

FRED BOWEN
SPORTS STORY

T.J.'S SECRET PITCH

FRED BOWEN





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ONE

T. J. Burns ran out the front door with his baseball glove and a dream. More than anything else in the world, he wanted to be a baseball pitcher. T. J. looped his baseball glove onto the handlebars of his bicycle and pedaled toward the practice field.

He was in a hurry. Today was the first day of baseball practice.

On his way, T. J. saw one of his teammates from the Pirates. “Hi, Nicole!” called T. J., skidding to a stop in front of her house. “Are you going to practice?”

“Sure,” said Nicole as she bumped her bike down her front steps. “You going?”

“Yep. I’m going to ask Mr. Upton if I can pitch this year,” T. J. said proudly.

“Gee,” Nicole said as she and her bike cleared the last step and came to a stop in front of T. J., “aren’t you kinda shrimpy to be a pitcher? I mean, aren’t most pitchers, um, you know...bigger...like Matty or Scott?”

T. J. straightened up on his bicycle seat. “I’m not that small. I’m taller than you,” he said, a little too loudly.

“No way!” Nicole answered, lowering her bike to the ground. “Come on, back to back, let’s measure.”

T. J. swung his leg around his bike seat, knocked down the kickstand, pulled himself to his full height, and walked over to Nicole.

The two friends quickly turned away from each other and scooted backward until they bumped. T. J. placed his left hand flat against his head and moved it slowly across his hair. Much to his disappointment his fingertips hit the back of Nicole’s head.

“See, I told you so,” Nicole said. “I’m two inches taller than you. Easy.”

T. J. didn’t feel like talking. He got on his

bike, and Nicole got on hers. The two of them pedaled in silence to the practice field.

Eventually, Nicole broke the silence: “At least you get to play second base, T. J. I’d love to play infield.”

“I don’t want to play second base. I want to be a pitcher,” said T. J., who still couldn’t believe that Nicole was two inches taller.

Oh, how T. J. wanted to be a pitcher! Earlier that spring, right after the winter snows had melted and long before most kids had started thinking about baseball, T. J. was practicing his windup.

He propped an old mattress against the fence in his backyard and painted a box about the size of a twelve-year-old’s strike zone on it. Every day, rain or shine, T. J. would pitch baseballs into the mattress.

Thump. Thump. Thump. The balls would plunk against the mattress. Day after day, T. J. would fire fastballs and dream of standing on the mound.

Some days Bobby Drummer, T. J.’s best friend and the Pirates regular left fielder, would drop by and bring his older brother’s

catcher's mitt. Bobby would squat down in front of the mattress, give T. J. a target, and call balls and strikes for the would-be Pirates' hurler.

That was a month ago. Now it was the first day of practice. When T. J. and Nicole pulled up to the practice field, they hopped off their bikes and joined the team. T. J. saw Scott, the Pirates tall star pitcher, warming up on the sidelines. Scott's long, loose delivery sent the ball flying in a blur to the dead center of the catcher's mitt. *Thwack!*

Bobby Drummer ran in from left field when he saw T. J. and Nicole. "Hey," he called. "You guys are late! Come on, let's get going."

T. J. and Nicole jogged out toward Bobby and when they caught up with him, Bobby asked, "Are you gonna ask Mr. Upton if you can pitch?"

"Sure," T. J. said confidently as he glanced at Nicole. "I've been practicing all month."

"Well, go ahead and ask him," Nicole dared. "He's standing right over there."

"I think I will," said T. J. He broke away

from Bobby and Nicole and walked over to Mr. Upton.

Mr. Upton was a friendly older man who had coached the Pirates for years. “Hi, T. J.,” he said. “How’s my second baseman?”

“Fine, Mr. Upton,” said T. J., looking up at Mr. Upton and squinting from the sun. “But, um, I was wondering if I could try pitching this year?”

Mr. Upton’s smile disappeared. “Gee, T. J.,” he said. “I was thinking that Matty or Scott would pitch for us. Scott pitched last year and Matty has the strongest arm in the club. You’ve got to admit that. And anyway, who would play second base?”

T. J. was ready for that one. “Nicole could play second, Mr. Upton. She played it some last year and did a good job.” T. J. pleaded, “Please let me pitch, Mr. Upton. I practiced every day for a month! Just give me a chance.”

Mr. Upton’s smile returned to his face. “Okay, T. J., why don’t you pitch batting practice and show us what you’ve got?” Turning toward the clump of teammates

pulling gloves and balls out of their knapsacks, Mr. Upton said, "C'mon kids! Let's get started. We're going to have some batting practice. Scott, you'll pitch a little later. We're going to give T. J. a chance to show us what he can do."

T. J.'s heart jumped as he ran out to the mound. Bobby trotted by on his way out to his familiar left-field position. "Come on, T. J.!" he called, encouraging his best friend. "Just like we practiced. Smoke it by 'em."

T. J. nodded and toed the rubber just as he had dreamed of doing a thousand times before in his backyard. He looked right into the eye of the batter, Lee Wasserman, one of the the better hitters on the Pirates team. T. J. started his windup and hurled the baseball with all his might.

Whack! Lee smacked the ball over the shortstop's head for a clean single. Bobby hustled his throw back into the infield as Lee teased T. J., "There goes your no-hitter!"

T. J.'s face reddened, then he took a deep breath. He went into his windup and threw the second pitch even harder.

Whack!

