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*note: The following was archived many years ago (ca. 1982) from "Sports Illustrated" magazine.*



## Bang! Bang! You're Out!

*He may not have been the model of a major league umpire. But in 17 tumultuous years, Ron Luciano had more fun and "shot" more players than anyone in blue.*

**by Ron Luciano and David Fisher / *Sports Illustrated* magazine**

*excepted from The Umpire Strikes Back by Ron Luciano and David Fisher, © 1982 Bantam Books.*

I was born in Binghamton, NY in 1937. My father and his 2 brothers had emigrated to America from the tiny Italian village of San Giovanni about 20 years earlier. They split up when they got here and bought train tickets to wherever their money would take them because they couldn't believe that any one town would be large enough to have 3 jobs available. My father's ticket took him to the small town of Endicott, 10 miles from Binghamton in upstate New York. His brothers ended up in Pennsylvania.

I had a normal childhood except perhaps for having a ringside seat at the largest gangland bust in history. When your name is Luciano and you're living in a community of 15,000 Italians, there's no such thing as a gangster. The Mafia was considered a local fraternal organization. There were perhaps 50 families in Endicott thought to be "connected" and they were among the most respected people in town.

Two of my closest friends were Joe and Pete Barbara. Their father -- Big Joe -- owned the local soft-drink bottling plant and was one of the wealthiest men in town. They lived in a big lovely house

with stables and a pool in the nearby village of Apalachin. Most weekends, I would go up there to get thrown off horses with them.

But one Friday night in 1957, Joe called me and told me not to come up that weekend because his father was having company. When I opened the newspaper on Sunday morning, I learned that his company had included just about every crime boss in the Country. Later, I found out that the Barbaras' telephones had been tapped and all of my conversations with Joe and Pete had been recorded. The FBI knew which girl in my class I had a crush on. They interviewed me a number of times in the next few years. But all I could honestly tell them was that I kept falling off horses.

My uncle -- Nick DiNunzio -- had gone through Syracuse University on a football scholarship and was assistant coach of the Endicott High School football team. Being bigger and taller than most of the other kids, I was a decent basketball player and a very good football player. There was never any question in my mind where I wanted to go to college. Uncle Nick had been a quarterback at Syracuse. I wanted to go to Syracuse. The day that Coach Ben Schwartzwalder offered me a scholarship was one of the happiest days of my life. I was 2 years behind Jimmy Brown and 3 years ahead of Ernie Davis. So you can say it was Brown, Luciano, and Davis at Syracuse. (But you have to say it fast.)

The Colts drafted me in 1959, then traded me to the Lions before the season started. But injuries kept me on the bench. Detroit sent me to Minnesota. In 1962, I finally ended my playing career with the Buffalo Bills of in the American Football League (AFL).

An injury that keeps you out of football for 1 year is an accident. An injury that keeps you a second season is a shame. Not only did I have to deal with the end of my dream, but I also had to find a means of making a living. In 1963, I called Spike Briggs who owned the Tigers and had a part of the Lions and asked him for a job on the Lions' coaching staff. He promised to try to find something for me.

Briggs called back in the fall of the year and asked: "How'd you like to be general manager of the Tigers' minor league team in Lakeland, Florida?"

"Great," I said. "Sounds terrific. What do I do?"

A few days after I arrived in Florida, I learned baseball school was about to start in Daytona Beach. "Hey!" I thought. "This is perfect. I'll take a general manager's course and when the season starts, I'll be ready." I soon found the baseball school was the Al Somers Umpire School which had nothing to do with general managers.

Right from the beginning, I loved umpiring. We were out in Sun all day and got to yell as loud as we wanted. The instructors kept telling us that we were virtually dictators on the field; that whatever we said was the rule; and that the players and managers had to listen to us and respect our decisions. That sounded pretty good to me.

The course lasted 6 weeks. At the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> week, I knew that I'd found a profession. So I called Briggs and told him to find another general manager for Lakeland. "Good," he said. "You probably would have done a rotten job anyway. But what are you going to do?"

I told him I was going to be an umpire.

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A manager named Pinky May has the distinction of being the first man I ever threw out of a game. While umpiring spring-training intra-squad games for the Tigers in 1964, I'd gotten used to major league pitchers being around the plate with their pitches. They made it easy. But in the Class A Florida State League, the pitchers lacked that pinpoint control.

One afternoon, I was having a particularly bad game. It involved the Tampa Tarpons and the Lakeland Tigers. One pitch would be too high; the next would be too low; and I'd call them both balls. But the third one would be right down the heart of the plate and I'd call that a ball too. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> inning, I called a hitter out on a pitch that bounced on the plate and May (the manager of the Tarpons) started cursing at me. I got terribly upset. He didn't even know me and he was swearing at me. I didn't need him to embarrass me in front of the fans. I was doing a pretty good job of it myself. So I threw him out of the game.

Just that simply, the problem was resolved. He continued screaming at me for a few more minutes. But suddenly he was gone and it was quiet and peaceful and beautiful on the field once again. Immediately realized I was on to something good.

Too good. The next year I umpired in the Class AA Eastern League and in 140 games I had 26 ejections. Far too many. My problem was that I had gotten pretty good on technique. But I hadn't learned anything about politics. I was trying to run the game with the "charm" of a South American dictator. It took me a long time to realize that umpiring is best described as the profession of standing between two 7-year-olds with one ice-cream cone. No matter how good an umpire you are, your entire career is going to be spend making 50% of all the players and managers unhappy. Every call is going to anger half the people. The key to getting away with it is learning how to deal with the other people's anger and frustration. And all I knew was how to give them the thumb.

In 1966, my contract was purchased by the Triple-A International League. Triple-A is one step below the major leagues and an entire staircase above the rest of the minor leagues. In Triple-A, everything was better. Even I was better. Once I stopped trying to be King Kong on the field, I was free to start managing and coaching. I was finally learning how the game of baseball should be played. And once I figured it out, I wanted to share my knowledge with everyone.



I started talking to the players between innings and during timeouts. Then began talking to them in the field between pitches. And finally just started talking to them whenever I had something important to say (which turned out to be all the time). It might have been the bottom of the 9<sup>th</sup> with the winning run on second and a full count of the batter. He'd be digging his spikes into the dirt ... the pitcher would be glaring in ... no one in the stands would be breathing ... and I'd ask the batter what he thought of a recently opened restaurant. Instead of driving myself crazy, I was doing it to other people. It was good to be in the driver's seat!

I was also feeling relaxed enough to allow my enthusiasm to show on the field. Off the field, I'm actually a very shy person. But once I stepped between the foul lines, all my inhibitions disappeared. I started screaming my calls and leaping in the air, making an attraction out of myself. The fans loved it. Naturally, the league officials hated it. I'd constantly be getting small reminders from the league office that the fans hadn't paid their way into the ballpark to see Ron Luciano umpire.

The way the fans responded to me made that difficult for me to believe. I had begun to develop a real rapport with them. Not satisfied simply to be disturbing the players, between innings I'd wander over to the stands and ask the fans what they thought of a call that I'd made or their opinion of a certain player. They'd yell at me (true, I was still an umpire). But it was all in fun. It gave them a special contact with the field and made it difficult for them to get on me later in the game.

Suddenly I was their official representative. I was doing exactly what they would do if they had the opportunity. Quite often someone would buy me a hot dog or a soda. And I'd forget I was working and end up having to run back to my position with half-a-frank in my mouth and soda splashing all over me.

