

## NAKED TO THE INVISIBLE EYE

The one thing a dying institution does not need is an overly brilliant performer.

There were less than a thousand spectators in the little ball park, their chatter nearly inaudible compared to the heartening roar of the major league crowds. The fans sat uneasily, as if they had wandered into the wake of a legendary hero. No longer was baseball the national pastime. Even the big league teams, roving from franchise to franchise in search of yesterday's loyal bleacher fanatics, resorted to promotional gimmicks to stave off bankruptcy. Here, the Bears were in third place, with an unlikely shot at second. The Tigers had clinched the pennant early, now leading the second-place Kings by nine games and the Bears by an even more discouraging number. There was no real tension in this game—oh, with a bad slump the Bears might fall down among the cellar teams, but so what? For all intents and purposes, the season had ended a month ago.

There was no tension, no pennant race any longer, just an inexpensive evening out for the South Carolina fans. The sweat on the batter's hands was the fault of his own nervous reaction; the knots in his stomach were shared by no one. He went to the on-deck circle for the pine-tar rag while he waited for the new pitcher to toss his warm-ups.

The Bear shortstop was batting eighth, reflecting his anemic .219 average. Like a great smoothed rock this fact sat in the torrent of his thinking, submerged at times but often breaking through the racing surface. With his unsteady fielding it looked as if he would be out of a job the next spring. To the players and to the spectators the game was insignificant; to him it was the first of his last few chances. With two runs in already in the eighth, one out and a man on first, he went to the plate.

He looked out toward the kid on the mound before settling himself in the batter's box. The pitcher's name was Rudy Ramirez, he was only nineteen and from somewhere in Venezuela. That was all anybody knew about him; this was his first appearance in a professional ball game. The Bear shortstop took a deep breath and stepped in.

*That kid Ramirez looked pretty fast during his warm-ups*, he thought. The shortstop damned the fate that made him the focus of attention against a complete unknown. The waters surged; his thoughts shuffled and died.

The Venezuelan kid looked in for his sign. The shortstop looked down to the third-base coach, who flashed the take signal; that was all right with him. *I'm only batting .219, I want to see this kid throw one before ...*

Ramirez went into his stretch, glanced at the runner on first ...

With that kid Barger coming off the disabled list I might not be able to . . .

Ramirez' right leg kicked, his left arm flung back ...

The shortstop's shrieking flood of thought stilled, his mind was as quiet as the surface of a pond stagnating. The umpire called the pitch a ball.

Along the coaching lines at third Sorenson was relaying the *hit-and-run* sign from the dugout. *All right*, thought the shortstop, *just make contact, get a good ground ball, maybe a hit, move the man into scoring position ...*

Ramirez nodded to his catcher, stretched, checked the runner ...

*My luck, I'll get an easy double-play ball to the right side ...*

Ramirez kicked, snapped, and pitched ...

The shortstop's mind was silent, ice-cold, dead, watching the runner vainly flying toward second, the catcher's throw beating him there by fifteen feet. Two out. One ball and one strike.

Sorenson called time. He met the shortstop halfway down the line.

"You damn, brainless idiot!" said the coach. "You saw the sign, you *acknowledged* the sign, you stood there with your thumb in your ear looking at a perfect strike! You got an awful short memory?"

"Look, I don't know—"

"I'll tell you what I do know," said Sorenson. "I know that'll cost you twenty dollars. Maybe your spot in the lineup."

The shortstop walked to the on-deck circle, wiped his bat again with the pine-tar. His head was filled with anger and frustration. Back in the batter's box he stared toward the pitcher in desperation.

On the rubber Ramirez worked out of a full wind-up with the bases empty. His high kick hid his delivery until the last moment. The ball floated toward the plate, a fat balloon belt-high, a curve that didn't break ...

The hitter's mind was like a desert, his mind was like an empty glass, a blank sheet of paper, his mind was totally at rest ...

The ball nicked the outside corner for a called strike two. The Tiger catcher chuckled. "Them people in the seats have to pay to get in," he said. "They're doin' more'n you!"

"Shut up." The Bear shortstop choked up another couple of inches on the handle. *He'll feed me another curve, and then the fast ball . . .*

Ramirez took the sign and went into his motion.

*Lousy kid I'm gonna rap it one down his lousy throat ...*

The wrist flicked, the ball spun, broke ...

The shortstop watched, unawed, very still, like a hollow thing, as the curve broke sharply, down the heart of the plate, strike three, side retired.

The Tigers managed to score an insurance run in the top half of the ninth, and Rudy Ramirez went back to the mound with a five-to--three lead to protect. The first batter that he was scheduled to face was the Bear pitcher, who was re-placed in the order by pinch-hitter Frank Asterino.

A sense of determination, confidence made Asterino's mind orderly. It was a brightly-lit mind, with none of the shifting doubts of the other. Rudy felt the will, he weighed the desire, he discovered the man's dedication and respected it. He stood off the rubber, rubbing the shine from the new ball. He reached for the rosin bag, then dropped it. He peered in at Johnston, his catcher. The sign: the fast ball.

Asterino guarded the plate closely. Johnston's mitt was targeted on the inside—start off with the high hard one, loosen the batter up. Rudy rocked back, kicked that leg high, and threw. The ball did not go for the catcher's mark, sailing out just a little. A not-over-powering pitch right down the pipe—a true gopher ball.

Rudy thought as the ball left his hand. He found that will of Asterino's, and he held it gently back. *Be still. Do not move; yes, be still.* And Asterino watched the strike intently as it passed.

Asterino watched two more, both curves that hung tantalizing but un-touched. Ramirez grasped the batter's desire with his own, and blotted up all the fierce resolution there was in him. Asterino returned to the bench amid the boos of the fans, disappointed but un-bewildered. He had struck out but, after all, that was not so unusual.

The top of the batting order was up, and Rudy touched their disparate minds. He hid their judgment behind the glare of his own will, and they struck out; the first batter needed five pitches and the second four. They observed balls with as much passive interest as strikes, and their bats never left their shoulders. No runs, no hits, no errors, nothing across for the Bears in the ninth. The ball game was over; Rudy earned a save for striking out the four batters he faced in his first pro assignment.

Afterward, local reporters were met by the angry manager of the Bears. When asked for his impression of the young Tiger pitcher he said, "I didn't think he looked that sharp. How you supposed to win managing a damn bunch of zom-bies?" In the visitors' clubhouse Tiger manager Fred Marenholtz was in a more expansive mood.

