

THE GREATEST

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. These words haunted me in the spring of 1982. My English Lit class was not one I was looking forward to, quite the opposite I was dreading it. After all, I was an accounting major and somehow I doubted that Charles Dickens would have any relevance in my future career as a certified public accountant. When I saw the list of reading material for the course and the name Dickens, immediately I assumed it was going to be A Christmas Carol. Little did I know Dickens wrote a considerable amount of books including the dreaded A Tale of Two Cities. I feel I must add that since then, David Copperfield, Great Expectations and Oliver Twist have become some of my personal favorite novels in classic literature. But, in 1982, Charles Dickens was a nightmare that rivaled the very ones he had written about in A Christmas Carol.

I plodded through the story of Charles Darnay and Sydney Carlton, their completely different characters with a similar appearance and a shared love for Lucie Manette. I struggled mightily with the grammar used by Dickens in 1859 when he wrote the classic, after all I was American and the last thing a true American uses is proper grammar. By the time I reached Sydney Carlton's peaceful death and his closing stanza of, "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known." I was ready to hang myself by my shoelaces and have a far, far better rest myself. I spent the next few days writing my essay, my interpretation of Dickens' work. Something, by the way, I consider to be quite cynical. Who am I to interpret Charles Dickens after all? Nevertheless, I handed in my assignment and feared the worst.

My Lit class was scheduled for Monday and Wednesday, the essay was turned in on the latter of the two so by the next class session, the papers were graded and returned to us. Though it really isn't paramount information for my purposes in this story, I will include that I received a B+ grade and I was never more satisfied with a grade less than an A in my entire life. During class discussion Professor Walton questioned me directly on my thoughts on the opening sentence.

My response was less than gratified and one I would soon regret, oh how I would regret it. "I think the opening sentence sets the pace for the rest of the story. Dickens was fickle quite often in this story, often being vague and suggestive rather than factual when, in my opinion, it would have made the novel better to have been less suggestive. After all, it is impossible for a time to be both the best and the worst simultaneously."

I won't get into the response I received from my professor. Needless to say it wasn't pleasant. What I will stress is how wrong I was in my assessment. How terribly, terribly wrong I was.

That day we were given a new assignment. Choose a topic that is familiar and enjoyable to you and write an essay of no less than fifty pages and no more than seventy pages. The day was March 29, 1982. With spring training in full swing and the start of the major league baseball season merely a week away there was only one topic on my mind. On Wednesday, March 31, I presented my idea to Professor Walton. I was going to write about the greatest baseball players to ever play the game. One player from each position encompassing what I considered to be the greatest team ever assembled. After

several minutes of discussion and begging on my part, Professor Walton gave her consent and my life was about to change forever.

I went back to my dorm room and began making notes, choosing each player I would use in my story carefully. After all, I would have to present compelling arguments and extensive research into why these players were indeed the greatest to ever play the game at their position. I began at first base, though several others were what I considered to be “no-brainers”, first base was where my idol played. Henry Louis Gehrig played for the New York Yankees from 1923 to 1939. Over that span he managed a .340 lifetime batting average, 493 home runs, 1995 runs batted in and 2,721 hits. He was a two-time league most valuable player. He was on the Yankees teams that won the 1927, 1928, 1932, 1936, 1937, 1938 and 1939 World Series titles. Dubbed the “Iron Horse, he played in 2,130 consecutive games from June 1, 1925 through April 20, 1939.

However, despite those numerous accomplishments, he is best known for his death at the age of 37 on June 2, 1941. He died from a disease called amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or ALS. The other commonly used name for the disease is of course, Lou Gehrig’s Disease. I’m not ashamed to admit that I love Lou Gehrig. Though I didn’t know him, his life was baseball and his wife Eleanor. He was a great man both on and off the field, a man whose heart was filled with kindness. By the time I was finished writing about Lou, I was nine pages into my essay.