When I reached the majors in 1969, everything was going so well I began to get cocky. I started shouting my calls with the same exuberance I'd shown in the minors. I didn't just call a runner out. I called him out-out-out-out-out-out... maybe 15 times. I mean he knew he was out!

I couldn't help myself. I was finally in the Major Leagues and I let my enthusiasm show. I needed to talk to the players, the coaches, the managers, the groundkeepers, ball boys -- anybody who would listen to me. It would have been impossible for me to stand out there for 9 innings having nobody to talk to. It didn't matter if they answered or not.

The players and managers had never seen -- or heard -- an umpire like me. It was as if everyone were surprised that an umpire was bright enough to watch the game and talk at the same time. Later, I proved that an umpire could watch, talk, and enjoy a soft drink or throw paper airplanes all at the same time.

But because I didn't act like other umpires, many people didn't know how to deal with me. Some of them enjoyed the way I worked while others despised it. Some of the players wouldn't talk to me. But the managers had no choice.

When Rick Burleson was with the Red Sox, he would get livid if I bothered him. So naturally I kept after him. Once when he came to bat, he told me that if I said one more word, he didn't care how much bigger I was, he was going to pound me into the ground. Of course, I wanted to talk about that.

On the other hand, my questions never bothered Rodney Carew. He is the finest pure hitter that I've ever seen and doesn't allow anything to break his concentration. One night in Minnesota just as the pitcher began his windup, I asked Rod how they'd been pitching him lately. As he began striding into the pitch, he said "*Curveballs on the outside*". The pitch began breaking and he started his swing. "I'm going to left with it." Which he did.

Most players were like Carl Yastrzemski. When they were going good, they didn't mind my chatter (or at least ignored it). But when they were going bad, they didn't want me fooling around with them.

I remember Yaz coming to bat in a gamer situation in Boston in 1976. There were 33,536 Fenway Park fans screaming at him. But he didn't hear them. Before I could say a word, he looked right at me and said: "Listen, Ronnie. My kid is hitting .300; my wife is fine; and I haven't heard any new jokes. I don't want to know about Polish restaurants; I'm nothing-for-15; and I want you to keep your mouth shut." What could I say?



On the second pitch, he hit a home run. As he crossed home plate, he looked right at me and nodded. "Okay," he said, "you can talk to me now."

My talking drove managers crazy and they couldn't even hear me. But they were convinced I was bothering their players. The only one who ever did anything about it was Cleveland's Frank Robinson.

I always liked working Indian games because they were usually out of the pennant race by the end of April and there was never too much pressure on the umpires. Although Robinson and I had never gotten along very well, I liked a lot of his players. But in 1975, he imposed a \$200 fine for any player who talked to me.

If I had kept quiet and concentrated on my job, I would have been a better umpire. But I wouldn't have enjoyed myself as much. When I came up, I knew the rules of the game. But I really didn't know baseball. I didn't understand the subtle movements of the game and the strategy that goes into every pitch. And who better to learn it from than the players themselves?

The only time I ever regretted my behavior was when it interfered with my job and when it got other people in trouble. First Baseman Jim Spencer was with the Rangers in 1974 when he successfully pulled off the hidden-ball trick. The runner wandered off base while Spencer was holding the ball and Jim tagged him. It's a tough play to pull off and a field has to be lucky to manage it even once-a-season. Unfortunately, I was in the middle of an important conversation and missed it completely. So I ended up getting the coach in trouble with his manager and Spencer infuriated. "Jeez!" I told him later. "Next time you're going to do that, you've got to warn me."

Once I spent an entire ball game in the outfield trying to talk Detroit Centerfielder Mickey Stanley out of retiring. Mickey was an absolute sweetheart. If the bases were loaded and I struck him out on a pitch that bounced in front of the plate, he'd just turn around and go back to the dugout. Umpires simply can't afford to let players like that get out of the game. So I decided to talk him into playing another year.

I was working second base and Ritchie Garcia was umpiring at third. At the beginning of the game, I told Ritchie what I had in mind and he agreed to cover for me. Nothing of any consequence happened during the game. But I was unable to talk Mickey out of retiring.

The telephone was ringing in the locker room when I walked in after the game. Dick Butler (American League supervisor of umpires) had heard from Detroit General Manager Jim Campbell that I had umpired the entire game from center field. He wanted to know what I was doing there. It was a fair question. One requiring a good lie.

"I'm testing a new theory," I explained. "You know, one of the toughest plays for an umpire is the trap play in the outfield. Sometimes you just can't tell if the fielder caught the ball on the fly or short-hopped it. I figure that with nobody on base, one ump can go out there." As I began telling this to Butler, it started making a good deal of sense.

Garcia was listening to my end of the conversation and was breaking up. Butler finally realized that I wasn't going to tell him the truth and emphatically informed me that my experiment was officially a failure. He warned me to stay in my proper position from that game on. I agreed to do so.

American League President Lee MacPhail's office warned me about my behavior on several occasions. But I didn't get fined until the foul bat incident in 1972. I was at first base in Boston when a bat slipped out of the hands of the Yankees' Bobby Murcer and came spinning down the first-base line

toward me. I was on top of it in a flash and as soon as it twirled into foul territory, I gave it one of my "foul-foul-foul-foul-foul" calls. The TV cameras caught me and compounded my crime by showing the replay twice during the game and again and the local news.

Officially, I was fined \$200 for "conduct unbecoming an umpire". But I never paid it and they never pressed me on it. The best thing that came out of it was that nobody argued about the call.

I only felt bad when my fooling around hurt the quality of my work. For example, once I missed a play at second base in Anaheim because someone had made a nifty paper airplane from a page in the game program and sailed it onto the infield. I picked it up and was just about to launch it when an article about the Angels' Carney Lansford caught my eye. I was reading it when the runner on first tried to steal second. I was out of position to make the call. I called him out, figuring I had a 50-50 chance of being right. No one argued so I guess that I got it right. (I did find out, however, that Lansford graduated from Wilcox High School in Santa Clara, CA.)



Dick Williams -- who thought I was a showboat -- made me pay for it one afternoon in Baltimore. It was the only time in my 11-year major league career that I had to change a real call. It was in 1975. I was at third base; Bill Haller was at first; and Armando Rodriguez was behind the plate.

Armando was a veteran Mexican League umpire who had been hired because the president of Mexico convinced our government that it would be a popular goodwill gesture. Armando was an excellent umpire. But he spoke no English. "Steak and potatoes" were the only words he knew. Which made it difficult for players to argue with him unless they were arguing over a menu.



California's Tommy Harper hit a long fly ball down the leftfield foul line. From the moment it left his bat, it was either a home run or a foul ball. It was my call the-the-way. I started running down the line trying to following the ball. But it was very difficult. The Sun was glinting off Memorial Stadium's football press boxes and eventually I lost the ball in the glare. I had no idea where it landed.

The first thing taught in umpires' school is make a call. Right or wrong, make a call. In this situation, my only option was to try to fake it. I had a 50% chance of being correct. I looked at the Orioles' leftfield Don Buford and he was looking into the seats. I listened to the Baltimore crowd. The fans were quiet as if something terrible had happened to their team. I figured it had to be a home run.

But because I wasn't positive and I knew it was a close call, I decided to give it the full "Lucian special". I was going to sell it so hard that no one could possibly doubt I knew what I was doing. I leaped high into the air. I twirled my hand. I spun around. I shouted at the top of my lungs. I blew up a small sandstorm.