"Where did Ramirez come from?" asked one reporter.

"I don't really know," he said. "Charlie Cardona checks out Detroit's prospects down there. All I know is the telegram said that he was signed, and then here he is. Charlie's dug up some good kids for us."

"Did he impress you tonight?"

Marenholtz settled his wire-rim glasses on his long nose and nodded. "He looked real cool for his

first game. I'm going to start him in the series with the Reds this week-end. We'll have a better idea then, of course, but I have a feeling he won't be playing Class B ball long."

After the game with the Bears, the Tigers showered quickly and boarded their bus. They had a game the next night against the Selene Comets. It was a home game for the Tigers, and they were all glad to be returning to Cordele, but the bus ride from the Bears' stadium would be four or five hours. They would get in just before dawn, sleep until noon, have time for a couple of unpleasant hamburgers, and get to the park in time for practice.

The Tigers won that game, and the game the next night, also. The Comets left town and were re-placed by the Rockhill Reds, in for a Saturday afternoon game and a Sunday doubleheader. This late in the summer the pitching staffs were nearly exhausted. Manager Marenholtz of the Tigers kept his promise to the newspapermen; after the Saturday loss to the Reds he went to Chico Guerra, his first-string catcher, and told him to get Rudy Ramirez ready for the second game the next day.

Ramirez was eager, of course, and confident. Marenholtz was sitting in his office when Rudy came into the locker room before the Sunday doubleheader, a full half hour before practice began. Marenholtz smiled, remembering his own first game. He had been an outfielder; in the seventh inning he had run into the left field wall chasing a long fly. He dropped the ball, cracked his head, and spent the next three weeks on the disabled list. Marenholtz wished Ramirez better luck.

The Tigers' second-string catcher, Maurie Johnston, played the first game, and Guerra sat next to Ramirez in the dugout, pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of the opposing batters. Ramirez said little, just nodding and smiling. Marenholtz walked by them near the end of the first game. "Chico," he said, "ask him if he's nervous."

The catcher translated the question into Spanish. Ramirez grinned and answered. "He say no," said Guerra. "He jus' wan' show you what he can do."

The manager grunted a reply and went back to his seat, thinking about cocky rookies. The Tigers lost the first game, making two in a row dropped to the last-place Reds. The fans didn't seem to mind; there were only twenty games left until the end of the season, and there was no way possible for the Tigers to fall from first place short of losing all of them. It was obvious that Marenholtz was trying out new kids, resting his regulars for the Hanson Cup playoffs. The fans would let him get away with a lot, as long as he won the cup.

Between games there was a high school band marching in the out-field, and the local Kiwanis Club presented a plaque to the Tigers' center fielder, who was leading the league with forty-two home runs. Ramirez loosened up his arm during all this; he stood along the right field foul-line and tossed some easy pitches to Guerra. After a while the managers brought out their lineup cards to the umpires and the grounds crew finished grooming the infield. Ramirez and

Guerra took their positions on the field, and the rest of the team joined them, to the cheers of the Tigers' fans.

Skip Stackpole, the Reds' short-stop and leadoff batter, was settling himself in the batter's box. Rudy bent over and stared toward Guerra for the sign. An inside curve. Rudy nodded.

As he started into his windup he explored Stackpole's mind. It was a relaxed mind, concentrating only because Stackpole enjoyed playing baseball; for him, and for the last-place Reds, the game was meaningless. Rudy would have little difficulty.

*Wait*, thought Rudy wordlessly, forcing his will directly into Stackpole's intellect. *Not this one. Wait*. And Stackpole waited. The ball broke sharply, over the heart of the plate, for the first strike. There was a ripple of applause from the Tiger fans.

Guerra wanted a fast ball. Rudy nodded, kicked high, and threw. *Quiet*, he thought, *do not move*. Right down the pipe, strike two.

This much ahead of the hitter, Guerra should have called for a couple of pitches on the outside, to tease the batter into swinging at a bad pitch. But the catcher thought that Stackpole was off balance. The Reds had never seen Ramirez pitch before. Guerra called for another fast ball. Rudy nodded and went into his windup. He kept Stackpole from swinging. The Reds' first hitter was called out on strikes; the

Tiger fans cheered loudly as Guerra stood and threw the ball down to third base. Ramirez could hear his infielders chattering and encouraging him in a language that he didn't understand. He got the ball back and looked at the Reds' second man.

The new batter would be more of a challenge. He was hitting .312, battling with two others for the last place in the league's top ten. He was more determined than anyone Ramirez had yet faced. When Rudy pitched the ball, he needed more mental effort to keep the man from swinging at it. The pitch was too high. Ramirez leaned forward; Guerra wanted a low curve. The pitch broke just above the batter's knees, over the outside corner of the plate. One ball, one strike. The next pitch was a fast ball, high and inside. Ball two. Another fast ball, over the plate. *Wait*, thought Rudy, *wait*. The batter waited, and the count was two and two. Rudy tried another curve, and forced the batter to watch it helplessly. Strike three, two out.

Ramirez felt good, now. The stadium full of noisy people didn't make him nervous. The experienced athletes on the other team posed no threat at all. Rudy knew that he could win today; he knew that there wasn't a batter in the world that could beat him. The third hitter was no problem for Rudy's unusual talent. He struck out on four pitches. Rudy received a loud cheer from the fans as he walked back to the dugout. He smiled and waved, and took a seat next to the water cooler with Guerra.

The Tigers scored no runs in their part of the first inning, and Rudy went back to the mound and threw his allotment of warmups. He stood rubbing up the ball while the Reds' cleanup hitter settled himself at the plate. Rudy disposed of the Reds' best power hitter with three pitches, insolently tossing three fast balls straight down the heart of the plate. Rudy got the other two outs just as quickly. The fans gave him another cheer as he walked from the mound.

The Tigers got a hit but no runs in the second, and Ramirez struck out the side again in the top of the third. In the bottom of the third Doug Davies, the Tiger second baseman, led off with a sharp single down the left-field line. Rudy was scheduled to bat next; he took off his jacket and chose a light bat. He had never faced an opposing pitcher before. He had never even taken batting practice in the time he had been with the Tigers. He walked to the plate and took his place awkwardly.

