Donnie Ball

Ron McLaughlin had unbridled fun when his boys were in Little League. He loved the game and the friendships and rivalries. His spirits rose every time a tyke hit a solid single or turned a routine grounder into an out. His boys were long since grown and gone, but Ron still relished the game. He’d been an umpire for more than a decade.

On a bright Saturday afternoon, Ron took his position behind the plate, adjusted his cap and mask and sang out his favorite words.

 “Play ball!”

 The Trout Homes Titans, sponsored, uniformed and nourished by pizza after every game by an aggressive real estate agent, were at bat. They were facing the hometown Cats. Ron knew the locals well but he’d not seen the Titans play before.

Their first batter ran the count full before he popped up to short; the next kid went down on three quick strikes.

 The third Titan, who wore 1 on his uniform with lettering reading Donnie, connected and hit a crisp grounder toward third base. Donnie headed to first, not jogging but not going full tilt either; Ron trotted a few paces behind him.

 The Cats’ third baseman scooped up the ball and threw to first. The throw was level and accurate and it smacked the first baseman’s glove crisply. Donnie was at least three strides behind the throw.

 “You’re out,” said Ron. He threw his arm up to signal the out.

 Donnie tapped first base and made the turn, heading to second. Everybody else froze, completely perplexed. When he got to second base, the kid gave his teammates in the dugout air high fives.

 Ron took a few steps toward second base.

“Sorry, son,” said Ron, “maybe I didn’t holler loud enough. You’re out. Inning’s over.”

 Donnie gave him a look, equal parts contempt and unbridled confidence.

 “Nah,” said Donnie T. “I beat the throw.”

 “Nope. You were at least two steps behind it. Good effort, but it’s still an out.”

 The three Cats outfielders jogged across the grass and the infielders headed for their dugout, too. The pitcher walked across the infield grass to join the catcher who pointed to second base. Donnie had not moved.

 Drawing a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Ron walked all the way to second.

 “C’mon, now,” he said, “you know the rules. The throw was perfect. Go grab your glove and take the field.”

 “Safe,” said Donnie “I beat the throw and stretched it into a double.”

 Ron wasn’t quite sure what to do, so he threw his right hand in the air again and said, “Out!”

 Donnie said, “You got some kind of problem? You’re wrong and” – with a sneer – “you’re too old to be out here anyhow. I’m safe. Batter up.”

 Ron turned his back to the lad and looked in to the Titans dugout.

 “Coach. Over here, please.”

 The coach ambled out, shaking his head slowly.

 Ron spoke quietly.

 “Coach, you saw the play, right? Clean throw. He was out at first.”

 “I know.”

 “So, get him to get off the bag.”

 “Easier said than done.”

 “How’s that?”

 The coach shrugged.

 “I got a problem here. The kid’s dad is the reason we’re here. He put up all the cash to get the team together, bought the uniforms, lends us the company van to get to games, the whole schmear.”

 “So what?”

 “You notice the kid’s number?”

 “Sure. He’s wearin’ number One.”

 “Exactly. The old man put this outfit together so his kid could be on a team. I’m gonna be honest with you. I gave him number One ‘cause the dad asked me to, but the kid’s just not that good. Our starting left fielder got the mumps. I figured I’d make his dad happy and let him start.”

 “That’s all well and good,” said McLaughlin, “but it doesn’t change anything. Rules are rules, coach. You need to get him to get off that base.”

 “I’ll see what I can do.”

 While the coach talked to Donnie, the rest of the players, all standing near their respective dugouts, watched.

 The coach spoke. Donnie shook his head. The coach laid a hand on the lad’s shoulder and Donnie slapped it away, stomping one foot on the base. The coach pointed emphatically at left field; Donnie didn’t move. The coach turned and walked away.

 “He’s convinced he’s safe. He’s not going to leave that bag. I don’t know what to do. You got any ideas?”

 Ron folded his arms across his chest.

 “I don’t need ideas,” he said. “The game is built on rules. I know the rules. Your team shouldn’t be punished – they haven’t done anything wrong – so for their sake, I’m going to give him one more chance.”

 McLaughlin walked over to Donnie and buckled his knees enough so he was at eye level with the youngster.

 “If you won’t follow the rules, I have two choices. I can eject you from the game and your teammates can continue without you.”

 “I’m not leaving,” said Donnie. “I’m safe. You’re wrong.”

 “Then I have to forfeit the game. You and your buddies take the loss. You can’t make up new rules just because you don’t like the real ones. If everybody made up their own rules, it wouldn’t be baseball. It’s up to you. You want your team to play the game or not?”

 “I couldn’t care less about those losers,” said Donnie. “I hit the double, none of them had anything to do with it. It was me.”

 McLaughlin held the boy’s gaze for a moment and then turned to face the dugouts.

“Forfeit. Cats win.”

 When Donnie arrived home, his dad was lounging in the backyard.

 “Hiya, kiddo. How’d the game go?”

 “Great!” said Donnie, “I smacked a double.”

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