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Nobody's Perfect, but They Were Good

A blown call occasions a lesson in civility and honesty.

By PEGGY NOONAN



We needed some happy news this week, and I think we got it. But first, a journey back in time.

It was Monday July 4, 1983, a painfully hot day, 94 degrees when the game began. We were at Yankee Stadium, and the Yanks were playing their ancestral foes, the Boston Red Sox. More than 40,000 people filled the stands. My friend George and I had seats in the upper decks, where people were waving programs against the heat, eating hot dogs, drinking beer and—oh, innocent days—smoking. In fact it was the smoking that made me realize something was going on.

The Yankees' pitcher, Dave Righetti, who'd bounced from the majors to the minors and back again, was having a good game, striking out seven of the first nine hitters. The Yanks were scoring; the Red Sox were doing nothing. Suddenly, around the sixth or seventh inning, I realized the boisterous crowd had turned quieter. George was chain-smoking with a look of fierce intensity. "What's happening?" I asked him. "Don't say it," he replied. "If you say, it you jinx it." He said some other things, talking in a kind of code, and I realized: This may be a no-hitter. We may be witnessing history.

Now I'm watching not only the game but everyone around me. Fathers are with their kids, and you can tell they're starting to think: "I have given my son a great gift today." Just down from us was an old man, 75 or so, tall, slim and white-haired. I never saw him say a word to anyone, and throughout the game there was an empty seat beside him. I thought: He's got a wife in the hospital and she told him to take the afternoon off; he'd bought the tickets before she got sick, and he's here by himself. He was so distracted and lonely-looking but inning by inning the game started to capture him, and the last few innings he couldn't sit down.

Everyone else in New York was at the beach for the three-day weekend, but around us were regular people, working people who didn't have enough to be at the Jersey Shore or out on the island, but who had enough for a baseball game. Also there were die-hard fans holding their game cards. Meaning everyone who was there deserved to be there, everyone who got the gift deserved it. It was one of those moments where life is just.

Twenty-five years later, on July 3, 2008, Anthony McCarron of New York's Daily News wrote of the final moments of the game. Righetti is facing the final batter, Wade Boggs, and is worried he'll tap the ball toward first and beat him to the bag. At the plate, Boggs is thinking, "If I get a hit here, with two out in the ninth inning, and break this thing up, I'm probably not getting out of

here alive." As Mr. McCarron wrote, Righetti "snapped off a crisp slider, Boggs struck out swinging," and Righetti flung his arms out in joy.

The crowd exploded, they wouldn't stop jumping and cheering, and later they filled the bars around the stadium. It was raucous, joyful. Everyone acted as if they were related, because it is a beautiful thing when you witness history together. It's unifying.

Only later would it be noted that it wasn't only Independence Day, and a home game, and the Red Sox, it was the anniversary of Lou Gehrig's 1939 farewell speech. So it was fitting everyone left feeling like the luckiest man on the face of the earth.

I bet you know where I'm going.

It was Wednesday night of this week, and it was a heartbreaker, and you have seen the videotape. Comerica Park in Detroit, the Tigers vs. the Cleveland Indians, and on the mound is Tigers pitcher Armando Galarraga, 28. In his brief Major League career, he has not pitched a complete game, never mind a perfect one but here he is. He's retired 26 straight batters. It's two outs in the ninth with just one to go, one out between him and history. Indians shortstop Jason Donald is at the plate. Donald hits a grounder between first and second. Miguel Cabrera, the Tigers first baseman, fields it as Galarraga sprints to first. The pitcher takes the throw from Cabrera and steps on the base. Donald crosses it just a step later. Galarraga gets this look of joy. And the umpire blows it. He calls Donald safe. Everyone is shocked.

It's everything that follows that blunder that makes the story great.

When Galarraga hears the call, he looks puzzled, surprised. But he's composed and calm, and he smiles, as if accepting fate. Others run to the ump and begin to yell, but Galarraga just walks back to the mound to finish the job. Which he does, grounding out the next batter. The game is over.

The umpire, Jim Joyce, 54, left the field and watches the videotape. He saw that he'd made a mistake and took immediate responsibility. He went straight to the clubhouse where he personally apologized to Galarraga. Then he told the press, "I just cost the kid a perfect game." He said, "I thought [Donald] beat the throw. I was convinced he beat the throw until I saw the replay. It was the biggest call of my career."

Galarraga told reporters he felt worse for Joyce than he felt for himself. At first, reacting to the game in the clubhouse, he'd criticized Joyce. But after Joyce apologized, Galarraga said, "You don't see an umpire after the game come out and say, 'Hey, let me tell you I'm sorry.'" He said, "He felt really bad." He noted Joyce had come straight over as soon as he knew he'd made the wrong call.

What was sweet and surprising was that all the principals in the story comported themselves as fully formed adults, with patience, grace and dignity. And in doing so, Galarraga and Joyce showed kids How to Do It.

A lot of adults don't teach kids this now, because the adults themselves don't know how to do it. There's a mentoring gap, an instruction gap in our country. We don't put forward a template because we don't know the template. So everyone imitates TV, where victors dance in the end zone, where winners shoot their arms in the air and distort their face and yell "Whooooahhh,"

and where victims of an injustice scream, cry, say bitter things, and beat the ground with their fists. Everyone has come to believe this is authentic. It is authentically babyish. Everyone thinks it's honest. It's honestly undignified, self-indulgent, weak and embarrassing.

Galarraga and Joyce couldn't have known it when they went to work Wednesday, but they were going to show children in an unforgettable way that a victim of injustice can react with compassion, and a person who makes a mistake can admit and declare it. Joyce especially was a relief, not spinning or digging in his heels. I wish he hadn't sworn. Nobody's perfect.

Thursday afternoon the Tigers met the Indians again in Comerica Park. Armando Galarraga got a standing ovation. In a small masterpiece of public relations, Detroit's own General Motors gave him a brand new red Corvette. Galarraga brought out the lineup card and gave it to the umpire—Jim Joyce, who had been offered the day off but chose to work.

Fans came with signs that said, "It was perfect."

It was.

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