He swung at two and watched two before he connected. He hit the ball weakly, on the handle of the bat, and it dribbled slowly down the first-base line. He passed it on his way to first base, and he saw the Reds' pitcher running over to field it. Rudy knew that he'd be an easy out. *Wait*, he thought at the pitcher, *stop. Don't throw it.* The pitcher held the ball, staring ahead dazedly. It looked to the fans as if the pitcher couldn't decide whether to throw to first, or try for the lead runner going into second. Both runners were safe before Rudy released him.

Rudy took a short lead toward second base. He watched the coaches for signs. On the next pitch Davies broke for third. Rudy ran for second base. The Reds' catcher got the ball and jumped up. Quiet, thought Rudy. Be still. The catcher watched both Davies and Rudy slide in safely.

Eventually, the Tigers' lead-off man struck out. The next batter popped up in the infield. The third batter in the lineup, Chico Guerra, hit a long fly to right field, an easy enough chance for the fielder. But Rudy found the man's judgment and blocked it with his will. *Not yet*, he thought, *wait*. The outfielder hesitated, seeming as if he had lost the ball in the setting sun. By the time he ran after it, it was too late. The ball fell in and rolled to the wall. Two runs scored and Guerra lumbered into third base.

"Now we win!" yelled Rudy in Spanish. Guerra grinned and yelled back.

The inning ended with the Tigers ahead, three to nothing. Rudy was joking with Guerra as he walked back on the field. His manner was easy and supremely confident. He directed loud comments to the umpire and the opposing batters, but his Spanish went uninterpreted by his catcher. The top of the Reds' batting order was up again in the fourth inning, and Rudy treated them with total disregard, shaking off all of Guerra's signs except for the fast ball, straight down the middle. Stackpole, the leadoff batter, struck out again on four pitches. The second batter needed only three, and the third hitter used four. No one yet had swung at a pitch. Perhaps the fans were beginning to notice, because the cheer was more

subdued as the Tigers came back to the bench. The Reds' manager was standing up in the dugout, angrily condemning his players, who went out to their positions with per-plexed expressions.

The game proceeded, with the fans growing quieter and quieter in the stands, the Reds' manager getting louder in his damnations, the Tiger players becoming increasingly uneasy about the Reds' lack of interest. Rudy didn't care; he kept pitching them in to Guerra, and the Rockhill batters kept walking back to their dugout, shrugging their shoulders and saying nothing. Not a single Rockhill Red had reached first base. The ninth inning began in total silence. Rudy faced three pinch-hitters and, of course, struck them out in order. He had not only pitched a no-hit game, not only pitched a perfect game, but he had struck out twenty-seven consecutive batters. Not once during the entire game did a Rockhill player even swing at one of his pitches.

A perfect game is one of the rarest of baseball phenomena. Perhaps only the unassisted triple play occurs less frequently. There should have been a massive crowd pouring out to congratulate Rudy. Players and fans should have mobbed him, carried him off the field, into the clubhouse. Beer should have been spilled over his head. Pictures should have been taken with Fred Marenholtz' arm around Rudy's neck. Instead, the infielders ran off the field as quickly as they could. They patted Rudy's back as they passed him on the way to the dugout. The fans got up and went home, not even applauding the Tiger victory.

Marenholtz was waiting in the dugout. "Take a shower and see me in my office," he said, indicating both Guerra and Ramirez. Then the manager shook his head and went down the tunnel to the dressing room.

Marenholtz was a tall, thin man with sharp, birdlike features. He was sitting at his desk, smoking a cigar. He smoked cigars only when he was very angry, very worried, or very happy. Tonight, while he waited for Guerra and the new kid, he was very worried. Baseball, aged and crippled, didn't need this kind of notoriety.

There were half a dozen local newspapermen trying to force their way into the clubhouse. He had given orders that there would be no interviews until he had a chance to talk to Ramirez himself. He had phone calls from newscasters, scouts, fans, gamblers, politicians, and relatives. There was a stack of congratulatory telegrams. There was a very worried telegram from the team's general manager, and a very worried telegram from the front office of the Tigers' major league affiliate.

There was a soft knock on the door. "Guerra?" Marenholtz called out.

"Si."

"Come on in, but don't let anybody else come in with you except Ramirez."

Guerra opened the door and the two men entered. Behind them was a noisy, confused crowd of Tiger players. Marenholtz sighed; he would have to find out what happened, and then deal with his team. Then he had to come up with an explanation for the public.

Ramirez was grinning, evidently not sharing Marenholtz and Guerra's apprehension. He said something to Guerra. The catcher frowned and translated for Marenholtz. "He say, don' he do a good job?"

"That's what *I* want to know!" said Marenholtz. "What *did* he do? You know it looks a little strange that not one guy on that team took swing number one."

Guerra looked very uncomfortable. "Si, maybe he just *good*." Marenholtz grunted. "Chico, did he look *that* good?"

Guerra shook his head. Ramirez was still smiling. Marenholtz stood up and paced behind his desk. "I don't mind him pitching a perfect game," he said. "It's a memorable achievement. But I think his effort would be better appreciated if one of those batters had tried hitting. At least one. I want you to tell me why they didn't. If you can't, I want you to ask him."

Guerra shrugged and turned to Ramirez. They conversed for a few seconds, and then the catcher spoke to Marenholtz. "He say he don' want them to."

Marenholtz slammed his fist on his desk. "That's going to make a great headline in the Sporting News. Look, if somehow he paid off the Reds to throw the game, even they wouldn't be so stupid as to

do it that way." He paused, catching his breath, trying to control his exasperation. "All right, I'll give him a chance. Maybe he is the greatest pitcher the world has ever known. Though I doubt it." He reached for his phone and dialed a number. "Hello, Thompson? Look, I need a favor from you. Have you turned off the field lights yet? O.K., leave 'em on for a while, all right? I don't care. I'll talk to Mr. Kaemmer in the morning. And hang around for another half hour, O.K.? Well, screw the union. We're having a little crisis here. Yeah, Ramirez. Understand? Thanks, Thompson." Marenholtz hung up and nodded to Guerra. "You and your battery mate here are going to get some extra practice. Tell him I want to hit some off him, right now. Don't bother getting dressed again. Just put on your mask and get out on the field." Guerra nodded unhappily and led Rudy away.

