

CHAPTER ONE

Play Ball, Already



By the time June 15 arrived, the St. Paul Saints had had enough of practice. They wanted nothing more to do with infield drills, dead-ball batting practice in the cage, intrasquad games, and getting to the field at half past nine in the morning. They were ready to play a real game. If only the bus driver could find the Duluth stadium.

Duluth is an odd little city, barely more than a mile wide and 15 miles long, hugging the western shore of Lake Superior. The city is enduringly linked to the giant lake, from its port, where it derives so many jobs and so much of its economy, to its weather, which can turn from calm and pleasant to positively frigid with one puff of wind off Superior's chilly waters. As it rises from the lake, the City of Duluth keeps on rising, with steep hills that make it look like San Francisco would, if San Francisco had only 100,000 people and not all that much to do past 10 o'clock at night.

Grundy the bus driver (his name tag really said "Grundy"), an old, tediously methodical man with a friendly manner, a round, puffy face with a protruding lower lip—like a caricature, with an oversized head and a tiny body—stood up at the front of the bus after the Saints players and coaches had piled on and addressed the team: "OK, so who knows how to get to the ballpark?"

You could almost hear shoulders drooping and eyebrows raising as these people from Georgia and Cuba and Australia and Arizona looked at each other and wondered if they'd have opening day after all. But Doug McLeod, the team's radio announcer and the one person on that bus

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who'd actually been to Duluth, saved the day. He knew the general direction Grundy had to drive to get to the park, and a clue gleaned from that day's *Duluth News-Tribune*—advice on the best places to park when attending the game—led the bus to the right neighborhood. Team look-outs spotted lighting standards, and Grundy finally zeroed in on the spot. But he zipped right past the entrance marked "Players and Park Officials Only" and proceeded around the front of the park, around a corner and past the outfield wall into a muddy morass and a dead end. If Grundy was good at anything, though, it was backing up, and he did it well enough that the team could make the walk to the dressing room and begin preparing for a baseball game.

Wade Stadium in Duluth was almost Wade Pile of Rubble in 1986, when the forces of progress wanted to tear it down to put up some structure that would make money for some developers—nobody remembers anymore just what that was. But the park's rich tradition—it hosted the old Duluth-Superior Dukes of the original Northern League on and off for forty years until the circuit fizzled and popped in the early 1970s—and the faint hope that it might one day again host a professional ballclub won the argument, and a group of impassioned civic boosters managed to save the stadium—but not to renovate it.

Until the Northern League showed interest in Wade Stadium, it was a holy mess, an impressive brick facade hiding a sinkhole where teams could still play ball, if they didn't mind a pockmarked field with decrepit stands and almost uninhabitable clubhouses. But the promise of a little baseball can be a powerful motivation, and Wade was now a gleaming, if cramped, edifice, with a 12-foot-high cement outfield wall covered top to bottom and foul pole to foul pole with billboards, a fresh coat of paint leading to the refurbished concession stands, brand-new plastic bleacher seats to put an end to Wade's famous splinters, and new lights in the towers, so players could at least see at night, even if they still couldn't see well.

It was the dugouts that were a problem. The clubhouse steps led down into a dank concrete shaft that usually held plenty of standing water in which mosquitoes could breed; this dungeon fed into three steep steps with a ceiling only five feet above the top one. That was the first time the players had to duck. Even when the stadium maintenance workers staple-gunned a powder-blue shag carpet remnant on the doorway, it was still a dangerous spot; it might not draw blood anymore, but it could induce a thundering headache just the same. The dugout itself was tiny, without enough bench space for even the starting lineup, let alone the entire team, which resulted in Saints and Dukes spilling out across the warning track because they couldn't fit anywhere else. Getting out of the dugout the players had to duck again. The upwardly slanted roof—which, incredibly, was new—extended all the way over the dugout pit and was barely four feet above the last of the three steps, which were so high that players sitting on the bench couldn't see the playing field. People wondered when, not if, someone was going to clock his head on the roof and tumble hair-first to the dugout floor.

