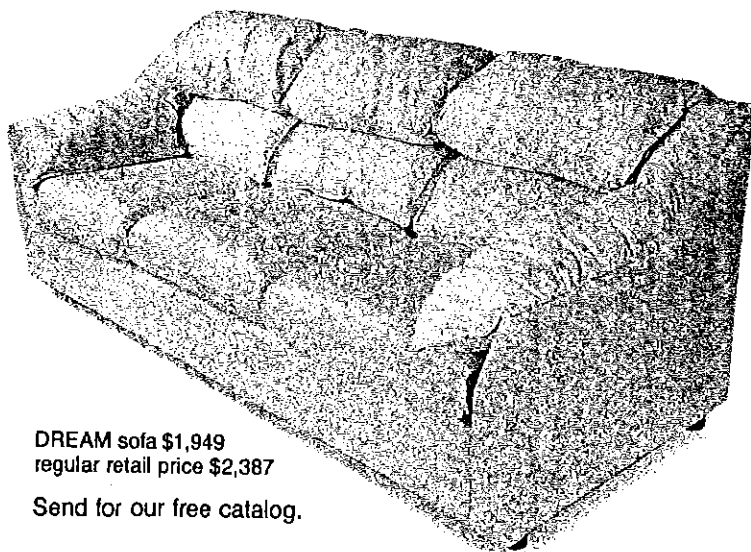
"Thank you, ma'am," I'll say, and tip my cap. "But even in ridicule, the spirit which informs the invective should be instructive."

"...you foot-wiper, you impish sarcastigator..."

Though her praise is well taken, she'll never know how it pains me to see such talent wasted. ■

F.X. Drapeau is a graduate student in the University of Houston writing program and is working on a novel.

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