The stadium was deserted. Marenholtz walked through the dugout and onto the field. He felt strangely alone, cold and worried; the lights made odd, vague shadows that had never bothered him before. He went to the batter's box. The white lines had been all but erased during the course of the game. He leaned on the bat that he had brought with him and waited for the two men.

Guerra came out first, wearing his chest protector and carrying his mask and mitt. Behind him walked Ramirez, silently, without his usual grin. He was dressed in street clothes, with his baseball spikes instead of dress shoes. Rudy took his place on the mound. He tossed a ball from his hand to his glove. Guerra positioned himself and Marenholtz waved to Rudy. No one had said a word.

Rudy wound up and pitched, a medium fast ball down the middle. Marenholtz swung and hit a low line drive down the right-field line that bounced once and went into the stands. Rudy threw another and Marenholtz hit it far into right center field. The next three pitches he sent to distant, shadowed parts of the ball park. Marenholtz stepped back for a moment. "He was throwing harder during the game, wasn't he?" he asked.

"I think so," said Guerra.

"Tell him to pitch me as hard as he did then. And throw some good curves, too." Guerra translated, and Ramirez nodded. He leaned back and pitched. Marenholtz swung, connected, and watched the ball sail in a huge arc, to land in the seats three hundred and fifty feet away in right field.

Rudy turned to watch the ball. He said nothing. Marenholtz tossed him another from a box on the ground. "I want a curve, now," he said.

The pitch came, breaking lazily on the outside part of the plate. Marenholtz timed it well and sent it on a clothesline into center field, not two feet over Ramirez' head. "All right," said the manager, "tell him to come here." Guerra waved, and Rudy trotted to join them. "One thing," said Marenholtz sourly. "I want him to explain why the Reds didn't hit him like that."

"I wanna know, too," said Guerra. He spoke with Ramirez, at last turning back to Marenholtz with a bewildered expression. "He say he don' wan' them to hit. He say you wan' hit, he let you hit."

"Oh, hell," said Marenholtz. "I'm not stupid."

Rudy looked confused. He said something to Guerra. "He say he don' know why you wan' hit now, but he do what you say."

The manager turned away in anger. He spit toward the dugout, thinking. He turned back to Guerra. "We got a couple of balls left," he said. "I want him to pitch me just like he did to the Reds, understand? I don't want him to let me hit. Have him try to weave his magic spell on me, too."

Rudy took a ball and went back to the mound. Marenholtz stood up to the plate, waving the bat over his shoulder in a slow circle. Ramirez wound up, kicked, and threw. His fastest pitch, cutting the heart of the plate.

*Quiet*, thought Rudy, working to restrain his manager's furious mind. *Easy, now. Don't swing. Quiet.*

Marenholtz' mind was suddenly peaceful, composed, thoughtless. The pitch cracked into Guerra's mitt. The manager hadn't swung at it.

Rudy threw ten more pitches, and Marenholtz didn't offer at any of them. Finally he raised his hand. Rudy left the mound again. Marenholtz stood waiting, shaking his head. "Why didn't I swing? Those pitches weren't any harder than the others." Marenholtz said.

"He just say he don' want you to swing. In his head he tell you. Then you don' swing. He say it's easy."

"I don't believe it," said the manager nervously. "Yeah, O.K., he can do it. He did do it. I don't like it." Guerra shook his head. The three stood on the empty field for several seconds in uneasy silence. "Can he do that with any-body?" asked Marenholtz.

"He say, *si*."

"Can he do it any time? Every time?"

"He say, *si*."

"We're in trouble, Chico." Guerra looked into Marenholtz' frightened face and nodded slowly. "I don't mean just us. I mean base-ball. This kid can throw a perfect game, every time. What do you think'll happen if he makes it to the majors? The game'll be dead. Poor kid. He scares me. Those people in the stands aren't going to like it any better."

"What you gonna do, Mr. Ma-renholtz?" asked Guerra.

"I don't know, Chico. It's going to be hard keeping a bunch of per-fect games secret. Especially when none of the hitters ever takes the bat off his shoulder."

The following Thursday the Ti-gers had a night game at home against the Kings. Rudy came pre-pared to be the starting pitcher, af-ter three days' rest. But when Ma-renholtz announced the starting lineup, he had the Tigers' long re-lief man on the mound. Rudy was disappointed, and complained to Guerra. The catcher told him that Marenholtz was probably saving him for the next night, when the Kings' ace left-hander was sched-uled to pitch.

On Friday Ramirez was passed over again. He sat in the dugout, sweating in his warmup jacket, irri-tated at the manager. Guerra told him to have patience. Rudy couldn't understand why Ma-renholtz wouldn't pitch him, after the great game Ramirez had thrown in his first chance. Guerra just shrugged and told Rudy to study the hitters.

Rudy didn't play Saturday, or in either of the Sunday double-header's games. He didn't know that the newspapermen were as mystified as he. Marenholtz made up excuses, saying that Rudy had pulled a back muscle in practice. The manager refused to make any comments about Ramirez' strange perfect game, and as the days passed the clamor died down.

The next week Rudy spent on the bench, becoming angrier and more frustrated. He confronted Marenholtz several times, with Guerra as unwilling interpreter, and each time the manager just said that he didn't feel that Rami-fez was "ready." The season was coming to its close, with only six games left, and Rudy was determined to play. As the games came and went, however, it became obvi-ous that he wasn't going to get the chance.

On the day of the last game, Marenholtz announced that Iry Tappan, his number-one right-hander, would start. Rudy stormed out of the dugout in a rage. He went back to the locker room and started to change clothes. Ma-renholtz signaled to Guerra, and they followed Ramirez.

"All right, Ramirez, what're you doing?" asked the manager.

"He say he goin' home," said Guerra, translating Rudy's shouted reply.

"If he leaves before the game is over, he's liable to be fined. Does he know that?"

"He say he don' care."

"Tell him he's acting like a kid," said Marenholtz, feeling relieved. "He say you can go to hell."

Marenholtz took a deep breath. "O.K., Chico. Tell him we've enjoyed knowing him, and respect his talent, and would like to invite him to try out for the team again next spring."

"He say go to hell."

"He's going home?" asked Ma-renholtz.

"He say you 'mericanos jealous, and waste his time. He say he can do other things."

"Well, tell him we're sorry, and wish him luck."

"He say go to hell. He say you don' know your *ano* from a hole in the groun'."

