

FRED BOWEN SERIES
SPORTS STORY

THE KID COACH

FRED BOWEN





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Lee Boudreau photo courtesy of the National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown, NY.

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ONE

What do you want to do?" Scott Hudson watched the spring rain splash tiny rivers on the living room window.

"I don't know," Scott said. "What do you want to do?"

Drew Moyers, Scott's best friend and Tigers teammate, walked across the room and joined Scott at the window.

"We sure aren't going to have baseball practice today," he said.

Scott shrugged. "What does it matter?" he asked. "Coach Skelly would have been late anyway."

"What's his story?" Drew asked. "He's always late for practice."

Scott searched the skies for a break in the clouds. The sky stayed steely gray. “I don’t know,” he said. “My dad says he’s starting a new business or something.”

“Remember when his cell phone went off during practice and he answered it like his pants were on fire?” Drew laughed.

Scott laughed too, but his smile quickly melted into a frown. “He better be there when we scrimmage the Red Sox,” he said.

“Yeah, but I hope Mr. Skelly doesn’t play Max at third. Max can’t throw,” Drew said. “I think Fran could make the throw from third.”

Just then, Scott saw a yellow-hooded figure dash across the front yard. “Hey, guess who’s here?” called Scott as he went to open the door. “It’s Fran.”

Mary Frances McDermott, Scott’s next-door neighbor and teammate, stepped in and shook the rain off her coat. “Hey, guys, what are you doing?”

“Hey, Fran, can you make the throw from third?” Drew asked.

“Sure, no sweat,” Fran said. “Why? Do

you think girls can't throw?" she asked, looking straight at Drew.

"No, gimme a break," said Drew, holding up his hands. "We think you should be playing third instead of Max."

"So do I. But we're not coaches. We're just players," Fran replied.

"Hey! Let's make up a lineup!" shouted Scott. "You know, like who we would start if we were coaching."

"Well, there's nothing else to do," Drew shrugged.

"Yeah, let's do it," said Fran.

Scott found a piece of paper and a pencil and sat down in front of the coffee table with his legs underneath him. His two friends sat at either end of the table leaning toward Scott.

"Okay, let's start with pitcher," Scott suggested.

"That's a cinch," Drew said. "You and me pitch. When I pitch, you play shortstop. When you pitch, I'll play shortstop." The boys exchanged high fives before Scott wrote down their names.

“Put Danny at catcher,” Fran said.

“Yeah, that’s good,” Scott said. “And what about Brendan in the outfield?”

“Just so long as he’s not near a snack machine,” said Drew. “Boy, does he like to eat!”

“Okay. How about Max at first?” Scott asked.

“Nah,” said Drew. “Nick’s taller. He makes a better target.”

Fran nodded and Scott wrote it down.

The three friends went through the entire Tigers roster matching players with positions.

“We forgot Benny,” Fran said. “We gotta put him someplace.”

“Benny the Brain!” Drew howled. “That computer nerd! He stinks!”

“He’s not bad,” Fran protested. “He’s a pretty fast runner.”

“He runs goofy,” Drew said. “It’s like he borrowed someone else’s legs.”

“You don’t like him because he’s so much better at math than you are,” Fran said.

“I’m better at math than he is at baseball,” Drew snapped back. “At least I get Cs

in math. The Brain wouldn't get a D in baseball."

"Let's get back to the lineup, guys," Scott said, pointing to the paper. "We gotta play Benny somewhere. What about someplace in the outfield?"

"Outfield?!" Drew blurted. "We oughta play him someplace in *cyberfield*."

Scott laughed and wrote it down.

"Let's take a look at what we got," Fran said. The three teammates studied the lineup.

TIGERS

Starters

P Scott/Drew

C Danny Perlstein

1B Nicholas Chu

2B Maggie Ferris

SS Drew/Scott

3B Fran

LF Max Stevenson

CF Peter Martinez

RF Sam Finch

Reserves

Eric Jaworski infield

Brendan Lynch outfield

Michael Stamm outfield

Benny the Brain cyberfield

“It looks pretty good,” Fran said.