The baseball fans of Duluth were not very concerned about the condition of the dugout steps, though. They'd waited twenty-two years for professional baseball to come back to town, and they weren't going to let it go without a fight. Before the gates opened at Wade on opening night, more than three hours before game time, more than 500 people had queued up outside the stadium waiting for their chance to get in. Every parking lot within a mile was filled, and a sea of black and white Dukes paraphernalia converged on the red brick structure. The Dukes' trademark was black tie and tails—like the Duke of Earl—and general manager Tom Van Schaack and his staff were scurrying around the stadium in that garb, looking like they should be at opening night of the opera, not of a baseball game. Van Schaack kept knocking off his top hat with his walkie talkie antenna.

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This was not the first Duluth Dukes team of a Northern League to play in Wade Stadium. Don Gilmore was a nineteen-year-old pitcher in 1948, during the Dukes' first incarnation. He had just broken in with the Dukes, a Cardinals farm club, and he could throw, with a good fastball and a nasty curve. If he remained healthy and kept developing, this kid from Ohio had a near-certain future as a big-league ballplayer.

That was before the Dukes' team bus was heading south on Highway 36 through the Twin Cities, on the way to another town during a road trip. It was before the steering failed on the truck in the oncoming lane, before the truck rammed into the bus, leaving a wrenched, haunting pile of metal filled with dead and wounded ballplayers. Four players and the team's manager were killed. All but three of the 18 players were seriously injured. Gilmore's wounds sound so gruesome hearing them described 45 years later that it makes it almost impossible to imagine having to live through them. He suffered the excruciating pain of third-degree burns. His right foot was torn off at the ankle. His back was broken. His left thigh was crushed. He will forever be missing a small piece of his skull, taken off by a projectile of flying sheet metal. He broke seven ribs. Gilmore did not learn until two years later that he had cracked his fibia and broken his knee, and he did not find out about the steel plate in his head until three weeks after the wreck. Doctors did not want to upset him further with the news about losing part of his skull, and they had too much else to worry about to even find the broken bones in his leg, though the pain would not have been any better or worse had he known right away. After months in a St. Paul hospital, with his wedding postponed, Gilmore returned home to Columbus—in the train's baggage car, since he could not move well enough to make it to a seat in a passenger car.

Finally, the next year he was married. The couple honeymooned in Duluth.

It was the beginning of a magnetic attraction that kept Gilmore coming back to this city, despite all the pain that comes with the memories it brings. He came back again

and again, including for a thirty-year reunion of his ill-fated team in 1978, a visit that included a day of golfing and dining with Bob Hope, who was in Minnesota and had read Gilmore's story in the newspaper, and who was impressed enough to invite him out for the day. Gilmore kept coming back to Duluth during the course of a remarkable life, one that saw him pick up the pieces of his broken bones and shattered psyche and begin an eighteen-year career as a decorated police officer, followed by six terms in the Ohio legislature, which ran concurrently with a career operating a successful security company, after which he founded a company that develops new recycling technologies. "Either you get up and go, or you die," Gilmore would say much later. "I don't know anyone at that age who wants to die."

But he never watched baseball.

After he recuperated from the crash, Gilmore gathered his courage in a tight ball and stepped on a semipro diamond, but he collapsed running to first base in his opening game. He tried coaching during one spring training, but he couldn't take being so close to the field and not playing. He asked his wife, Jean, to take the sports pages out of the paper before she gave it to him in the morning.

But on June 15, 1993, almost forty-five years to the day after a runaway truck bid a jolting farewell to a promising baseball career, sixty-four-year-old Don Gilmore was at Wade Stadium, a dozen rows behind home plate, a spectator at his first full baseball game since that deadly night on Highway 36. You could tell, watching Don Gilmore gaze out at the field where he was to begin his journey to the top, that he was a happy man to be at a ball game again in Wade Stadium. He would tell you as much. Yet tears still welled up in his eyes as he talked about the potential that was lost in a hail of metal shards and broken glass. "There is lots of joy, but there is a lot of sadness, too. I look out there and I see guys that aren't there. I remember how they looked out there when we played ball out here."

The original Northern League and Duluth Dukes continued until the circuit wheezed to a halt in 1971, but it went on without Don Gilmore.