Marenholtz smiled coldly. "Chico, I want you to do me a fa-vor. Do yourself a favor, too; there's enough here for the two of us. You let him finish clearing out of here, and you go with him. I don't know where he's going this time of clay. Probably back to the hotel where he stays. Keep with him. Talk to

him. Don't let him get away, don't let him get drunk, don't let him talk to anybody else."

Guerra shrugged and nodded. Ramirez was turning to leave the clubhouse. Marenholtz grabbed Guerra's arm and pushed him toward the furious boy. "Go on," said the manager, "keep him in sight. I'll call the hotel in about three or four hours. We got a good thing here, Chico, my boy." The catcher frowned and hurried after Rudy.

Marenholtz sighed; he walked across the dressing room, stopping by his office. He opened the door and stared into the darkened room for a few seconds. He wanted des-perately to sit at his desk and write the letters and make the phone calls, but he still had a game to play. The job seemed so empty to him now. He knew this would be the last regular game he'd see in the minor leagues. Next spring he and Ramirez would be shocking them all at the Florida training camps. Next summer he and Rami-rez would own the world of major league baseball.

First, though, there was still the game with the Bears. Marenholtz closed the door to the office and locked it. Then he went up the tun-nel to the field. All that he could think of was going back to the Big Time.

After the game, Fred Marenholtz hurried to his office. The other players grabbed at him, swatting at his back to congratulate him on the end of the season. The Tigers were celebrating in the clubhouse. Cans of beer were popping open, and sandwiches had been supplied by the front office. The manager ig-nored them all. He locked the door to the office behind him. He called Ramirez' hotel and asked for his room.

Guerra answered, and reported that Ramirez was there, taking a nap. The catcher was instructed to tell Rudy that together they were all going to win their way to the major leagues. Guerra was doubtful, but Marenholtz wouldn't listen to the catcher's puzzled questions. The manager hung up. He pulled out a battered address book from his desk drawer, and found the telephone number of an old friend, a contract lawyer in St. Louis. He called the number, tapping a pencil nervously on the desk top while the phone rang.

"Hello, Marty?" he said when the call was finally answered.

"Yes. Who's this calling, please?"

"Hi. You won't remember me, but this is Fred Marenholtz."

"Freddie! How are you? Lord, it's been fifteen years. Are you in town?"

Marenholtz smiled. Things were going to be all right. They chatted for a few minutes, and then Ma-renholtz told his old friend that he was calling on business.

"Sure, Freddie," said the lawyer. "For Frantic Fred Marenholtz, anything. Is it legal?" Marenholtz laughed.

The photographs on the office wall looked painfully old to Marenholtz. They were of an era too long dead, filled with people who themselves had long since passed away. Baseball itself had withered, had lost the lifeblood of interest that had infused the millions of fans each spring. It had been too many years since Fred Marenholtz had claimed his share of glory. He had never been treated to his part of the financial rewards of baseball, and after his brief major league ca-reer he felt it was time to make his bid.

Marenholtz instructed the lawyer in detail. Old contracts were to be broken, new ones drawn up. The lawyer wrote himself in for five percent as payment. The manager hung up the phone again. He slammed his desk drawer closed in sheer exuberance. Then he got up and left his office. He had to thank his players for their cooperation during the past season.

"Tell him he's not going to get anything but investigated if he doesn't go with us." It was late now, past midnight. Ramirez' tiny hotel room was stifling. Rudy rested on the bed. Guerra sat in a chair by the single window. Ma-renholtz paced around, his coat thrown on the bed, his shirt soaked with perspiration.

"He say he don' like the way you run the club. He don' think you run him better," said Guerra wearily.

"All right. Explain to him that we're not going to cost him anything. The only way we can make any money is by making sure he does O.K. We'll take a percentage of what he makes. That's his insur-ance."

"He wan' know why you wan' him now, you wouldn' play him before."



"Because he's a damn fool, is why! Doesn't he know what would happen if he pitched his kind of game, week after week?"

"He think he make a lot of money."

Marenholtz stopped pacing and stared. "Stupid Spanish idiot!" he said. Guerra, from a farming vil-lage in Panama, glared resentfully. "I'm sorry, Chico. Explain it to him." The catcher went to the edge of the bed and sat down. He talked with Rudy for a long while, then turned back to the manager.

"O.K., Mr. Marenholtz. He didn' think anybody noticed."

"Fine," said Marenholtz, taking Guerra's vacated chair. "Now let's talk. Chico, what were you plan-ning to do this winter?"

Guerra looked puzzled again. "I don' know. Go home."

Marenholtz smiled briefly and shook his head. "No. You're coming with me. We're taking young Mr. Ramirez here and turn him into a pitcher. If not that, at least into an intelligent thrower. We got a job, my friend."

They had six months, and they could have used more. They worked hard, giving Rudy little time to relax. He spent weeks just throwing baseballs through a circle of wire on a stand. Guerra and Marenholtz helped him learn the most efficient way to pitch, so that he wouldn't tire after half a game; he studied films of his motions, to see where they might be improved, to fool the hitters and conserve his own energy. Guerra coached him on all the fundamentals: fielding his position, developing a deceptive throw to first base, making certain that his windup was the same for every different pitch.

After a couple of months Rami-rez' control was sharp enough to put a ball into Guerra's mitt wher-ever the catcher might ask. Marenholtz watched with growing ex-citement—they were going to bring it off. Rudy was as good as any mediocre pitcher in the majors. Marenholtz was teaching him to save his special talent for the tight situations, the emergencies where less attention would be focused on the pitcher. Rudy was made to re-alize that he had eight skilled teammates behind him; if he threw the ball where the catcher wanted it, the danger of long hits was min-imized. A succession of pop-ups and weak grounders would look in-finitely better than twenty-seven passive strikeouts.

Before the spring training session began, Rudy had developed a much better curve that he could throw with reasonable control, a passable change-up, a poor slider, and a slightly off-speed fast ball. He relied on Guerra and Ma-renholtz for instructions, and they schooled him in all the possible sit-uations until he was fed up.

"Freddie Marenholtz! Damn, you look like you could still get out there and play nine hard ones yourself. Got that phenom of yours?"

"Yeah, you want him to get dressed?" Marenholtz stood by a batting cage in the training camp of the Nashville Cats, a team welcomed into the American League during the expansion draft three years previously. The Florida sun was already fierce enough in March to make Marenholtz uncomfort-able, and he shielded his eyes with one hand as he talked to Jim Billy Westfahl, the Cats' manager.