I was about 7 feet off the ground when I first realized I'd made the wrong call. Don Buford was racing toward me. The Oriole relief pitchers in the bullpen didn't even bother opening the gate. They came right over the fence at me. I turned around and Brooks Robinson -- who had never argued with an umpire in his life -- was breathing fire. The fans were screaming at me. I was surrounded ...

Then I saw my Earl Weaver -- my longtime nemesis -- leading the rest of the team onto the field. There was no doubt in my mind that I had made a mistake. So before Earl could say a word, I shouted: "Don't get yourself thrown out of the game. I'm gonna get help."

He was so shocked that he barely screamed at me. He pushed everybody out of the way so I would have a clear path. I walked past him toward home plate to get help.

Suddenly I looked up. Grinning happily at me behind the plate was Armando Rodriguez. "#S!-'!&," I thought and veered off toward Bill Haller who was umpired at first. When I reached him, I said: "I blew it, huh?"

He shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. What's 40-or-50 feet? Hey, Ron. When you started jumping all around like that, I didn't know exactly what you were trying to do."

"I gotta change it, right?"

He agreed.

"But if I do, Williams is gonna go nuts and I'm gonna have to run him out, right?"

He agreed.

I had no choice. As I walked slowly past the Angel's dugout, I shouted to Harper "Foul ball. You're still up" and kept walking. I was sort of hoping I could sneak this one by Williams. But in fact, he was waiting for me at third. He had already started the argument by the time I got there.

"First you call it fair. Then you call it foul. You don't know what you're doing and you're making a mockery of the game the way you jump up-and-down and you know you're going to have to run me 'cause I can't stand to stay here and see you doing things like that and ..."

I really couldn't argue with him. He had a legitimate gripe. I pushed my face up close to him and screamed: "You know I'm gonna have to run you, right? So you wanna go now?"

"No, I don't wanna go now. And when I do go, I want you to throw me out of the game the same way you called that a fair ball. I want you to leap into the air and make funny circles with your hands. And I want to hear you shouting ..."

"Now?"

"No, not now. I'll tell you when. Then I want you to start spinning around like a damn top and I want it all in one motion and I want you to yell so loud that the people in California can hear what a rotten umpire you are ..."

Eventually he shouted himself out.

"Now?" I asked.

"Now," he agreed.

I bent my knees slightly ... then leaped as high as I could straight into the air. At the top of my jump, I thrust out my right arm and shouted at him as loudly as possible. I hit the ground twirling and jumped again and screamed louder than before.

Williams jammed his hands into his back pockets and nodded approvingly. "That's all right," he said as he left the field.

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My trademark on the playing field -- the thing that attracted the most attention to me -- was my habit of "shooting out" players. In school, umpires are taught the basics of the job. How to get into the correct position; how to make calls; and how to run a ball game. But with experience, each man develops his own style. One will give it the short arm extended and a crisp call while another will drawl it out. Me? I just pulled out my trusty index finder and let them have it.

It started accidentally in 1971. Famous Amos Otis was the victim. He and I had been friends since his International League days. For some reason during his first years with the Kansas City Royals, I couldn't do anything but call him out. I mean every play. If he tried to steal second, my hand would be in the air before the catcher released the throw. I don't know why it happened. But I had a mental block and always thought he was out. Safe or out, he was out. No way he was going to get a close call from me.

So before the 1972 season, I consciously told myself I was going to change. I thought over-and-over "*Amos Otis is safe ... Amos Otis is safe ...*" It worked better than I intended. For half-a-season, I couldn't call him out. He'd hit a grounder to shortstop and be walking back to the dugout and I'd call him safe. Everybody on the Royals knew about the situation and kidded both of us about it. Even Amos was embarrassed. "I know you like me, Ron," he said. "But I can get on base without your help."

I had to try to reverse myself again. We went into Kansas City for a 3-game series and I was determined not to help or hinder him. I was simply going to get it right. His first at bat, he hit a routine one-hopper back to the pitcher. He was running full-speed because he knew I was going to call him safe and he wanted to make it look good. I was thinking: "I can't possibly call him safe on this one. I know I'm going to get it right." The pitcher tossed the ball to the first baseman and Otis was out by 15 feet.

I was so pleased that I was finally going to get him that I pointed my index finger at him, <cocked> my thumb, and started screaming: "I gotcha-gotcha-gotcha-..." Meanwhile the rest of the Royals are standing on the dugout steps screaming "*Shoot him! Shoot him!*"

I had no idea what they were talking about until I realized I had my trigger finger pointing at him. And it was loaded. So I shot him with it. 3 times. And when I finished, I casually blew the smoke away from the barrel and put it back in its holster.

Then I shot the next guy. Got him by 5 feet. He was racing down the baseline and I was yelling "Bang! You're out!" I was actually yelling that at the runner. Suddenly the mundane out call at first base became a lot of fun for me and the fans. It was different. But it didn't hurt anyone and made a routine moment entertaining. My personal record is 16 shots. Bill Haller counted them.



The only player who ever complained about it was the short shortstop Freddie Patek when he was with the Royals. He approached me before a game in which I was scheduled to work first base. "Look," he said. "I haven't had a hit in about 20 at bats and I'm gonna be embarrassed if you shoot me out. So please give me a break this time." I agreed not to do it.

He struck out his first at bat and flied to the outfield his second, so I didn't get a chance at him. But on his 3<sup>rd</sup> time up, he hit an easy ground ball to short. John Mayberry and Frank White were yelling at me from the Royal dugout. "*Shoot him! Shoot him!*" But I had given him my word and I intended to honor it.

So I pulled the pin out of a hand grenade and threw it at him!

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Only umpires and some pitchers really understand baseballs. To most players (including catchers), every baseball is the same. How easily they're fooled by surface appearances.

Every baseball is different. Pitchers know that. The laces might be higher than normal or tighter. The cover may be too slick (it might even have a nick in it). Some years, baseballs are different sizes than other years no matter the league office claims.

When a pitcher asks the umpire for a new baseball, the man-in-blue usually inspects the old one and either tosses it out-of-play or slips it into his pocket and gives the pitcher a new one. Depending on who the pitcher was, I often pretended to put the ball in my pocket but in fact kept the same one in play. Among others, Dennis Eckersely accepted and pitched with the same ball which he had rejected.

Jim Palmer was the only pitcher who consistently rejected the same baseballs. I tested him on a number of occasions and he passed every test. He'd reject a ball and I'd put it in my pocket and give it to him again a few balls later and he'd reject it again. That is a man who knows his business. Unfortunately, he is also a man who thought he knew my business and was never shy about telling me.

Hitters can also ask the umpire to look at a ball and throw it out if it's marked or scuffed. Theoretically, every baseball could be rejected for some reason. So the umpire's decision usually depends on who is asking. Umpires didn't like the much-traveled Alex Johnson when he was playing because he was a chronic complainer and so gave him nothing. If he asked me to look at a ball, I'd glance at it. That ball could have been square and I wouldn't have taken it out-of-play. "Good ball" I'd decide and toss it back to the pitcher.

On the other hand, if Rod Carew asked me to check the ball, I didn't even have to glance at it -- that ball was gone. If Rodney didn't like it then I didn't like it. That's one of the reasons we were such a good hitter.

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The hit-batsman call is one of the most difficult to make behind the plate. Only once did a man hit by a pitch refuse to take his base while I was umpiring. Don Mincher was with Oakland with a runner on third with less than 2 out. All that Mincher had to do was get good wood on the ball and he had himself another run batted in. But the ball clipped his uniform shirt and I told him to take first base.

"No," he said. "It didn't hit me. It hit my bat."

"It hit you," I insisted.

""Say it hit my bat," he pleaded.