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When he heard, almost by accident, that the Dukes and the Northern League were being revived, the homing device in Gilmore's brain kicked in and drew him to the west shore of Lake Superior. "There was no doubt in the world I would be here. My wife said, 'Are you sure you want to go?' I said, 'No.' She said, 'Why are you going?' I said, 'I just have to.'

"On my ball club, everyone had potential. There was no one on the way down. Everyone was on the way up. Even after all these years, I still wonder what would have been. It's just something you never get over. We all still get nightmares. I get four or five a month. It'll take your mind off your golf game, I'll guarantee you."

"C'mon, man, let's get going. I'm getting anxious. I haven't had an opening day in two years."

Leon "Bull" Durham, the St. Paul Saints' main attraction and biggest player (both in myth and physical stature), was swinging his bat in the dugout, nearly knocking loose a couple of heads, waiting for the interminable opening ceremonies to end and the ballgame to begin. Finally, the players were introduced so they could take their places along the baselines for the national anthem.

One by one the announcer called the Saints, but he forgot Stephane Dionne, French Canada's contribution to baseball. Dionne, a catcher, wanted to play baseball so badly that he attended four of the Northern League's six tryouts, sleeping in his car in Florida so he could afford his attempt to latch onto a pro team. Finally, Saints manager Tim Blackwell, himself a catcher, could take no more. He signed Dionne as a bullpen catcher—the lowest position in a league many were wondering if they should even take seriously. But Stephane got to wear a uniform and was paid \$500 a month for the privilege, and he did not dream of complaining. But when the announcer skipped over his name, Durham and Blackwell did complain. They did not take well the snubbing of their teammate.

"Come on, Stephane, you come out with me," Blackwell told him as he ran to take his position near home plate.

“You can be assistant manager for a day.” Bull looked skyward towards the press box and let loose in his deepest French-accented baritone boom: “*Stephane!* What about *Stephane?* Damn, man!” On the way back to the dugout, Durham put his arm around the round-faced catcher and reassured him, “We’ll make sure they don’t do that to you at home, man.”

Finally, then, after more than a year of preparation, weeks of practice, hours of nervous anticipation and about a dozen pregame speeches, the St. Paul Saints were ready to play the Duluth-Superior Dukes. The visiting Saints began inauspiciously, going down one-two-three in their half of the first. But starter Ranbir Grewal had his chance to show what he and his team could do as he stared down Dana Williams, Duluth’s closest thing to a superstar, who’d had a couple of cups of coffee, maybe even an entire continental breakfast, in the big leagues.

With the first pitch, Ranbir plunked him square in the shoulder.

Things were not going well early on for Ranbir, an imposing pitcher of Indian ancestry, with a goatee and a massive family grape farm to retire to in California if this baseball thing didn’t work out. In baseball, pitchers want to keep the ball low, where it will curve and dart more accurately, and where it is more difficult for hitters to rear back and hit it as far as they can. Grewal was absolutely not doing that in the first inning, with his pitches high and very often outside. He loaded the bases before Eddie Ortega, the flashy, wiry Cuban second baseman, rescued him by starting a double play to end the inning.

On went the game. And on. And on some more. One of the Northern League’s proudest innovations was the twenty-second clock, a timer that was to hang in center field, much like the twenty-four-second clock that rules a basketball game. Once the pitcher got the ball from the catcher, he had twenty seconds to throw a pitch. If he didn’t, the umpire called a ball. If the batter stalled twenty seconds, it was a strike. It was a great idea. All Duluth had to do was to figure out how to work its clock, which hung on a

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center field light standard like a TV without a picture tube. Without a functioning clock, the Saints and the Dukes rambled to a 3-3 tie after nine innings in just over three hours—a long time even for organized baseball, which makes little effort to speed up its games.