It was the start of the next chapter that began a series of events that to this day have me completed baffled. The next player I chose to write about was Tyrus Raymond Cobb. “Ty” Cobb was the polar opposite of Lou Gehrig in personality. He is regarded as the meanest person to ever play the game. He began his career with the Detroit Tigers in 1905 and ended it with the Philadelphia Athletics in 1928. His antics off the field are a book on their own. From constant fighting, to stabbing to even shooting a man who tried to rob him. Cobb had no friends, he had enemies and he had people who tolerated him. But, he had a God-given talent to play the game unlike anyone else. His career batting average of .366 will never be topped. When he retired he held thirty-nine records. His most widely known and amazing one was 4,189 total hits in his career.

I was in the middle of writing about Cobb when I drifted off to sleep, well maybe I did. I guess you can be the judge. You see one minute I was in Virginia in 1982 writing about Ty Cobb, the next minute I was in Detroit and it was 1913. Everything seemed so real to me, it was astounding. The smells, the sites every detail was explicit and it was definitely in color. That in itself is supposed to disqualify it as a dream according to the so-called experts.

I was standing just outside of Tiger stadium and people were filing in. In my hand was a ticket, section 9, row 1, seat 4. In my mind I was thinking, if this is a dream at least let me sleep until the game is over. I handed my ticket to the man at the entry, he tore it, returned my stub which I carefully placed in my wallet for safe-keeping and I went into the stadium. I didn’t go to my seat immediately. Instead I went to the vendor stand and purchased a hot dog and a cold beer. The total price was sixty-five cents. I pulled out a dollar bill and handed it to the vendor, he gave me my change and I smiled as I made my way to my seat. In 1913 I’d be a moderately wealthy man, I thought to myself. Of course, in 1982 I was just above poverty level.

I walked through the tunnel and out into the seating area. The Tigers were warming up on the field. My seat was fantastic. I was just to the left of the Washington

Senators dugout. I recognized the pitcher immediately. It was “The Big Train”, Walter Johnson. One of the greatest pitchers in major league baseball history was about to take the mound against the immortal Ty Cobb and I had a front row seat. My excitement was immeasurable and it lasted for about thirty seconds. An announcement came over the loud speaker. “Walter Johnson will not be pitching tonight for the Washington Senators. Taking his place on the mound will be Harold Abbott.”

“Harold Abbott? Who the hell is he?” I asked the man sitting next to me.

He pointed to this tiny kid with thick glasses throwing warm-up pitches. “He’s an 18-year-old rookie. This is the first game of his career.”

“Cobb and the boys should have a nice day today then.” I smiled at the man.

He didn’t reciprocate with any dialogue, just a nod and a smile before turning away from me.

Detroit was in the field first and Washington went down in order. When the kid made his way to the mound for the Senators he looked terrified. I would be too if I was facing Ty Cobb and the Detroit Tigers to start my career. I had knowledge that no one else had, after all, I knew this kid never made a name for himself. In fact, I’d never heard of him which in itself was extremely odd.

The very first pitch Abbott threw was hit long and deep to center field. It was tracked down and caught for a long out. I watched the kid closely. He took a deep breath and wiped perspiration from his forehead. He got the ball back and turned to the next hitter. Again the ball was crushed when he pitched it and again it was caught by an outfielder. The next batter was Ty Cobb. Cobb stepped into the batter’s box and glared at the kid. From where I was sitting I could literally see the kid shaking.

Abbott threw a fast ball, Cobb swung and missed. My eyes grew wide and my jaw dropped. Ty Cobb just swung and missed. Something he seldom ever did. Hatred filled his face now and everyone in the stadium knew he was going to hammer the next one. The next pitch met with the same result, Cobb swung and missed. He stepped out of the batter’s box and slammed the head of the bat into the ground. He cursed loudly and then stepped back into the box. His teeth were clenched in rage his eyes were intense and he scowled at this rookie pitcher. Ty Cobb was famous for many things. One of those was that only twice in his career did he ever swing at three pitches in one at bat and not make contact. I was one hundred percent positive that this was not going to be one of those times. Or, at least I thought I was. The next pitch came and again Cobb missed it. “Strike Three” yelled the umpire.