The catcher looked up at me. "What'd you call" he asked. It was his way of telling me he wasn't going to argue if I let Mincher hit. Mincher struck out a lot and the catcher would just as soon take his chances with Mincher as a hitter.

"Foul ball," I yelled. "Let's play."

There were occasions during my career when I made a mark to prevent the other team from arguing a hit-batsman call. If the catcher questioned it, I'd grab the player by the wrist or forearm and squeeze hard with my thumb, thereby creating admissible evidence. Then I'd point the blemish out to the catcher, quickly ending the argument.

That got me into difficult one afternoon. The batter was Tommy McCraw -- a black first baseman then with the California Angels. I thought he was hit on the wrist by a close pitch so I pointed to first base. But White Sox Catcher Ed Herrmann protested. I didn't know for sure that McCraw had been hit. But once I made the call, I had to justify it.

I grabbed McCraw's and took a quick look. I couldn't find a mark, so I started squeezing his wrist with my thumb. I weighed nearly 300 pounds at the time and could squeeze w wrist. But I couldn't produce a mark.

"Lemme see the bruise," Herrmann was demanding, trying to look over my shoulder. I kept turning away from him so he couldn't see, dragging McCraw around in a little circle with me.

McCraw was grabbing my hand with his free hand, trying to pull it away. "C'mon, Ron!" he was yelling. "That hurts! You're hurting me!"

"I'm looking for the mark," I said, continuing to turn him around and squeezing his wrist as Herrmann tried to push his way in.

Finally, McCraw pulled away from me. There on his wrist was a welt just about the same size as my thumb. "There it is" I pointed victoriously as I pushed McCraw toward first. "Go ahead. Take your base."



"Where is it?" Herrmann demanded. "I don't see it."

McCraw started trotting toward first, shaking his wrist.

"C'mon, let's go! I yelled in Herrmann's ear. "Play ball!"

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When Ted Williams was managing the Washington Senators, he often came into the umpires' dressing room after games to talk about pitchers. Williams knows more about hitting than any man alive. But he also always knew who to talk to about pitching. He'd ask about specific pitches during the game. For example, was that a good pitch that Mike Epstein struck out on in the 3<sup>rd</sup> inning? We'd tell him as much as we remembered and made up the rest.

Once, these conversations led to a potentially embarrassing moment. Every 3<sup>rd</sup> word out of Williams' mouth was a swear word. These adjectives were an absolutely essential part of his baseball vocabulary. One night in Washington, President Nixon used out locker-room as his ball-park office because it was small, secure, and had a separate entrance on the field right next to the President's box. They even installed a US-USSR nuclear emergency red phone in the room. (You can imagine my temptation!)

After the game, Nixon paused to talk baseball with us. I was my usual delightful self and was in the middle of a wonderful story about me when Williams rapped on the door. The 4 umpires in the room became so quiet that you could have heard a stolen baseball drop.

The Secret Service agents escorted Williams into the room. I knew exactly what was coming next and closed my eyes (although that didn't affect my hearing). "Hey!" Williams said after being introduced to the President of the United States. "How the %\$#:@\$#! are you?"

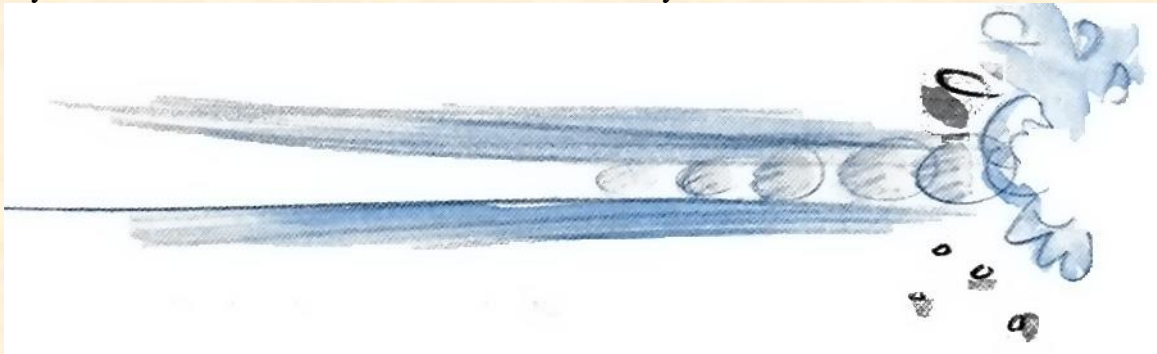
Nixon didn't hesitate. He looked at us and said: "Oh, don't worry about that. I've me the \$##:#! man before."

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Any discussion of the fastball has to begin with Nolan Ryan with Goose Gossage in relief. Ryan was the first man I ever saw who was capable of throwing an "exploding fastball". Although we knew he was supposedly the fastest gun in the National League, I didn't hear him pitch until 1972 after the Mets traded him to the Angels.

In a game in August, I had the plate with him on the mound. I was immediately impressed but not overwhelmed. Not until the 4<sup>th</sup> inning. In that inning, he went into his fluid windup ... reared back ... and fired. Until the pitch reached home plate, it looked like a very good -- but normal -- rising fastball.

Then suddenly, it exploded! A million specks of shiny white cover blinded me. I closed my eyes to protect myself. I waited for the roar of the crowd. Nobody else noticed it.



I <blinked> ... tried to shake the flash out of my eyes ... and called it a strike.

Must have been my imagination, I thought, and put it out of my mind. But a few innings later, *Bam!* The same thing happened. The baseball actually exploded. That's when I began to worry that there was something wrong with my eyesight. So when I was in New York City, I made an appointment with a noted optometrist.

The doctor examined my eyes, then explained that Ryan's exploding fastball was simply an optical illusion. Normally when a pitcher releases the ball, it appears to be the size of a golf ball. But as it comes toward the plate, it grows into a regular-sized baseball. A number of times each game, Ryan

threw the ball with such velocity that my eyes simply couldn't make the adjustment fast enough. So it remained golf-ball size until it got to the plate ... then popped (or "exploded") into a full-sized baseball. That explained my problem.

"So my eyes are okay?" I asked him.

"For an umpire," the doctor answered noncommittally.

-----

The key to hitting is good eyes. Ted Williams went just a bit further. He claimed that he could actually see the ball hit the bat. He said he could see if the bat hit one seam, two seams, or missed the seams entirely.

In 1972 in spring training, he offered to prove it to me. Admittedly, I was reluctant to go along with him. In his prime, Williams had been one of the greatest hitters in baseball history. But at this time, he was 54 years old. A hitter's reflexes usually start fading in his mid-30s. In Williams' case, that was 2 decades ago. I didn't want to embarrass him by shattering one of his beliefs. But he insisted. With me head down, I followed him to a practice field.

He covered the barrel of a bat with pine tar and stepped up to the plate. A hard-throwing rookie had been recruited to pitch to him. I took a deep breath, anticipating what was going to be a very sad moment.

The young pitcher threw a bullet and Williams hit a rocket to centerfield. "One seam," he shouted confidently over his shoulder.

"Sure, Ted," I agreed. I was just glad he was still able to hit the ball.

Someone retrieved it and brought it over to me. One seam was covered with pine tar.

He hit another pitch. "About a quarter-inch above the \$#%\$%\$% seam," he said.

That ball had a pine-tar scar just a quarter-inch above the seam. He called 5-of-7 perfectly. It was the most amazing display of hitting ability that I've ever seen.