“We’re better coaches than Mr. Skelly,”
Drew said.

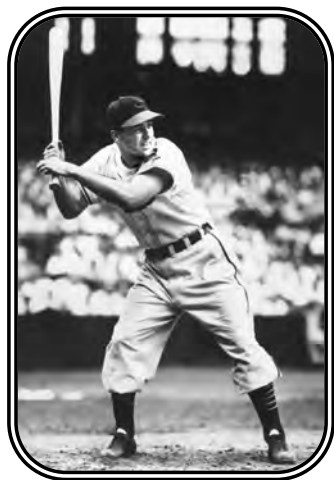
Scott laughed, folded the paper, and stuffed it in his pocket. He walked back to the window, desperately looking for some blue sky.

It was still raining.

PLAYER COACHES THE REAL STORY

What Benny told his teammates about player-coaches is true. Years ago, it was fairly common for major league ball players to take on the added responsibility of coaching their teams. They called these guys player-coaches (or player-managers).

The list of player-coaches includes some of the biggest names in baseball history. Ty Cobb (career batting



average of .367), Rogers Hornsby (.358), home-run slugger Mel Ott (511 homers), and pitching great Christy Mathewson (373 wins) are on the list. Also included are Hall of Famers like Bill Terry, George Sisler, Joe Cronin, Mickey Cochrane, and Harold Joseph “Pie” Traynor, who all managed teams during their playing years.

The legendary Babe Ruth wanted to manage the New York Yankees near the end of his playing career, but the owners of the Yankees said no. They thought the “Sultan of Swat” (as Babe Ruth was known) was too undependable to run a baseball team.

Today you don’t hear much about player-coaches. Most of them played ball before the 1950s. But in the 1970s, all-time great Frank Robinson (586 homers) played and coached with the Cleveland Indians. Pete Rose, another all-time great (4256 hits), was a player-coach for the Cincinnati Reds in the 1980s.

Probably the greatest single season any player-coach has had in the history of baseball was the season Lou Boudreau (pronounced Boo-DRO) had in 1948. Boudreau,

a shortstop with the Cleveland Indians, became the team's player-coach in 1942 when he was only twenty-four years old. He was so young that the newspapers sometimes called him "The Boy Manager."

Boudreau wasn't a terrific player-coach right away. In the Indians first six years under Boudreau, they never finished higher than third place in the American League. Things were looking so bad for Boudreau that the Indians almost traded him in 1947.

It's a good thing they didn't—1948 was a magical year for Boudreau. As he put it: "I had angels on my shoulders." Boudreau batted .355 with 18 home runs and 106 runs batted in. He led American League shortstops in double plays and fielding percentage and he was named the American League's MVP (Most Valuable Player).

That year, the Indians—coached by Boudreau—tied the Boston Red Sox for first place in the American League with a record of 96–58. Boudreau smashed two home runs and two singles in an 8–3 victory over the Red Sox in a playoff game. Then, Boudreau led the Indians to the World

Series Championship over the Boston Braves in six games.

Imagine if modern-day shortstop Jimmy Rollins, during his MVP year in 2007, also coached his team to the World Championship. That is what Lou Boudreau did in 1948.

Benny was also right that Lou Boudreau is known for the “The Williams Shift.” Just like Benny, Boudreau had been keeping notes. He knew that Ted Williams of the Boston Red Sox, a left-handed slugger, hit the ball to the right side of the field 95 percent of the time. So when Ted Williams got up to bat, Boudreau shifted his fielders to the right side of the field. Other major league teams followed Boudreau’s lead and started using the shift against Ted Williams.

Did the shift work? Well, yes and no. There were times when Williams tried so hard to blast the ball past the fielders that he did not hit very well. For example, the St. Louis Cardinals used the shift against Williams in the 1946 World Series and the

Red Sox star hit only .200 (5 singles in 25 at bats) with no home runs.

But the Williams Shift did not keep Ted Williams from being one of the greatest hitters of his era. In fact, Williams ended his career with .344 batting average and 521 home runs. Because, as Benny found out, no matter where the coach places the fielders, someone has to catch the ball to get the batter out. That's playing baseball.