“Shut the hell up.” Cobb yelled back. He threw his bat against the dugout wall so hard it shattered. In my mind I could only think, boy is this kid in for it the next time Cobb comes up to bat.

In the fourth inning Cobb came up to bat again, Harold Abbott was pitching a perfect game to that point. I, just like everyone else, expected that to end now. I can’t begin to describe the look on my face at what I witnessed next. Harold Abbott struck out Ty Cobb again, three pitches, three swings, three strikes. In one game he’d caused Ty Cobb to do something he’d only done twice in his twenty-three year career. The string of obscenities that came from Cobb would have made a sailor blush. This time he swung his bat against a dugout post and splintered it into two pieces.

I watched in complete awe as Abbott mowed down hitter after hitter. The perfect game continued into the seventh inning and, as you may have guessed, Ty Cobb was

coming to bat. His face was beet red and you could see the hatred clearly. This was not just anger or frustration, it was complete hatred. When the third pitch hit the catcher's mitt and the umpire yelled strike three I had to duck. Ty Cobb threw his bat into the crowd narrowly missing my head. Then, he did something I'd never seen anyone do before. He pulled off his cleat and ran at Harold Abbott. By the time Abbott knew he was coming it was too late. Cobb stuck the sharp metal on the bottom of the cleat into the boy's chest.

There was a brawl on the field after that incident. Players from both teams were beating on one another. I watched Harold Abbott the whole time. He stood up. Blood was all over the front of his jersey. He walked calmly into the dugout. The fight was broken up ten minutes later and the game resumed.

When the Tigers were due to come up in the eighth I expected a new pitcher for Washington. Harold Abbott showed more courage that day than I have ever seen, he came running out of Washington's dugout and took the mound. He gave up two hits in the eighth inning but no runs. In the ninth, he was one out away from winning. Ty Cobb was on deck and it looked like he wasn't going to get a chance to bat.

Abbott decided otherwise, he walked the next batter on purpose sending Ty Cobb to the plate for a fourth time. With absolute calm and complete confidence, he once again struck out the immortal Ty Cobb on three pitches winning the game for the Washington Senators one to nothing.

On the way out of the stadium I picked up a game program. Harold Abbott was barely listed as a footnote, 18-years-old from Baltimore Maryland. My mind was racing. How could I possibly have never heard of Harold Abbott and the game he pitched today against the game's greatest hitter? The answer presented itself minutes later. An ambulance pulled into the stadium by the players' entrance. I ran over to see who was hurt.

When the stretcher returned from inside, the body was completely covered. Someone was dead. "Who is that?" One man asked.

"Some kid named Abbott." The ambulance driver responded.

My heart sunk in my chest. I found it very difficult to breathe. My wonderful dream had just become a tragic nightmare. "Okay, it's time to wake up now!" I yelled out. Everyone stopped what they were doing and stared at me like I was insane. In hindsight, they weren't far off. No matter what I did I could not wake up. Finally, after walking around 1913 Detroit for hours I found a motel. I went in, paid \$1.50 for the night and went to my room. I closed the door behind me and sat down on the bed. I was terrified now that perhaps I would not be able to wake up. Maybe I was stuck somehow in 1913 Detroit. After what seemed like several hours of panic I fell asleep.

My sleep did not last long or, maybe it did depending on how you look at it. Seconds later, I was back in my dorm room and it was 1982 again.

I sat up in my bed for what seemed like hours mulling over what had just happened. I couldn't escape the feeling that it seemed so real. The smells of the hot dogs and the grass, the sounds of the game and the amazing clarity of the visual side of this dream were astounding. I looked at the clock on my desk. It was 9:02 and daylight outside. I was asleep for nearly fourteen hours! I've never slept that long in my life, at most I slept for eight hours and generally between five and six hours per night.