-----

Although it must have become obvious by now that I don't like to brag about my somewhat limited accomplishments, I must admit that I've given the benefit of my wisdom to a few favored players. One day in Oakland, Sal Bando came up to me and started talking about the slump he was in.

"You've seen me enough," he said. "Whaddya think I'm doing wrong? I just can't seem to get my weight moving forward."

In all modesty, I know as much about hitting as I do about Alaskan wines. But I wasn't about to admit that.

"Yeah, I noticed that too," I said. "have you checked the films?"

He said he had and hadn't seen anything unusual.

"Doesn't surprise me," I said knowingly.

"Tell you what," I guessed. "I think maybe you're standing a little too far off the plate. You're seeing the inside pitch good. But you can't reach the outside pitch."

He was skeptical. "You really think that's it?"

"Absolutely. That's probably definitely it. Try crowding the plate a bit

I was working third base the next day. Bando came out in the 1<sup>st</sup> inning and told me that he'd checked the films and I must be right.

"Watch me when I'm up. I'm gonna get up close and hit the ball out."

"Sure," I agreed. "Just crowd the plate."

He came to bat in the 2<sup>nd</sup> inning. Just as he had predicted, he hit the second pitch a ton. A tremendous shot over the leftfield wall. I don't know who was happier -- me or Bando.

As he rounded second base, he was clapping his hands and whooping. I totally forgot where I was and ran toward him. As we came together, he held out his palm and I slapped it hard. Then slapped him on the behind as he trotted past me. I watched him swing around third base ...

... and then I realized what I'd done. I had broken every behavior code in the book. I'd actually congratulated a player on the field. What were the fans going to think? What was the opposing team going to think? Most important, what was Lee MacPhail going to think?

I lowered my head and began slinking back toward third base. As I got close, the third baseman was looking at me as if I were slightly out of my mind. But before he could say a word, I said firmly: "It's okay. We're Italian."

-----  
Probably the worst thing that can happen to most hitters is that they eventually become base runners. For some, that is an extremely difficult transition to make.

I've been caught in a rundown myself. This was in 1973 when I was still hustling. A California player got caught between first and second. I started moving back-and-forth with him so I could get a clear view of the play. We had them going, too. We were dancing back-and-forth, 4 steps toward first and 5 toward second. A properly executed rundown shouldn't require more than 2 throws. But we had them so mixed up that they made 4 throws and we were still alive.

I was really into it, waiting for the opportunity to make a break for the base. But somehow, to this day, I don't understand how -- I got too close to the runner. I sort of tripped him. Not tripped, exactly; it was more like running into him. We both went down and I had no choice but to call both of us out. Neither of us argued.



Only once did I ever try to help a base runner. And there was a very good reason I did so -- Greed. Pure greed.

In 1975, baseball was building a promotion around the 1,000,000<sup>th</sup> run scored in Major League history. The players (and umpires) involved in the game in which the run was scored would receive engraved wristwatches. The magic word was "Free". Everybody in baseball was going for it.

I was working third base for the White Sox and A's on the fateful day. We were in the fourth inning with nobody out and Oakland having runners on first and third. Then the announcement was made that the 999,999<sup>th</sup> run had been scored. Man on third with nobody out? I could hear that snazzy timepiece ticking on my wrist. I could feel the gold against my skin.

The batter lifted a short fly to right-field. No way it was deep enough for the runner to tag up and score. No way at all. But I saw him bend into the running position with his back foot pushed against the base. "Don't go!" I yelled pleadingly. "Don't go!"

He went. Ed Herrmann caught the throw from the outfield on a fly and stood at home plate with a sad incredulous look on his face. He had no choice but to make the play and he did. I couldn't believe the runner had taken my watch away from me.

We still had a shot, though. On the play at the plate, the runner on first had alertly tagged and gone to second. A base hit would score him with the 1,000,000<sup>th</sup> run.

On the first pitch, the batter smacked a line-drive single. The runner tore around third ... and stopped! He just stopped and scampered back to the third base.

I was screaming: Go! Go!" I was signaling with my hands. "Go!" I wanted to take him by the hand and drag him home.

It was probably too late anyway. As soon as that play ended, the announcer informed the crowd that Houston's Bob Watson had scored the millionth run in Major League history. So today, some national League umpire is wearing my watch.

-----

Over a period of time, I learned to trust certain catchers so much that I actually let them umpire for me on the bad days. The bad days usually followed the good nights. Those were the days when I knew I was in trouble because I'd be seeing 2 baseballs (and Nolan Ryan wasn't pitching!). On those days, there wasn't much I could do but take 2 aspirin and make calls as little as possible.

If someone that I trusted was catching like Elrod Hendricks, Ed Herrmann, or Johnny Roseboro, I'd tell him: "Look, it's a bad day. You'd better take it for me. If it's a strike, hold your glove in place for an extra second. If it's a ball, throw it right back. And please, don't yell."

"What about tips?" one of my friends asked me.

"Nah," I said. "I'm not paying at all."

It would work just fine. If they held the ball, I'd call (softly) it a strike. And if they threw it right back, it was a ball. If the game was close in the later innings, I'd take back control. No one I ever worked with ever took advantage of the situation. And no hitter ever figured out what I was doing.

And only once (when Herrmann was calling the pitches) did a pitcher (Herrmann's own pitcher!) ever complain about a call. I smiled. I laughed. But I didn't say a word. (I was tempted, though. Really tempted.)

-----

There was a time in my imaginary playing career when I thought given the choice and another body, I'd want to be an infielder. I continued to feel that way until I made my Major League debut.

Spring training, 1973, Tucson, AZ. The Indians were playing the Angels in an exhibition game. Buddy Bell was at third base for Cleveland and having an awful day. I was umpiring at third and reminding him that he was having an awful day.

After he committed his second ridiculous error, I did the natural thing. I laughed at him. He turned around and warned me. "Watch your step, Luciano. I make one more and you're gonna have to play third and I'm gonna ump."

An inning later, a routine grounder skipped through his legs, setting up my Major League career. Bell turned around and flipped his glove to me and we exchanged hats.

In an instant, I made the transition from umpire to player. Suddenly I was part of the team. Winning mattered. I was no longer neutral.

I bent down as low as possible and made sure the fingers of my glove were almost brushing the dirt so nothing could get under it. I was ready. Then the batter (a right-handed hitter) stepped up to the plate and looked in my direction.

I knew then that I was going to be killed. He was so close to me. And so Big. And he was actually swinging a telephone pole. I had never felt so vulnerable in my life. When I'd played football, I had worn protective padding. But the only "padding" I had that day was hanging over my belt.

The batter took a few vicious practice swings. I could feel a slight breeze. I backed up a foot ... thought about it ... and then backed up another few feet. Bell was standing behind me yelling at the pitcher to keep the game moving. I started yelling at the pitcher, too.

"C'mon, babe!" I screamed. "You can walk this guy!"

The pitcher started his windup. Everything was wrong. Bell's glove was too small for me. I needed spikes.

The first pitch was high and outside. "Way to go!" I screamed. "Keep it away from him!"

"Come on, Luciano," Bell sneered (imitating a well-known umpire). "Bend down."

I glanced over my shoulder. "No talking to the players, huh."

The second pitch was low and inside. It was a perfect pitch to pull through my stomach. The batter stepped into it and began swinging. I began retreating. Luckily, he missed it.

"Good pitch, good pitch!" I yelled. "Way to go!"

The batter hit the 3<sup>rd</sup> pitch on a rope to right field. I knew enough to cover third base in case the runner from first tried to go to third. Unfortunately, he did.