For the tenth inning, Duluth manager Mal Fichman put in pitcher Mike Brady, a left hander who threw slow. Painfully slow. Brady is the kind of pitcher that sends hitters running to the batter's box, so excited are they to have the luxury of time as they study the ball ambling its way to home plate. Michael Mimbs, the Saints' starter the next day, looked up and recognized Brady. "Hey, I played with him in the Dodgers organization. He throws nothing but curve balls." Jim Eppard, the team's first baseman and hitting coach, couldn't understand why Mimbs was talking almost to himself. Eppard opened his eyes wide and said almost in disbelief as Jerry DeFabbia began his walk to the plate, "Well, tell Jerry! Tell Jerry!"

Actually, it didn't matter what he told Jerry, because Brady put the first pitch in the small of Jerry's back and DeFabbia trotted to first base. Ortega singled, and Fichman, the Duluth manager, decided to walk Eppard—a player with a reputation around baseball of being able to make contact with the ball at any time and drive in a run when he needs to, and with five minor-league batting titles to prove it—to pitch to Durham.

Then Mal Fichman showed the world and 4,518 Duluthians why he is known around baseball as Mal Function. All night, Bull had been so far in front of pitches that he could swing at strike three, get back to the dugout, and head into the clubhouse for a smoke before the ball reached the catcher. Durham had spent more than a decade in the major leagues, terrorizing pitchers who threw their fastballs at more than ninety miles an hour, a speed most Northern League pitchers simply could not match. Under Wade Stadium's dim lighting conditions—the front office might have been better off running to the hardware store and buying a case of hundred-watt GE bulbs and screwing them in the lighting fix-

tures—it made Durham look more like an overweight, old ballplayer waving at bad pitches (which he was) than the man who was once one of the most feared power hitters in baseball (which he also was).

That's why no one could figure out why after Fichman walked singles hitter Jim Eppard he took out Brady, who was throwing curveball after looping curveball in the low seventies, and put in Wayne Rosenthal, a former big-leaguer who throws the kind of hard fastballs that Bull dreams about when he's snoring loudly and sleeping with the TV on. But Fichman did, and Rosenthal put two straight fastballs right down Broadway for strikes one and two. Everybody in northeastern Minnesota knew Rosenthal would be coming with more heat, including Bull. Rosey laid the ball over the center of the plate, right about at Durham's belt level. Bull turned on the pitch and sent it towering into the air, where it caught Duluth's stiff lake breeze. The wind carried the shot over the right field fence and into the murky swamp beyond.

Bull Durham. Grand slam. Tenth inning. Opening night.

And Leon, all 230 pounds of him, leaped down the dugout steps, ducked his head and ran into the clubhouse. He lit a cigarette and called his daughter. "That's right, sweetheart, just like you said. I hit a home run."

This is not where Leon Durham was supposed to be as he approached his thirty-sixth birthday. He wanted more. He and plenty of others thought he deserved more.

In Leon Durham's boyhood, baseball was his ideal. As the seventh of ten children in a happy, comfortable, and crowded Cincinnati home, fighting for attention took too much energy. But that house was right down the street from Crosley Field, where the Cincinnati Reds played before they retreated behind the imposing genericness that is Riverfront Stadium. To earn pocket money, Leon would direct Reds fans to his front lawn, where they could tear up his mom's grass for two bucks a car. When he wasn't making money off the Reds, he was living vicariously through them.

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He found the modern version of a knothole, an aperture in the concrete stadium wall where a growing boy could watch heroes like Lee May, Pete Rose, and Tony Perez, the legends of the Big Red Machine. It was the kind of boyhood that would happen in a movie if someone wanted to romanticize the life of a young black kid growing up dreaming of being a ballplayer. Everything was going right.

When Durham reached high school, the good fortune continued. He starred in football, basketball, and baseball, a six-foot-two young man with enough strength to power a ball over the right field fence or post up underneath the basket against the toughest opponent. For his senior year, Durham decided to concentrate on baseball, but he also wanted to get a job to earn some pocket money. Prom was coming up, dating was a priority, and Leon wanted to be able to participate in the fun. No problem, his older brothers told him. We'll take care of your pocket money, but you concentrate on sports, on working out and building your strength. They saw their kid brother had a future in baseball, and as his surrogate fathers they were determined that nothing would stand in his way.