I got out of bed, took a shower and prepared for the day ahead. The memory or the dream from the previous night was one I knew I'd never forget. When I left the dorm building that morning, my first stop was the campus library. I went straight for the Baseball Almanac and checked it out. While I ate an early lunch, I thumbed through the pages anxiously. Frustration, or perhaps impatience, got the better of me. I went to the index of names and looked at the A's. I was frozen when I saw Harold Abbott page 239. It took me several minutes before I had the courage to turn the book to page 239. When I did I closed my eyes and said a little prayer that what I was about to read did not match what I had seen in my dream the previous night.

The paragraph began with June 6, 1913 Washington Senators vs. Detroit Tigers. A chill ran down my spine as I read every detail of what I had just witnessed. Ty Cobb's statistics were now changed. Before, he had only struck out twice by swinging and missing at three pitches in his career. Now, he'd done so six times. Four of those occurred on June 6, 1913 in Detroit against a pitcher named Harold Abbott. The story added the cause of Abbott's death, a detail I was unfamiliar with. Evidently, the cleat that Cobb had stuck into his chest had caused internal bleeding near the heart and that incident resulted in his death. It was absolutely fascinating that no criminal charges were ever filed against Ty Cobb for the incident.

I closed the book and pushed away my lunch. My appetite was gone now. I just sat there staring into nothingness and pondering what had transpired. Finally, I came to the conclusion that obviously I had been previously mistaken regarding Cobb's statistics. There was no way that the game involving Abbott just occurred last night, it was impossible. An hour later, I finished my lunch. Mentally I was in a far better place, I knew baseball statistics very well but that didn't mean I didn't have a simple oversight before.

At 1:25 I returned to my room and once again worked on my project. Next up in my list of greats was a catcher named Josh Gibson. Josh Gibson never "officially" played in the major leagues. However, he was an absolute star in the Negro Leagues from 1930 to 1946. Initially he played for the Pittsburgh Crawfords and then in 1937 he started playing for the Homestead Grays. The latter of these two was when Josh rose to glory in the annals of baseball.

Babe Ruth is considered by the majority of baseball fans and historians alike as being the most prolific home run hitter ever. Babe ended his career with 714 in 1935. If you visit the National Baseball Hall of Fame, however, on Josh Gibson's plaque it reads, "Almost 800 home runs". Satchel Paige, one of the greatest pitchers ever who played both in the Negro Leagues and Major Leagues said that in his opinion "Gibson hit more than 800". No one will ever truly know because Negro League statistics are askew and incomplete. In addition to their regular season and playoffs, they played in what was called "Barnstorming Leagues". They would put together an all-star team and play against the white major leaguers and other teams across the country.

In 1940, the records for the Negro Leagues were well documented, at least those of the Homestead Greys. That season, Josh Gibson hit 79 home runs, far eclipsing Babe Ruth's single season mark of 60. One of his crowning achievements was in 1934 when he and the Negro League All-Stars played an exhibition at Yankee Stadium in New York. Gibson hit a home run that sailed over the third deck and out of the ballpark. It is the

only baseball, to this day, to ever be hit out of Yankee Stadium. It was hit an estimated distance of 600 feet.

Gibson's life though, just as Gehrig's, met with a tragic early ending in 1947 at the age of 35. He was diagnosed with a brain tumor in 1943, but refused to have it surgically removed. He lived the last four years of his life with recurring headaches. In January, 1947, he suffered a fatal stroke. He passed away three months before the first black player played in the major leagues. Playing in the majors and breaking the color barrier was a dream of his for his entire life.

My writing was flowing along well, all thoughts of the previous night were faded as I wrote about Mr. Gibson. I laid down the pen and leaned back on my bed to take a break and collect my thoughts. In hindsight, I'd have preferred to have written a garbled report. When I opened my eyes, I was on a bench. In front of me was a baseball field across the top was a banner reading, Homestead Greys. I closed my eyes and shook my head. "This is not happening." I repeated numerous times. But, the sound of people passing by clearly indicated, it was.