Shortstop Frank Duffy was there to cut off the throw to prevent the hitter from going to second. The right-fielder's throw came toward third on a low hard line. But I could see it wasn't going to beat the runner.

"Cut it!" I screamed.

Duffy ducked out of the way, laughing.

I actually caught the ball without suffering any permanent injury. Self-defense. But the runner was safely on third. The batter, however, was racing toward second, testing my throwing arm.

I wound up and threw a small-caliber bullet over second. Way over second. 8 feet over second!

Jack Brohamer leaped into the air and somehow managed to come down with the ball. By that time, though, the batter (Mike Epstein) was standing on the base dusting off his uniform. Brohamer tagged him anyway. Joe Brinkman called him out.

Epstein couldn't believe it. he began screaming. But Brinkman cut him off in mid-yowl.

"Who do you think threw it?" he asked, pointing toward third.

Epstein turned and saw me standing next the base kicking the dirt and looking sort of sheepish.

"Oh," he said softly and trotted off the field.

That ended my playing career. As soon as the league office heard about it, I received a letter telling me never to play again (as if I need a warning) and both clubs were reprimanded.

I've never been invited back for Old Timers Day either. How quickly they forget.

-----  
It was early in the 1965 season that I first heard the 2 words that were to haunt me for the rest of my career -- **Earl Weaver**.

Earl has become one of the greatest managers in the history of baseball. When he retires, he'll go directly from the Baltimore Orioles dugout into the Hall of Fame. He is a genius at motivating ballplayers and manipulating his team on the field. While some managers are thinking ahead 20-or-3 innings, Earl is already in the middle of the next week. It's impossible not to admire him. But it's pretty hard for me to like him.

Earl Weaver is the worst enemy that umpires ever had. He'll come screaming out of the dugout at the drop of the temperature. He'll scream and yell and make life miserable for everyone around him.

Except for a few months at the end of the 1968 season when he went up to the Orioles to replace Hank Bauer and I stayed in Triple-A, we were together from 1965 in the Double-A Eastern League until

I retired at the end of the 1979 season. We got along slightly worse than Hugh Hefner and the Moral majority.

Eventually our relationship got so bad that Weaver's players would establish a betting pool before the game trying to guess what inning I'd throw him out. So I might dump him in the 5<sup>th</sup> and look into the Oriole dugout and Mark Belanger or Jim Palmer or Don Buford would be jumping up-and-down and cheering: "5<sup>th</sup> inning -- that's me!" It reached the point that the American League office transferred me when my crew went into Baltimore.



It started in June 1965 in Reading, PA. Weaver's Elmira Pioneers came into town for a 4-game series. I had heard other umpires talk about him. But I'd never had him for a game and firmly believed I could handle him.

We got off to a bad start at the pregame meeting at home plate. He politely introduced himself. I was aggressively unimpressed. Then I told him who I was and he seemed less impressed than I was. Which immediately turned me off.

By this time, I was getting very good at throwing people out of games. I'd only gotten 11 my entire first season. But I was well on my way to a personal record and it was only June. 2 umpires usually work a game in the low minors -- one calling balls&strikes and the other handling plays in the field. That first night, I was out in the field and there as a close play at second base in a late inning. It was a sliding tag play and I was pretty sure I got it right. But Weaver came out of the dugout like a cannon shot. He was screaming and telling me I was a rotten umpire and I'd never last in baseball.



Finally, I gave him the thumb. Had I known what was to follow, I would have had George Sosniak commemorate the occasion with a painted baseball. George was a fellow Eastern League umpire who used to do that sort of thing to make a little extra money.

The second night, I was behind the plate and Weaver started with the very first pitch of the game. I'd call "High, ball one" and I'd hear this squeaky voice yelling from Elmira's dugout: *"Ball's not high."*

He'd complain on every pitch that went against him. *"Where was that one?" "He didn't swing." "You missed it again!"*

I'd never had anyone do that to me before and it really started irritating me. Every pitch. *"Bounced in the dirt." "Worse call yet."*

Finally in the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> inning, I walked over to his dugout and told me he couldn't continue yelling at me. He said he'd keep yelling at me as long as I was wrong. Then I asked him how loud he could yell.

"Why?" he asked.

"because you're gonna be doing it from the clubhouse!"

It wasn't a great exit line. But then it was only the minors.

I didn't want to throw him out the third night. I was already in trouble with the league office for being too quick-on-the-trigger and I'd gotten him 2 nights in-a-row. But I couldn't help myself.

Again I was in the field and again there was a close play at second. By this time, Weaver had me so intimidated that I probably did miss it. He came barreling out of the dugout like an overdue express train ... and I had him out of the game before he reached the pitcher's mound.

Now I was 3-for-3. I didn't want to make it a 4-game sweep. Before the next game, I sat by myself and tried to relax. I told myself not to pay attention to his antics. I was determined to remain calm and keep my temper in check.

He lasted 20 seconds.

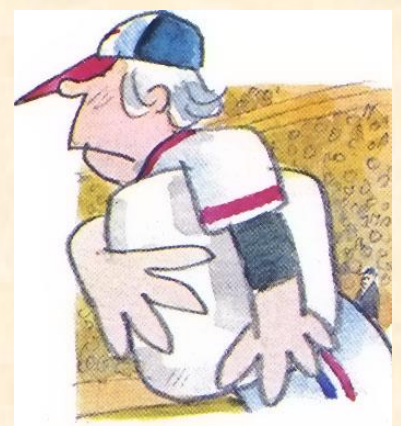
When he came up to the plate to exchange starting lineups with the other manager, he looked up at me (Earl is 5'7" and I'm 6'4") and cracked: "How 'bout it, Luciano. You gonna be as bad tonight as you've been the first 3 games?"

I gave him the only possible answer ...

"Earl," I said, "you're never gonna find out."

I got him 4-for-4 (at least tying a record) and our relationship went downhill from there.

Weaver and I spent the 1967 season in Triple-A and our relationship continued to develop. That was the year he stole second base on me (another managerial first). I made a call at second that got him so mad that he ran onto the field ... picked up second base ... and



took it with him back into the dugout. He refused to give it back to me. I asked the groundkeeper for a replacement. But he told me that he was all out of second bases.

"C'mon," I told Earl. "You gotta give me back the base. We can't play baseball without the bases."

The logic didn't move him. So I warned him that if he didn't give it back to me, I'd forfeit the game.

"Ronnie," he told me, "you'll never forfeit a game in the minors. Because if you do, you'll never make it to the Majors. If they see you can't handle games down here, they'll never bring you up."

I was livid. He had discovered my weak point. Nothing infuriated me more than hearing Earl Weaver make sense. Eventually I negotiated a loan of his second base and we finished the game.

Only twice in my career did I actually throw a manager out of the game before it started. The first was that time I got Earl in the minor leagues. The second time, I got him in the Major Leagues.

The afternoon I ejected him in the Major Leagues marked a personal high for me. We were playing a doubleheader in Baltimore and I got him both games. I was at first base for the first game. He came out in a late inning to argue a call. I started laughing because I knew I was going to get him.

"That's the trouble with you!" he started screaming at me. "You don't take anything seriously. All you care about is throwing your arms in the air and jumping around!"

As he yelled that, he threw his arms in the air in an extremely poor Luciano imitation.

"You can't throw your arms in the air!" I screamed right back at him. "You're not an umpire!"

Then I gave him the thumb.

Before the second game began, he came quietly up to home plate with his lineup. Earl is one of the managers who take this exchange seriously. But Earl took the Three Stooges seriously.