As high school graduation and the June amateur baseball draft approached in 1976, the Durhams waited by the phone. It rang early. The St. Louis Cardinals picked Leon in the first round and gave him a \$96,000 signing bonus—"a lot of money back then," he remembered. The Cards sent Durham to their rookie-league team in Sarasota, Florida, his first time away from home, away from the family that always supported him and always was there for him when he turned around to look for help. With his safety net gone, Leon felt lost, his mind half on the game and half on Cincinnati. The distraction showed in his statistics. It was a summer of many firsts for Leon Durham: The first time cut from his umbilical cord to his family, the first time he didn't start every game and play every inning, the first time he did not dominate whatever level of baseball he was at. It was scary and confusing. "I couldn't relate to being away from home," he would remember later. "But it was on after that."

That was the kind of scrappy attitude that would mark the rest of his career, and mark the turning point from a teenager with rippling muscles and tremendous potential to a ballplayer who would meet that potential, partly because he convinced himself that he would, and that anybody who tried to take it away from him would do so at his peril. From Sarasota, Durham moved on in the next few years to Cardinals farm clubs in Gastonia, North Carolina; St. Petersburg, Florida; Little Rock, Arkansas; and Springfield, Illinois. That last stop was in 1980, when he was finally called to The Show. “I called Moms. She started crying.” In his first big league game, Leon had an RBI triple. It was indeed on.

With the big-league club, “It was great. I never had to go into my pocket for anything. Garry Templeton, Tony Scott, George Hendrick, those guys looked out for me. We made, like, sixty-five dollars a day in meal money, and that just stayed in my pocket. Those guys would see me in the hotel and say, ‘Where are you going?’ I’d tell them I was going out to eat, and they’d say, ‘Wait, we’re going with you.’ I just sent that money to Moms. She’s said that if I never got back to the big leagues, she’d be happy for the life I’ve been able to give her.”

It was a great life for Leon, too. But he let it get too good. In 1983, in the midst of his three straight All-Star Game appearances, when he was ripping twenty home runs a year and hitting around .300, with plenty of money in his pocket, and some new friends who provided the encouragement and the supplies, Durham discovered cocaine. The story is the same for all kinds of athletes, actors, businesspeople, average guys on the street. Coke does not discriminate, nor is there any socioeconomic test required to become a drug addict. It took Durham a while to realize what had happened to him, and a while longer to learn the necessity of leaving that in his past. “I got mixed up with the wrong guys,” he would say years later, after he learned to take responsibility for himself, and almost before it was too late to salvage his career. “That was my choice right there. I don’t know why it happened, but I thought I could control

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it. Of course I couldn't. I do regret it, but I'm still alive, I'm sober, and that's what counts." He knows that now, but four years after his first suspension for drugs, he tested positive for cocaine again. He was suffering back problems, he was at the tail end of a three-year, \$3.5 million contract (it should have been for two years and \$3.5 million more, and Durham was part of the Collusion I and II settlements as a result), and, as he put it with his characteristic rumbling belly laugh, "I was doing things I shouldn't have been doing. But it won't happen again. I'm a fucked up person anyway, why would I need drugs? Now I know what people talk about when they talk about a natural high."

After a decade of major-league baseball with the Cardinals and Chicago Cubs, Leon Durham was a shunned man. With the money from his playing days well-invested, and with a successful printing franchise in Cincinnati, the Durham family could afford to live well. But Leon still felt he had something to prove. He was ready to play again.

If Durham's attitude had improved along with his understanding of his life and his responsibilities, it apparently was still not enough to convince major-league clubs. While pitcher Steve Howe was on his eighth chance to bounce back from cocaine relapses, Leon could not seem to get a third opportunity. He was in spring training with the Chicago White Sox, and he had a good camp. But the choice was between Durham and Bo Jackson, and the Sox decided to pick up their option on Jackson, who was recovering from a risky hip replacement but who was still one of the most bankable stars in sports. They offered Leon a chance at Triple A Nashville, but with no guarantee that he would play regularly. Not good enough.

That's when the St. Paul Saints called. That's when Durham decided to take a chance on an untested league (though he was tested—twice a week for drugs, at the expense of Major League Baseball), a chance to play ball and be the big fish in a small and uncertain pond.