"All right," said Westfahl. "You said you brought this kid Ramirez and a catcher, right? What's his name?"

"Guerra. Only guy Ramirez ever pitched to."

"Yeah, well, you know we got two good catchers in Portobenez and Staefler. If Guerra's going to stick, he's going to have to beat them out."

Marenholtz frowned. Guerra was *not* going to beat them out of their jobs. But he had to keep the man around, both because he could soothe Ramirez' irrational temper and because Guerra presented a danger to the plan. But the aging catcher might have to get used to watching the games from the boxes. He collected three and a half percent of Rudy's income, and Marenholtz couldn't see that Guerra had reason to complain.

Rudy came out of the locker room and walked to the batting cage. Guerra followed, looking uneasy among the major league talents. Ramirez turned to Westfahl and said something in Spanish. Guerra translated. "He say he wan' show you what he can do."

"O.K., I'm game. *Somebody's* go-ing to have to replace McAnion. It may as well be your kid. Let's

see what he looks like."

Rudy pitched to Guerra, and Westfahl made a few noncommittal remarks. Later in the day Rudy faced some of the Cats' regulars, and the B squad of rookies. He held some of them back, pitched to some of them, and looked no less sharp than any of the other regular pitchers after a winter's inactivity. In the next few weeks Marenholtz and Guerra guided Rudy well, let-ting him use his invisible talent sparingly, without attracting undue notice, and Ramirez seemed sure to go north with the team when the season began. Guerra didn't have the same luck. A week before spring training came to an end he was optioned to the Cats' Double A farm club. Guerra pretended to be upset, and refused to report.

By this time Marenholtz had promoted a large amount of money. The newly-appointed presi-dent of RR *Star Enterprises* had spent the spring signing contracts while his protégé worked to im-press the public. Permissions and royalty fees were deposited from trading card companies, clothing manufacturers, grooming product endorsements (Rudy was hired to look into a camera and say, "I like it. It makes my hair neat without looking greasy." He was finally coached to say, "I like it" and the rest of the line was given to a sexy female model), fruit juice advertise-ments, and sporting goods dealers.

The regular season began at home for the Cats. Rudy Ramirez was scheduled to pitch the third game. Rudy felt little excitement before the game; what he did feel was in no way different in kind or quantity from his nervousness be-fore his first appearance with the Cordele Tigers. The slightly hostile major league crowd didn't awe him: he was prepared to awe the four thousand spectators who had come to watch the unknown rookie.

Fred Marenholtz had briefed Rudy thoroughly; before the game they had decided that an impres-sive but nonetheless credible effort would be a four- or five-hit shut-out. For an added touch of realism, Rudy might get tired in the eighth inning, and leave for a relief pitcher. Marenholtz and Guerra sat in field boxes along the first-base side, near the dugout. Ramirez could hear their shouts from the mound. He waved to them as he took his place before the National Anthem was sung.

Rudy's pitches were not partic-ularly overpowering. His fast ball was eminently hittable; only the experience of the Cats' catcher prevented it from sailing time after time over the short-left-field fence. Ramirez' weeks of practice saved him: his pitches crossed the plate just above the batter's knees, or handcuffed him close around the fists, or nicked the outside edge of the plate. Rudy's curve was just good enough to keep the hitters guessing. The first batter hit a sharp ground ball to short, fielded easily for the first out. The second batter lofted a fly to right field for the second out. Rudy threw three pitches to the third batter, and then threw his first mistake, a fast ball belt high, down the middle. Rudy knew what would happen—a healthy swing, and then a quick one-run lead for the White Sox. Urgently, desperately, he sought the batter's will and grasped it in time. The man stood stupidly, staring at the most perfect pitch he mould see in a long while. It went by for a called strike three, and Rudy had his first official major league strikeout.

Marenholtz stood and applauded when Rudy trotted back to the dugout. Guerra shouted something in Spanish. Ramirez' teammates slapped his back, and he smiled and nodded and took his place on the bench. He allowed a double down the line in the second inning, set the White Sox down in order in the third and fourth, gave up a single and a walk in the fifth, a single in the sixth, no hits in the seventh, two singles in the eighth, and two to the first two batters in the ninth. Rudy had pitched wisely, combining his inferior skill with ju-dicious use of his mental talent. Sometimes he held back a batter for just a fraction of a second, so that the hitter would swing late. Other times he would prevent a batter from running for a moment, to insure his being thrown out at first. He caused the opposition's de-fense to commit errors so that the Cats could score the runs to guar-antee victory.

The manager of the Cats came out to the mound to talk with Ramirez in the ninth. Carmen Ve-lillo, the Cats' third baseman, joined the conference to translate for Rudy. Ramirez insisted that he was strong enough to finish, but the manager brought in a relief pitcher. Rudy received a loud cheer from the fans as he went off the field. He didn't watch the rest of the game, but went straight to the showers. The Cats' new man put down the rally, and Ramirez had a shutout victory. After Rudy and Velillo had answered the excited questions of the newsmen, Ma-renholtz and Guerra met him for a celebration.

Marenholtz held interviews with reporters from national magazines or local weeklies. Coverage of

Ramirez' remarkable success grew more detailed; as the season progressed Rudy saw his picture on the front of such varied periodicals as *Sports Illustrated* and *Esquire*.

By June Rudy had won eleven games and lost none. His picture appeared on the cover of *Time*. A small article in *Playboy* announced that he was the greatest natural talent since Grover Cleveland Alexander. He appeared briefly on late-night television programs. He was hired to attend supermarket openings in the Nashville area. He loved winning ball games, and Marenholtz, too, gloried in returning a success to the major leagues that had treated him so shabbily in his youth.

The evening before Ramirez was to start his twelfth ball game, he was having dinner with Marenholtz and Guerra. The older man was talking about his own short playing career, and how baseball had deteriorated since then. Guerra nodded and said little. Ramirez stared quietly at his plate, toying with his food and not eating. Suddenly he spoke up, interrupting Marenholtz' flow of memories. He spoke in rapid Spanish; Marenholtz gaped in surprise. "What's he saying?" he asked.

Guerra coughed nervously. "He wan' know why he need us," he said. "He say he do pretty good by himself."