I opened my eyes again and looked down. In my hand was a ticket. Today's game featured the Pittsburgh Crawfords vs. the Homestead Greys. According to the ticket, it was August 3, 1934. Though I had a deep feeling of dread, there was no way I was going to pass up the chance to watch the game, even if it was all in my head. I entered the ballpark and took a seat in the third row behind first base. Immediately I noticed the pitcher for Pittsburgh, it was the legendary Satchel Paige.

One of the premier and most talked about match-ups between pitcher and batter was that of Satchel Paige vs. Josh Gibson. Satchel was the best pitcher, Josh was the best hitter. In the bottom of the first inning, an announcement came over the loud-speaker. "Josh Gibson will be replaced in the lineup by Terrence Henry."

A round of boos filled the stadium amidst a huge flow of conversation regarding what could have happened to Gibson. The kid that came out of Homestead's dugout in Gibson's place was enormous. He was at least six and a half feet tall and close to 300 pounds. His face looked so young and innocent that one person in the crowd yelled, "Hurry up and hit the ball before puberty hits you." Satchel Paige, always the showman, yelled to the kid, "I'll try to strike you out quickly so you can be home by curfew."

The kid nervously approached the plate. Everyone was laughing and taunting him. I felt so sorry for him because he looked as if he wanted to crawl under a rock and hide. That pity didn't last long, Paige's first pitch was hit so hard that the cover of the ball literally flew off. The cover landed just past the third baseman, the rest of the ball didn't seem to land. It climbed up into the sky and disappeared over the left field wall. No one was laughing now, especially not Satchel Paige.

In Terrence Henry's next four times to the plate, Paige threw at him five times. Subsequently, Henry hit four more home runs. Five at-bats, five home runs with eleven runs driven in was the official line for Henry that day. I was in the stands to see it! After the game, I placed the ticket stub in my wallet, then went to a local diner and had dinner. Terrence Henry came in a few minutes after I did. A few of the other players from Homestead bought him dinner. He was still awkward. You could tell he was shy. Occasionally he'd smile, but even when they laughed the hardest, he didn't. I watched them leave the diner together but once outside, he went on his own to the right while everyone else went to the left.

Ten minutes later, I left the diner. I was actually planning on going to the left but I heard a terrible fight going on to my left. I ran to see what was happening and turned the corner beside the diner in time to see two men running away and one lying on the ground. I hurried to the man on the ground to help him. I was too late. There was blood everywhere, Terrence Henry the shy, innocent giant child was dying. He'd been stabbed twice and then his throat was cut. He tried to speak, but couldn't and I will never forget those next few seconds as long as I live. His chest heaved a few times and he fell still. His eyes were wide and reflected the horror of the last few minutes of his life.

I screamed into the night for help. That was when I woke up and I was back on my bed in my dorm room. It all happened in the blink of an eye. I can't really describe the next few hours. It was a surreal nightmare at best. My mind was engaged in an internal battle over the reality of what had just transpired. There was no way for me to look up Terrence Henry. Negro League Baseball almanacs listed the stars for the most part and regular lineups. It did not list, one-time heroes.

Though I was terrified to do so, I fell asleep and slept through the night. I awoke at 6:15 a.m. on Friday morning. I had no classes on Friday. I was a typical college student who preferred the three-day weekends. I went through my morning ritual, got dressed and went to the cafeteria for breakfast. I thumbed through the pages of the baseball almanac blankly as I ate. There was no reference to Terrence Henry. I was both disheartened and somewhat elated that I'd never be able to validate the events I witnessed the day before.

These thoughts were about to be eradicated. George Calwell, the campus' janitor/handyman walked past. Quickly, I remembered he told me he played in the Negro Leagues as a youth. "George?" I called out. "Do you have a minute?"