"Now, Ron," he said calmly, "I want you to take this game seriously. I want you to call balls&strikes the way they're supposed to be called."

I grimaced and shook my head sadly. "Earl," I told him, "I don't know how to tell you this. But it doesn't matter what you think 'cause you're not going to be here to see it."

Then I gave him the heave-ho.

Naturally he was upset. He refused to hand over his lineup card.

"You're not serious about this game and I'm not going to let you umpire," he said.

"Oh yeah?" I said.

I grabbed the lineup right out of his hand, holding out a carbon copy to the ballboy who was supposed to take it to the official scorer.

"Don't take it!" Weaver snapped.

"Hey," I said to Earl, "you can't tell him that 'cause you're not here. You're out of the game."

The poor ballboy didn't know what to do. But eventually I got the starting lineups to the scorer. Weaver left the field and managed the Orioles to a victory from the runway leading from the dugout to the clubhouse.

I had a good game behind the plate. Not an argument. In the newspapers the following day, Weaver was quoted as saying he was pleased with my performance and claimed to have motivated me to take my job seriously.

He was partly right. I was so glad he wasn't around that I had a good time.

-----

Baseball is Earl's religion. And he thought I was being sacrilegious. He saw the ballpark as a beautiful chapel. But when I was around, there was a problem with bats in the belfry.

I think the incident that finally convinced him I was beyond redemption occurred in Chicago my second year in the Majors. I was working the plate in the 7<sup>th</sup> inning of a close game. Tommy John was pitching for the White Sox and Don Buford was the Oriole batter.



As John began winding up, the ball squirted out of his hand and dribbled a few feet behind the pitcher's mound. Tommy continued his follow-through because he didn't want to risk straining his arm by stopping abruptly.

I couldn't resist the opportunity. I threw up my right arm. "Strike one!"

Buford stepped out of the batter's box and glared at me. "What-the-hell are you doing?"

"It caught the inside corner," I said.

The White Sox catcher Ed Herrmann agreed. "It was a good pitch, Don."

Weaver was on me in an instant, screaming about my making a mockery of the game. I told him it was just a joke. He said that I was just a joke. I changed the call.

With other managers -- Ralph Houk, for example -- when a game's over, it's done. Ralph never holds a grudge and umpires appreciate that.

But Weaver never forgets. He's convinced that all umpires hold grudges against him. Once in 1975, we got into an argument about a play at 3<sup>rd</sup> base. He screamed at me: "You couldn't get that play right in Elmira! And you still can't get it right!"

If I had been clever enough, I would have asked him to at least appreciate the fact that I was consistent. But I didn't think of it. All I could think about was that this man accused other people of holding grudges and he was still angry about a play that had taken place 10 years earlier. There was only one thing to say to him then -- "Goodbye!"

Surprisingly, I usually got along very well with Baltimore's catchers. I think I was sorry for them. Earl Williams wasn't a great catcher. But he disliked Weaver more than I did. So with that in common, we became good friends. The only thing we ever argued about was who Weaver yelled at more.

"You think he yells at you?" Williams would complain. "You should hear what he yells at me."

"I don't know about that," I'd reply. "The guy's on my back every pitch."

"Sure. But that's only during the game," he'd counter. "At least you don't have to listen to him in the clubhouse."

"That's true," I'd say. "But he doesn't talk about you in the papers."

"Weekly or daily?"

On the other hand, Elrod Hendricks tried to serve as a buffer between me and Weaver.

"Now Ron, just relax," he'd caution when he felt that Weaver was really getting to me. "You know Earl. He's not happy unless he's not happy."

In Weaver's war with umpires, he has even sought a technological advantage. The Orioles installed a closed-circuit television in Memorial Stadium and put monitors in their clubhouse. Whenever there was a close play on the field, someone would run into the clubhouse to check the replay and signal the result to a coach standing in the corner of the dugouts who would relay the signal to Weaver (usually already en route to his argument). They had one signal if the umpire was correct and another if he was wrong. If the replay showed the umpire had blown the play, Weaver would be all over him. But if it showed that the umpire had made the right call, he'd leave after putting up a perfunctory fight.

That worked very well until the night we stole Weaver's signs. Once we knew his system, we just waited for the right opportunity. With Earl, we knew we wouldn't have to wait too long.

The first time he charged out of the dugout, the 4 umpires on the field looked past him into the Oriole dugout at Coach Frank Robinson. Weaver started arguing, taking glances over his shoulder at Robinson. Finally Frank gave him the "stop" sign meaning the replay showed that the umpire had made a good call.

Weaver yelled his last few words, then turned around to return to his dugout and ran right into 6'4" Bill Haller. Earl turned the other way and 6'1" Ken Kaiser was standing there smiling, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

Then Earl turned to face me. "Goin' somewhere, Earl?" I asked. "How come you're in such a hurry this time?" Once we had him trapped in an umpire sandwich, we really let him have it. We hounded him off the field.

That marked the end of Earl Weaver's Instant Replay Signal System ... for about 2 games.

The strangest protest in which I ever was involved was lodged by Weaver (although I don't think anything concerning me and Earl could really be considered strange). I believe I've made it clear that the two of us don't get along. Once, for example, before a game we were having a very calm discussion about managing. He tried to convince me that the most a manager can do is try to arrange things so that certain hitters will face certain pitchers. I told him that he didn't know what he was talking about

because I had been watching him outmanage people in 4 leagues over 15 years. he told me I was crazy. I told him he was twice as crazy as I was. Finally one of his coaches stepped in and told us to stop shouting at each other. We were in the middle of an argument and didn't even realize it.

Our serious problems started in 1976. I was out in Oakland and a local reporter asked me who my favorite manager was. I told him it was former Oakland Manager Alvin Dark. Couldn't hurt, right?

Then unfortunately he asked me which manager I liked the least. Naturally I tried my best to avoid a direct answer.

"WEAVER!" I shouted. "EARL WEAVER!" I would have spelled it for him. I would have written it down. I would even have hired skywriters.



The only problem that I ever had with newspapermen is that they write for newspapers. If they had just kept my opinions to themselves, I never would have had any trouble.

Weaver read my comments and didn't appreciate my sense-of-humor. He requested that the league bar me from Baltimore's Memorial Stadium, the State of Maryland, and the entire East Coast. American League President Lee MacPhail suggested that I keep my mouth locked.

I knew MacPhail was right and did my best to avoid any more problems with Weaver. My best lasted until spring training the following year. I was in Arizona and a reporter asked me a trick question: Which teams did I think would win the division races in the American league.

"It doesn't matter to me," I said. "Lee MacPhail signs my paychecks no matter who wins."

When pressed further, I said that I thought Oakland would win the West and I didn't care who won the East "as long as it isn't Baltimore."

When I said it, I didn't think it was a terrible thing to say. That was the way I felt as a fan. But I knew that my feelings would never affect and had never affected my judgment on the field. Anytime I missed a play, it was simply because I missed it and not because I was partial to one team or one player.

In retrospect, it was a stupid thing to say. The league fined me \$400 and ordered me to apologize publicly to Weaver and the Orioles. I agreed to apologize but I didn't agree to pay the fine.

3 months later, my crew had Baltimore for the first time that season. I was prepared to be on my best behavior. But I could afford to. Bill Haller was angry.

Weaver had questioned his honesty by saying Haller shouldn't be allowed to work Detroit Tiger games because his brother was catching for the Tigers. The league actually removed Bill from our crew every time we had Detroit.

For the first game of this Oriole series, I was at second and Haller was at third. I had a close play at second that went against Baltimore and even before I took my thumb down, I knew Weaver would want to discuss enough.