Marenholtz put his cigar down and stared angrily at Ramirez. "I was wondering how long it would take him to think he could cut us out. You can tell him that if it hadn't been for us he'd either be in trouble or in Venezuela. You can tell him that if it hadn't been for us he wouldn't have that solid bank account and his poor gray mama wouldn't have the only color television south of the border. And if that doesn't work, tell him maybe he *doesn't* need us, but he signed the contracts."

Guerra said a few words, and Rudy answered. "What's he say now?" asked Marenholtz.

"Nothing," said Guerra, staring down at his own plate. "He jus' say he thank you, but he wan' do it by himself."

"Oh, hell. Tell him to forget that and pitch a good, game tomorrow. *I'll* do the worrying. That's what I'm for."

"He say he do that. He say he pitch you a good game."

"Well, thank you, Tom, and good afternoon, baseball fans everywhere. In just a few moments we'll bring you live coverage of the third contest of this weekend series, a game between the Nashville Cats, leaders in the American League Midlands division, and the Denver Athletics. It looks to be a pitchers' duel today, with young Rudy Ramirez, Nashville's astonishing rookie, going against the A's veteran right-hander, Morgan Stepitz."

"Right, Chuck, and I think a lot of the spectators in the park today have come to see whether Ramirez can keep his streak alive. He's won eleven, now, and he hasn't been beaten so far in his professional career. Each game must be more of an ordeal than the last for the youngster. The strain will be starting to take its toll."

"Nevertheless, Tom, I have to admit that it's been a very long time since I've seen anyone with the poise of that young man. He hasn't let his success make him overconfident, which for him is now the greatest danger. I'm sure that defeat, when it comes, will be a hard blow, but I'm just as certain that Rudy Ramirez will recover and go on to have a truly amazing season."

"A lot of fans have written in to ask what the record is for most consecutive games won. Well, Ramirez has quite a way to go. The major league record is nine-teen, set in 1912 by Rube Marguard. But even if Ramirez doesn't go on to break that one, he's still got the start on a great season. He's leading both leagues with an Earned Run Average of 1.54, and has an excellent shot at thirty wins—"

"All right, let's go down to the field, where we'll have the singing of the National Anthem."

After the spectators cheered and settled back into their seats, after the Cats' catcher whipped the ball down to second base, and after the infielders tossed it around and, finally, back to the pitcher, Rudy looked around at the stadium. The Nashville park was new, built five years ago in hopes of attracting a major league franchise. It was huge, well-designed, and, generally, filled with noisy fans. The sudden success of the usually hapless Cats was easily traced: Rudy Ramirez. He was to pitch again today, and his enthusiastic rooters crowded the spacious park. Bedsheet banners hung over railings, wishing him

luck and proclaiming Ramirez to be the best-loved individual on the continent. Rudy, still innocent of English, did not know what they said.

He could see Marenholtz and Guerra sitting behind the dugout. They saw him glance in their direction and stood, waving their arms. Rudy touched the visor of his cap in salute. Then he turned to face the first of the Athletics' hitters.

"O.K., the first batter for the A's is the second baseman, number 12, Jerry Kleiner. Kleiner's batting .262 this season. He's a switch-hitter, and he's batting right-handed against the southpaw, Ramirez.

"Ramirez takes his sign from Staefler, winds up, and delivers. Kleiner takes the pitch for a called strike one. Ramirez has faced the A's only once before this season, shutting them out on four hits.

"Kleiner steps out to glance down at the third base coach for the signal. He steps back in. Ramirez goes into his motion. Kleiner lets it go by again. No balls and two strikes."

"Ramirez is really piping them in today, Tom."

"That's right, Chuck. I noticed during his warmups that his fast ball seemed to be moving exceptionally well. It will tend to tail in toward a right-handed batter. Here comes the pitch—strike three! Kleiner goes down looking."

"Before the game we talked with Cats' catcher Bo Staefler, who told us that Ramirez' slider is improving as the season gets older. That can only be bad news for the hitters in the American League. It may be a while before they can solve his style."

"Stepping in now is the A's right fielder, number 24, Ricky Gonzalvo. Gonzalvo's having trouble with his old knee injury this year, and his average is down to .244. He crowds the plate a little on Ramirez. The first pitch is inside, knocking Gonzalvo down. Ball one.

"Ramirez gets the ball back, leans forward for his sign. And the pitch . . . in there for a called strike. The count is even at one and one."

"He seems to have excellent control today, wouldn't you say, Tom?"

"Exactly. Manager Westfahl of the Cats suggested last week that the pinpoint accuracy of his control is sometimes enough to rattle a batter into becoming an easy out."

"There must be some explanation, even if it's magic."

"Ramirez deals another breaking pitch, in there for a called strike two. I wouldn't say it's all magic, Chuck. It looked to me as though Gonzalvo was crossed up on that one, obviously expecting the fast ball again."

"Staefler gives him the sign. Ramirez nods, and throws. Fast ball, caught Gonzalvo napping. Called strike three; two away now in the top of the first.

"Batting in the number three position is the big first baseman, Howie Bass. Bass' brother, Eddie, who plays for the Orioles, has the only home run hit off Ramirez this season. Here comes Ramirez' pitch . . . Bass takes it for strike one."

"It seems to me that the batters are starting out behind Ramirez, a little overcautious. That's the effect that a winning streak like his can have. Ramirez has the benefit of a psychological edge working for him, as well as his great pitching."

"Right, Tom. That pitch while you were talking was a called strike two, a good slider that seemed to have Bass completely baffled."

"Staefler gives the sign, but Ramirez shakes his head. Ramirez shakes off another sign. Now he nods, goes into his windup, and throws. A fast ball, straight down the middle, strike three. Bass turns to argue with the umpire, but that'll do him no good. Three up and three down for the A's, no runs, no hits, nothing across."

The Cats' fans jumped to their feet, but Fred Marenholtz listened angrily to their applause. He caught Rudy's eye just as the pitcher was about to enter the dugout. Before Marenholtz could say anything, Rudy grinned and disappeared inside. Marenholtz was worried that the sophisticated major league audience would be even less likely to accept the spectacle of batter after batter going down without swinging at Ramirez' pitches. The older man turned to Guerra. "What's he trying to do?" he asked.

Guerra shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe he wan' strike out some."

"Maybe," said Marenholtz du-biously, "but I didn't think he'd be that dumb."

