

The Walk-Off Homer

By Phil Rice

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Spring break of my freshman year at Maryville College, 1979, found me spending a week at my parents' house in the Smoky Mountains. My partying habits during the school year were such that I felt no need to venture to Florida or some other sunny spot to let off steam; on the contrary, my need was to spend some time quietly trying to gather the energy necessary to survive the final academic period before a summer of working for next year's tuition. Being in the mountains was the proper tonic.

Having signed up for intramural softball that spring, I asked my dad, an Episcopal priest in the midst of a busy Easter season with his parish in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, if he would help me get in a little practice. Dad's 50th birthday was just a week away; I would turn 19 that July. As a young man Dad had been a fast-pitch softball player in the industrial leagues of north Georgia. The level of play in those leagues did not resemble the safe style of softball demonstrated by my college intramural team or in other contemporary leagues.

The leagues in and around the mill town of Rossville in 1948 consisted mostly of World War II veterans and young men whose lives were already dedicated to a life of rough physical labor. They worked hard and played hard. For them, fast-pitch softball was baseball played on a smaller field with a slightly larger ball. The speed and ferocity were the same, if not more intense. In the midst of this was a college boy working in the mill for the summer. Charlie Rice, aged 19. A photo from the time shows a fresh-faced kid posing with grizzled men in overalls and t-shirts, many with a cigarette in their hand or between their lips. Dad appears uncertain whether to smile or look tough. He manages neither. Although he looks out of place, he grew up in the

mill town. The younger players know him by name, and the older ones know him as Harold Rice's boy. He is welcome in their midst because of this connection and, not incidentally, because he is an excellent pitcher.

Coming from a family of meager income, Dad was entirely dependent on scholarships and his own earnings to attend college; he didn't have much time for sports or any other recreational pursuits as a student at the University of Chattanooga. But word of his pitching talents spread, and, as a member of the *Sigma Chi* fraternity, when his schedule allowed he was enlisted to help out their struggling fast-pitch softball team. On one such occasion the hapless *Sigma Chi* team was up against the "jock" fraternity, a collection of varsity athletes carrying an undefeated record into that afternoon's game. There were audible snickers from the muscle-bound opponents when the skinny kid ambled to the mound. They had not seen this player before, but they weren't worried. No other team in the league ever came close to defeating the powerful champs. But after the first three batters went down swinging, they suspected a ringer. After verifying he was indeed a *Sigma Chi* and on the official roster, the game resumed.

For five innings the score remained tied at 0 to 0 before a *Sigma Chi* batter managed a single in the fifth. With two out and a man on first, the skinny pitcher stepped to the plate. Crack. The ball shot on a straight line past the outfielders. There was no fence in the outfield, so the fielders could chase after the ball, and chase they did. The runner on first crossed the plate and the pitcher rounded second intent on going all the way home, but the third base coach held him at third, saying "save your arm Charlie." He reluctantly obeyed, and a few seconds later the ball reached home plate. "I could have made it. That should have been a home run," Dad would say each time he told me that story. And he told the story at least once a year. The final score was 1 to 0, *Sigma Chi*.

By the time I was born in 1960, Dad had given up any athletic activities in favor of more cerebral pursuits—except for occasionally demonstrating his skills at pitching a softball. He had bought an over-sized first baseman’s mitt and a high quality softball when he was a chaplain at East Tennessee State University in the late 1960s. The ball was strictly for pitching, and the mitt was for whoever he could find brave enough to serve as his catcher. By my early teens I was deemed quick enough to wear the mitt. I was both thrilled and scared at the promotion. Dad had paced out a 43-foot zone in the most level section of our backyard, and a few times each summer we would “play catch,” and the first fifteen or twenty minutes were just that—father and son tossing the ball back and forth while chatting. A classic bonding experience.

Then, when he decided his arm was loose enough, he would burn in a dozen or so underhanded gems. He had four main pitches: a sizzling, knee-level fastball straight down the middle; a curveball of similar speed and control; a rising fastball that was deadly because by the time it reached me it was face level; and an off-speed blooper ball that never failed to catch me off guard and crack him up. By the age of 15 I could usually catch his best pitches without ducking out of the way or even visibly flinching. But I had to stay focused. It was serious business.

In the spring of 1979 I was a lean, athletic youth. Years of high school wrestling had left me with a wiry build not unlike my father’s at a similar age. According to his assessment, I was more muscular and displayed a quickness he had never possessed. Perhaps that was true, but I did not have his talents on the diamond. Even in the slow-pitch variety of softball I never managed to distinguish myself as anything but adequate as a batter, and the pitching skills I had learned from Dad were useless in the version of play where the idea is to lob the ball softly

toward the batter so the ball could be hit (there are no 1 to 0 shutouts in slow-pitch.) I could run fast and I could catch; those were the only skills I brought to the game.