Sure enough, I looked up and saw him coming toward me. Even before he reached me, he had grabbed his hat and thrown it on the ground and I knew he was going to go. But as I flexed my thumb, I spotted Haller racing toward me from third.

"I got him!" he was screaming gleefully. "Lemme, lemme!"

I stepped aside and let Haller tell Weaver how much he had appreciated his remarks about the Tiger games.

While Haller was giving him explicit directions to the clubhouse, I looked wistfully at Weaver's cap lying on the ground and nostalgically remembered the night in 1973 when 6'1" umpire Don Denkinger had eased over to Weaver's cap while I was arguing with him. Don first stepped on it with the very sharp golf cleats on his right shoe. Then the very sharp gold cleats on his left shoe. And then he started twisting back-and-forth, back-and-forth.

Subsequently upon arriving in Anaheim for a series with Baltimore, I had announced a press conference at which I would make a formal apology for my ill-considered remarks in spring training. Before the game, a group of writers, Earl Weaver, and Dick Butler (the American League supervisor of umpires) squeezed into the umpires' dressing room.

My press conference began well. "To start with, I've got a big mouth and I said a lot of dumb things. Everyone makes mistakes. And I guess I'm at the top of the ladder when it comes to saying dumb things."

"It was just a dump stupid statement that should never have been printed. Earl and his players are professionals. They know I'm not going to do anything intentionally to hurt them. I like Baltimore and I like the Orioles team. They are a good defensive team and that always makes it easier on an umpire."

Suddenly I heard a familiar voice from the back of the small crowd.

"But you did say it," Weaver said.

"Well, sure ... yeah, I did say it," I admitted. "But hey, Earl. You've said a lot of things you're sorry for too."

"No," he said. "I'm not sorry about anything I ever said about you or to you. I've meant every word of it."

"Well then," I replied, just getting warmed up, "I haven't been too far wrong when I said those things about you, you know."

Dick Butler tried in vain to interrupt. "Thanks, Ron ..."

"So you meant it, Huh? I knew it."

"No," I told Weaver. "I didn't mean what I said about Baltimore."

"But you meant it about me!"

By this time we were shouting at each other.

"Well, you're the only guy I have trouble with all the time. And you have trouble with every umpire in the league. So don't you think that you're the problem?"

"I yell at you because you're biased."

"Oh yeah? Well, you're more biased than anyone!"

My attempt to apologize turned out to be a disaster. The American League had no choice but to take me off Baltimore games. I objected. But there really wasn't anything I could do about it.

I didn't work an Oriole game for an entire year. I didn't miss Weaver. But I did miss his team. The Orioles were always such a pleasure to watch. And they played quick games.

To my surprise, when I received my monthly schedule for August 1979 I had been assigned to a Baltimore-White Sox series in Chicago. Haller was taking his vacation during this period. I assumed the league had gotten confused and thought I was going to be on vacation. I didn't say a word. I was looking forward to seeing my pal Earl again.

We arrived in Chicago on a Friday morning. There had been a rock concert in Comiskey Park the previous weekend and the field had been badly torn up. New sod had been put down. But it had rained hard during the week. When I walked across the field, I sank in over my shoes. I decided that if I couldn't walk on water, certainly nobody playing major league baseball could. I declared the field unplayable and called the game.



White Sox manager Tony LaRussa objected. But I told him I wasn't going to be responsible for players getting hurt on a muddy field. Weaver agreed with me. So our first encounter in a year went smoothly.

The Sun was shining on Saturday but the field was still in terrible shape. I didn't think we should play the game, but I wasn't sure. Players on both teams signed a petition claiming the field wasn't playable. So I called that game off, too. This was the only case I've know of a game being called because of rain on a gorgeous August afternoon.

We played a doubleheader on Sunday. The field wasn't good. But life-rafts were no longer necessary, either. I had the plate and Weaver started on me in the very first inning.

"Looked like a strike from here." ... "Bend over and look at it."

It took him 3 pitches to make me feel right at home. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> inning, I called a strike on Doug DeCinces and Weaver really let me have it.

"Where was it ... looked high from here ... bend down ... bear down ..."

Maybe he was right. Maybe it wasn't a strike. I had only called about 150,000 pitches from behind the plate and he called many more than that from the dugout. But it looked like a good pitch to me. I

probably wouldn't have thrown out any other manager in baseball for complaining. But this wasn't any other manager. This was Earl Weaver.

I carefully loaded my finger. I pointed it right at him and shot him out of the game. Then I calmly blew the smoke away.

He sprinted out of the dugout to confront me. "Are you throwing me out of the game?"

I'd been waiting a long time for this moment. I smiled broadly.

"Earl," I said, "I haven't seen you in year. Of course I'm throwing you of the game."

He proceeded to criticize my work and concluded by protesting the game.

"Earl? What? What are you going to protest? You lasted until the 3<sup>rd</sup> inning. You should be flattered."

It was then that Weaver invented the strangest protest I'd ever heard.

"I'm protesting the game on account of the umpire's integrity.

"What?"

"Umpire's integrity. And I want it announced over the loudspeaker.

"Earl," I said sympathetically, "you know you don't want me to do that."

"I'm not leaving the field until it's announced over the loudspeaker," he insisted.

This was a man who had faked a heart attack on the field. This was a man who had stolen second base and refused to give it back. I knew he wasn't bluffing. He wasn't going to leave the field until that announcement was made.

I was thrilled. I knew I had him. There was no way that he wasn't going to get suspended for publicly attacking an umpire's integrity.

"Okay, buddy," I told him. "You got it."

I called the public-address announcer and told him exactly what Weaver wanted.

"You don't want me to announce that," he said.

"Oh yes I do," I chimed happily. "Oh yes I do!"

He still didn't believe that I was serious. He announced that the Orioles were playing the game but didn't give the reason. That brought Weaver back onto the field.

"What're you doing here?" I asked him. "You're not here anymore. You're gone."

"That's not what I said I wanted," he reminded me.

I tried to be sensible.

"Earl, leave it at this. It isn't going to hurt me. But it is going to hurt you."

"Announce it," he insisted.

I had it announced and play resumed.

Assistant Supervisor of Umpires Johnny Stevens was waiting for me in the umpires' dressing room at the conclusion of the first game. Fuming. He had been in contact with Lee MacPhail, he told me.

"How is Lee?" I asked.

I was told that I wasn't to discuss the incident with any reporters. And I wasn't to talk to Weaver during the second game of the doubleheader under any circumstances. I wasn't to smile at him. I wasn't to tell him that I couldn't hear him in order to draw him out of the dugout to give him the boot when he did come out. I wasn't to allow him to back me into a corner. If the ballpark caught on fire, I wasn't even to warn him. I began to realize that this was getting serious.



At the beginning of the second game, we met at home plate during the exchange of lineups. He looked at me and asked: What's going on?"

I opened my mouth to tell him that it had taken me an entire year, but I'd finally gotten him for his performance at the press conference. But before I could utter a single syllable, Umpire Russell Goetz stepped between us.

"Ron says everything is fine, Earl. Now listen, both of you. It's a new game and we're not going to talk about the first game. It's over. That's it."

I worked third base that game and only had 2 calls. One was a line drive hit by an Oriole that landed just foul. I called it foul at least 15 times. The other was a sliding tag play in which a White Sox player was out. That might have been the toughest out I ever called in baseball.

Weaver was later suspended for 3 games.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, that was the last time Earl Weaver and I would meet between the foul lines. The following year, I was up in the broadcast booth.

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