The ball sailed over the surprised center fielder's head.

"There goes your shutout," Lee laughed.

T. J. shook his head and pushed his fist into his glove. This was trickier than throwing balls against a mattress. T. J. wound up again.

Whack! Another hit. T. J. kept pitching and Lee kept hitting.

Finally, Mr. Upton called for another batter. "Come on, Kevin. Step up to the plate. Swing level and don't try to kill it."

Kevin Vincent, the Pirates stocky star shortstop, stepped to the plate. He cocked his bat behind his batting helmet and glared at the pitcher.

T. J. went into his motion and threw his best heater to the plate.

Whack! The ball sailed toward left field. Bobby Drummer scrambled back to the fence but ran out of room. He watched the ball drop far behind the old green fence.

"Meatballs!" Kevin yelled, grinning ear to ear. "My favorite food. Come on, T. J.—put

another one of your meatballs on my dinner plate!”

“That’s enough of that, Kevin,” scolded Mr. Upton from the sidelines. Then the coach looked at T. J. and said, “Try to keep the ball down in the strike zone.”

T. J. followed Mr. Upton’s advice on the next pitch, but Kevin slashed a hard grounder past Nicole at second base.

T. J. tried everything. Fastballs inside. Fastballs outside. Fastballs up, down, and all around, but nothing seemed to work. Pirate after Pirate paraded to the plate and pounded T. J.’s pitches. Even Paul “Jelly-bean” Jones cracked a couple deep into the outfield.

After what seemed forever, Mr. Upton called for another pitcher. T. J. trudged off the mound with his head hung low.

“Not bad, T. J.,” said Mr. Upton, trying to be nice. “You have a good windup and you get the ball over the plate. Maybe we can use you in relief this year. But I really think we need you at second base.”

T. J. nodded but never looked up. All of

his practicing and dreaming had come to nothing.

Then Mr. Upton turned to the infield and called: “Nicole, why don’t you take center? Matty, you come in and pitch. T. J., you take second.”

T. J. scuffed off to second, kicking the dirt every step of the way.

“You did okay, T. J.,” Nicole said gently. “You’ll get a chance to pitch.”

“Yeah, sure,” T. J. answered. “Maybe we’ll get a fifty-run lead in some game, and I’ll get to pitch to the last batter.”

Nicole started to trot out to center field, then glanced over her shoulder. “Face it, T. J., kids like us never get to be stars.”

RIP SEWELL

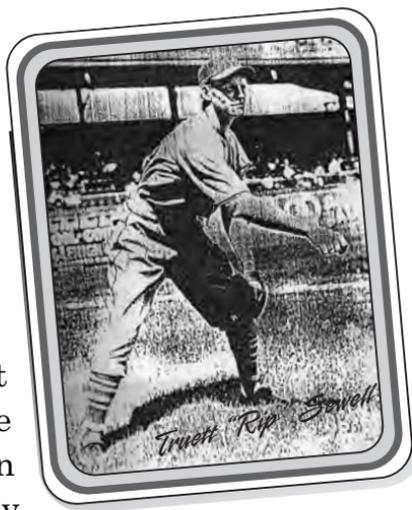
THE REAL STORY

T. J.'s grandfather was right—Rip Sewell was a pretty good pitcher.

Born in 1907, Truett “Rip” Sewell joined the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1938. He didn’t win any games the first year, but won forty over the next three seasons.

In those years, Sewell did not throw his famous pitch. He only had an average fastball and curveball, so he depended on pinpoint control to get batters out.

Everything changed on December 7, 1941, the day Japan attacked Pearl Harbor



and U.S. soldiers started fighting in World War II. Rip Sewell was on a hunting trip with a friend that day. His friend accidentally shot him. At the hospital, doctors removed buckshot from Sewell's stomach and legs but could not remove several pellets from his feet.

The injury prevented Sewell from joining the many other major leaguers who fought in World War II. It also forced Sewell to change the way he pitched because he couldn't lean on his feet the same way he used to. He began to experiment with the blooper pitch which he first threw in a game during the 1943 season. The pitch became known as the "eephus" pitch. One of his teammates named it that because, he said, "eephus doesn't mean anything and neither does the pitch."

The pitch may not have meant much, but National League batters had little success hitting it. Sewell posted 21 wins in 1943 and 1944 and pitched in three All-Star games. Unlike T. J., Sewell only threw the pitch about twenty times a game and never

with runners on base. (Major league base runners can run the moment the pitcher starts to throw the ball toward home. Little Leaguers have to wait until the ball crosses the plate.)

Sewell lofted the eephus pitch as high as 25 feet, so the ball would be coming almost straight down when it reached the batter. Once, completely frustrated, Cincinnati Reds shortstop Eddie Miller caught the ball in midair and threw it back at Sewell!

Only the great Ted Williams, who played for the Boston Red Sox, ever hit the eephus pitch for a home run. Before the 1946 All-Star Game, Williams asked Sewell if he would throw his famous pitch to him. Sewell signalled Williams when the time came and served up a blooper; the Red Sox slugger knocked it into the seats for a home run.

Sewell retired from baseball after the 1949 season. Years later, doctors amputated his legs below the knees because of problems related to his old hunting injuries. With the help of artificial legs, Sewell

remained active, even playing golf and playing it well—he scored in the eighties. This accomplishment is really not very surprising, since Sewell had learned during his baseball career that there is always more than one way to achieve a goal.