There were only two days left of my spring break when I asked if he'd like to walk the two blocks to the city park and toss the ball around, maybe let me shag a few flies. He agreed, but said we'd drive. In the storage room attached to the carport I found his old first baseman's mitt on a shelf next to a box of retired Christmas ornaments. The "for pitching only" softball was tucked inside the glove; the two items were always stored as one. An old wooden softball bat, which was part of the original set, was leaning in a corner along with a shovel and some long-neglected gardening tools. After placing the softball equipment in the trunk of his '73 Chevy Caprice, I retrieved my own glove — a Joe Morgan signature model — from my bedroom. Dreams of playing up to the standards of my glove had filled my head each summer since the day I bought it with my lawn mowing income as an optimistic 13-year-old. Inside the glove was an old scuffed ball that could be used to hit some grounders and pop-ups for fielding practice.

When I returned to the car Dad was in the driver's seat, smoking a cigarette with the air conditioner on full blast. We drove the two blocks and parked facing the ballfield. In all the years we had tossed around the softball, this would be the first time we had done so on a regulation field. Neither of us remarked on this fact, but we both sat there for an extended moment, looking at the diamond in front of us. Then we got out. Dad started walking toward the field as I retrieved the gear. I set the bat and the scuffed ball near home plate and then handed him the first baseman's mitt before trotting across the infield. He was standing near first base and I was in the area where the shortstop would play. We began tossing the ball back and forth. It had been a couple of years since we last performed this rite of spring. It felt good.

Mostly we threw and caught the ball as we might have at any time in our history together. A couple of balls got past me, and I chased them. Likewise, one of my throws was wide and missed Dad's outstretched glove, and I chased it down, too. This was not a previously established rule, but it seemed like the appropriate action in the moment. After a few more tosses I could see he was getting a little winded, and I said, "Ready to pitch a few?" He hesitated, which I had not expected, but then said, "Okay boy." He walked to the pitcher's mound where I handed him my fielder's glove and he gave me the first baseman's mitt, which he always called a catcher's mitt in deference to its actual function. I trotted to home plate, turned around and squatted in the appropriate position with my left arm extended, ready. Dad stood on the mound, which wasn't really raised much but did have an actual pitcher's rubber for him to toe. Again there was a pause, a hesitance. Then he went into his familiar wind-up motion and fired the ball.

Unlike modern fast-pitch softball hurlers, there was no windmill effect to Dad's wind-up. He pulled his arm back to a three-quarter angle and then whipped the ball underhanded, flicking his wrist as he pushed off his right leg. The combination of a quick wrist and powerful hip muscle did the trick, usually with lethal speed and deadly accuracy. There is an extant film of old-time baseball pitcher Walter Johnson, who played in the early years of the 20th century, pitching in a similar fashion, his arm at an angle only slightly higher than Dad's. Johnson was the most intimidating pitcher of his era, and on a comparative scale could still be called the most dominating pitcher to ever play at the top level. Because he played in a time barely recorded on film, his style has been largely ignored in deference to his statistics, but his technique made use of the same motion used by a skilled fast-pitch softball hurler.

Dad's first effort, while it had some heat, veered off a good three feet from the plate. Had there been a right-handed batter he would have had trouble dodging such a pitch, but without a

hitter in the way I was able to lunge and snag the ball in the webbing. I softly tossed it back without a comment. He caught the lobbed ball with his bare pitching hand, tucked his glove under his armpit and adjusted his new trifocals so they were lower on his nose. Then he stood for several seconds just staring at my waiting glove before whipping his wrist again. The pitch came in two-feet over the plate and landed with a satisfying smack in the mitt, which had not moved. I stood up smiling and said “great pitch Dad” as I tossed the ball back. This time he caught the return throw in his glove and began walking toward the plate.

“That’s enough for now. Get out there and I’ll hit you a few.” I was surprised that the pitching was already over but followed his instructions. He handed me the fielder’s glove as I trotted past him on my way to the outfield. Stopping in shallow centerfield, I turned and reflexively bent my knees in a slight crouch and pounded my fist into the Joe Morgan glove.

Dad picked up the bat and took a few practice swings. He bent down awkwardly to scoop up the scuffed ball and then readjusted his trifocals again before stepping to home plate. Standing there with the bat in his right hand and the ball in his left, he briefly scanned the field as if deciding where to place the first fly ball. He did not look like even a casual athlete in that moment. He weighed almost 100 pounds more than he did the day he shutout the jocks for *Sigma Chi*. His physique exuded an aura of power, but his round, protruding stomach belied any suggestion of his being “in shape.”