The Cats got a runner to second base in their part of the first inning, but he died there when the clean-up hitter sent a line drive over the head of the A's first base-man, who leaped high to save a run. Rudy walked out to the mound confidently, and threw his warmups.

"All right," said Marenholtz, "let's see him stop that nonsense now. This game's being televised all over the country." He watched Ramirez go into his motion. The first pitch was a curve that apparently didn't break; a slow pitch coming toward the plate as fat as a basketball. The A's batter watched it for a called strike. Marenholtz swore softly.

Rudy threw two more pitches, each of them over the plate for strikes. The hitter never moved his bat. Marenholtz' face was turning red with anger. Rudy struck out the next batter in three pitches. Guerra coughed nervously and said some-thing in Spanish. Already the fans around them were remarking on how strange it was to see the A's being called out on strikes without making an effort to guard the plate. The A's sixth batter took his place in the batter's box, and three pitches later he, too, walked back to the bench, a bewildered expres-sion on his face.

Marenholtz stood and hollered to Ramirez. "What the hell you doing?" he said, forgetting that the pitcher couldn't understand him. Rudy walked nonchalantly to the dugout, taking no notice of Marenholtz.

Guerra rose and edged past Ma-renholtz to the aisle. "You going for a couple of beers?" asked Ma-renholtz.

"No," said Guerra. "I think I just *goin'*."

"Well, Tom, it's the top of the third, score tied at nothing to noth-ing. I want to say that we're getting that pitchers' battle we promised. We're witnessing one heck of a good ball game so far. The Cats have had only one hit, and rookie Rudy Ramirez hasn't let an Ath-letic reach first base."

"There's an old baseball super-stition about jinxing a pitcher in a situation like this, but I might men-tion that Ramirez has struck out the first six men to face him. The record for consecutive strikeouts is eleven, held by Gaylord Perry of the old Cleveland Indians. If I re-member correctly, that mark was set the last year the Indians played in Cleveland, before their move to New Orleans."

"This sort of game isn't a new thing for Ramirez, either, Tom. His blurb in the Cats' pressbook men-tions that iii his one start in the minor leagues, he threw a perfect game and set a Triangle League record for most strikeouts in a nine-inning game."

"O.K., Chuck. Ramirez has fin-ished his warmups here in the top of the third. He'll face the bottom of the A's order. Batting in the sev-enth position is the catcher, num-ber 16, Tolly Knecht. Knecht's been in a long slump, but he's al-ways been something of a spoiler. He'd love to break out of it with a hit against Ramirez here. Here's the pitch . . . Knecht was taking all the way, a called strike one."

"Maybe the folks at home would like to see Ramirez' form here on the slow-motion replay. You can see how the extra-high kick tends to hide the ball from the batter un-til the very last moment. He's get-ting the full force of his body be-hind the pitch, throwing from the shoulder with a last, powerful snap of the wrist. He ends up here per-fectly balanced for a sudden defen-sive move. From the plate the white ball must be disguised by the uniform. A marvelous athlete and a terrific competitor."

"Right, Chuck. That last pitch was a good breaking ball; Knecht watched it for strike two. I think one of the reasons the hitters seem to be so confused is the excellent arsenal of pitches that Ramirez has. He throws his fast ball intelligently, saving it for the tight spots. He throws an overhand curve and a sidearm curve, each at two differ-ent speeds. His slider is showing up more and more as his confidence increases."

"Ramirez nods to Staefler, the catcher. He winds up, and throws. Strike three! That's seven, now. Knecht throws his bat away in frustration. The fans aren't too happy, either. Even the Cats' loyal crowd is beginning to boo. I don't think I've ever seen a team as com-pletely stymied as the A's are to-day."

"I tell you, I almost wish I could go down there myself. Some of Ramirez' pitches look just too good. It makes me want to grab a bat and take a poke at one. His slow curves seem to hang there, in-ving a good healthy cut. But, of course, from our vantage point we can't see what the batters are seeing. Ramirez must have tremen-dous stuff today. Not one Athletic hitter has taken a swing at his pitches."

When the eighth Athletic batter struck out, the fans stood and jeered. Marenholtz felt his stomach tightening. His mouth was dry and his ears buzzed. After the ninth batter fanned, staring uninterestedly at a mild, belt-high pitch, the stadium was filled with boos. Marenholtz couldn't be sure that they were all directed at the unlucky hitters.

*Maybe I ought to hurry after Guerra, thought Marenholtz. Maybe it's time to talk about that bowling alley deal again. This game is rotten at its roots already. It's not like when I was out there. We cared. The fans cared. Now they got guys like Grobert playing, they're nearly gangsters: Sometimes the games look like they're produced from a script. And Ramirez is going to topple it all. The kid's special, but that won't save us. Good God, I feel sorry for him. He can't see it coming. He won't see it coming. He's out there having a ball. And he's going to make the loudest boom when it all falls down. Then what's he going to do? What's he going to do?*

Rudy walked jauntily off the field. The spectators around Marenholtz screamed at him. Rudy only smiled. He waved to Marenholtz, and pointed to Guerra's empty seat. Marenholtz shrugged. Ramirez ducked into the dugout, leaving Marenholtz to fret in the stands.

After the Cats were retired in the third, Rudy went out to pitch his half of the fourth. A policeman called his name, and Rudy turned. The officer stood in the boxes, at the edge of the dugout, stationed to prevent overeager fans from storming the playing field. He held his hand out to Rudy and spoke to him in English. Rudy shook his head, not understanding. He took the papers from the policeman and studied them for a moment. They were contracts that he had signed with Marenholtz. They were torn in half. Ramirez grinned; he looked up toward Marenholtz' seat behind the dugout. The man had followed Guerra, had left the stadium before he could be implicated in the tarnished proceedings.

For the first time since he had come to the United States, Rudy Ramirez felt free. He handed the contracts back to the mystified police officer and walked to the mound. He took a few warmups and waited for Kleiner, the A's leadoff batter. Ramirez took his sign and pitched. Kleiner swung and hit a shot past the mound. Rudy entered Kleiner's mind and kept him motionless beside the plate for a part of a second. The Cats' shortstop went far to his left, grabbed the ball and threw on the dead run; the runner was out by a full step. There were mixed groans and cheers from the spectators, but Rudy didn't hear. He was watching Gonzalvo take his place in the batter's box. Maybe Rudy would let him get a hit.