Likewise, his attire gave no hint that he was expecting exercise. He was wearing a polo shirt tucked into casual business slacks with a proper belt. A pack of cigarettes and Zippo lighter, as always, were a visible bulge in the left breast pocket. He had on black dress socks and his shoes were the cheap canvas loafers with rubber soles that he always wore when he wasn’t on official business. For him, this was his everyday attire. He did not own a pair of sneakers, sweat

pants, or anything else designed for sports. He did not own blue jeans and never wore a collarless shirt except the ever-present white undershirt, which was strictly as underwear. In his world, “sportswear” referred to a style of clothing that would later become known as “business casual.” To him it meant no tie or clerical collar required. During his later years, hats were never a consideration, even when playing catch on a sunny day. His hair was carefully coiffed in a thick permanent wave that was brushed up and back and extended to the bottom of his shirt collar. To disturb this aesthetic trademark with a hat was unthinkable.

Unconcerned with any of these observations, Dad positioned his feet and tossed the ball up in the air. As the ball descended he swung the thin softball bat with all of his 230 pounds behind it. The swing was straight and his pivoting hips harkened back to a day when he had been properly coached on making contact with the ball. But he missed. I was reminded of films of Babe Ruth in his last days as a player with the Boston Braves—turning almost a full 360 with his follow-through on a strike. But Dad kept his cool, repeated the process and sent a solid fly ball for me to chase. He followed that with a dozen more, each placed to make sure I had to catch them on the run. Then a line drive went too far to my right for me to grab. It rolled deep into leftfield. I started to jog towards it, but he stopped me.

“Don’t worry about that one son. I’ll hit one more, then this car is headed to the barn.” He liked saying “this car is headed to the barn” instead of “I’m going home.” When he was a boy the day’s last trolley to the city would have a similar sign in its front window. He explained that to me once; I never heard him explain it to anyone else. He just said it, and even people who had never seen a trolley knew what he meant.

Standing in centerfield I could see the scuffed ball near the tree line that served as the leftfield fence. The woods stopped in left center where a paved walking trail stretched from the

park entrance toward the town. The trail itself was generally considered the right and centerfield boundary, though without a proper fence a ball hit that far would conceivably still be in play. In dead center, about twenty feet on the other side of the trail, stood a wooden shed with a tin roof. The door was missing, and a large riding lawn mower was visible inside. Just as Dad let me know he was ready I noticed a jogger approaching right field on the trail. Not a likely interference given the distance from home plate, but I made a mental note.

Dad was standing with the bat in his right hand, the white “pitching only” ball was in his left hand. He was concentrating like a tennis pro about to serve at Wimbledon. Then he tossed the ball straight up about six feet, which allowed him time to pull the bat back and have both hands placed one over the other at the knob—the classic power hitter’s grip. As the ball descended he was able to get full extension of his arms just as his hips pivoted. The crack of the virgin softball striking the sweet spot of the wooden bat sounded like an old-time radio sound effect. I took three steps backwards but knew right away the ball was not going to be within catching range. I stood and followed its arch as it soared over me. The jogger was approaching centerfield by this time, and he watched the ball as it sailed over his head and landed with a thundering crash on the far side of the shed’s tin roof. He looked toward us as he continued his slow run, his face wide-eyed and grinning.

For a moment I just stood and stared. That shed had to be at least 350 feet from home plate, maybe 375. And a softball hit with a wooden bat. Damn, Dad. I turned and looked at him standing at the plate, casually leaning against the bat like a walking stick. Then, still shaking my head in astonishment, I silently trotted behind the shed and where I found the ball some fifty feet from where it had bounced off the roof. I placed this once pristine pitching relic, now bearing a single smudge, in the pocket of my glove and trotted back past the shed, over the track, and

down the length of the field where Dad was waiting. We didn't speak as we walked to the car. He got in, started the engine and lit a cigarette while I stowed the gear, completely forgetting the scuffed ball still out in leftfield. He backed the car out and headed the two blocks to our house. Halfway there he said, "Did you see the way the jogger looked at me after watching the ball go over his head?"

"Yeah, I saw him. That was a hell of a shot Dad. That would've been out of many pro baseball parks, and damn sure out of any softball park." My admiration flowed freely.

"Think so boy? ... I don't know. It might not have been that far." He was looking straight ahead, his blues eyes smiling. He knew.

We never again threw the softball together, and he never again showed his unique ability as a fast-pitch softball pitcher to anyone. Already old for his age in 1979 — physically and spiritually — he would leave us a couple of weeks before his 57th birthday in 1986. Standing at the window of the hospital room where he would spend his final days, I could see a softball field at a city park in the distance. Unprompted, I said, "Hey Dad ... *I know* you could've made it to home in that game against the jocks." He laughed. 'The triple' had been a running joke for 15 years.

After a quiet reflection, he responded. "Remember that jogger's face when I hit the ball over the shed in Gatlinburg? ... I guess that was a good way to end it."

Yeah Dad. That *was* a good way to end it.