He grinned and said, "I have until God takes me home."

George was a warm-hearted person, always smiling and genuinely concerned if you had a problem you needed to get off your chest. He pulled out a chair at my table and sat down.

"What can I do for you today young Mr. Locke?" He asked.

"Did you used to play in the Negro Leagues?" I asked wearily.

"I certainly did. I played for the Homestead Greys from 1934 to 1938. I was the starting second baseman in those days."

In my mind, I remembered George Calwell playing in the game I watched yesterday. Before now though I hadn't put the two together because the person I saw yesterday was a small, skinny kid. I knew I had the person I needed to talk to. My mind pondered the coincidence involved this morning. George was seldom in the cafeteria. Usually he was outside tending to the grounds.

"I have a question regarding a player for the 1934 Homestead Greys." I responded.

"Then you have come to the right place. I'll bet you are going to ask me about Josh Gibson?" He smiled.

"Not this time. But some other time I'd love to hear about Josh." I responded. I could see his face change in anticipation. "Today, I'd like to ask you about a backup catcher named Terrence Henry."

His smile faded and a look of deep sadness swept over him. I knew I was about to have my heartbroken and find out that what I saw yesterday actually happened.

“Terry was a wonderful kid.” He began. “Not many people know about him though. He was sixteen-years-old in 1934, the only season he played for the Greys. I must say, I’m surprised to hear you ask about him. Although I suppose if anyone would, it would be a true baseball fan.”

He paused briefly before proceeding. “We found Terry playing a game in a sandlot just outside Pittsburgh. Josh saw him first and came and got the rest of us. He said, “You guys have to see this kid. He hits the ball farther than me.” We, of course, scoffed at this notion because Josh hit the bar so far we could’ve played in Yellowstone Park and he would’ve hit one out.”

Again he paused. The pain was evident in his face. “You’ll have to excuse me, I haven’t spoken about Terry in forty years and it is still painful for me. We saw him play and then held a special tryout for him. He hit our best pitchers with consistency and we got him signed with the Greys. It was agreed that since he was a catcher, Josh would spend the first season working with him and Papa Bell was going to teach him to play the outfield. He was progressing at an amazing rate. You know. A natural born ballplayer, God gave him a gift and he loved to use it.”

“He never changed though. He was very shy, quiet and sharp as a whip, even though he had no formal education. He didn’t party with the rest of us. He would go to his room and say his prayers. He learned how to read and every night you’d find him reading The Bible.”

Tears welled in his eyes. I wanted to tell him not to continue if it was too painful, but I had to know for sure and I didn’t say a word other than, “Take your time.”

A small grin swept over his face. “I don’t think I have ever met anyone more deserving of a trip to Heaven than Terry.”

The smile faded again and he added, “I just wish it hadn’t been so soon.”

“Anyway, during practice sessions, Terry regularly hit the ball out of the park. He wasn’t as good of an all-around hitter as Josh, but he certainly could hit the ball as hard if not harder. We were all excited about the 1935 season when we would have Josh hitting third and Terry hitting fourth. Honestly, we didn’t think anyone would beat us the whole year.”

He rubbed his hand nervously and paused to gather his thoughts. “I’ll never forget, August 3, 1934. We were playing the Pittsburgh Greys that day and Satchel Paige was pitching. Josh decided to have some fun with Satchel and sit out. He wanted to see Satchel’s face when Terry hammered him. Everything went exactly as we expected. Satchel taunted him by saying something about striking him out quick so he could make it home for curfew.”

My heart stopped beating in that moment. I could feel the blood leave my head and feeling a mixture of dizziness and nausea sweep through me. George saw my face turn white and asked, “Are you okay young Mr. Locke? You look like someone painted your face with white shoe polish.”

It took me a few seconds to be able to respond, but finally I mustered up the ability and replied, “I’m fine George. Please continue.”

“Well, the very first pitch that Satchel threw in, Terry hit so hard he knocked the cover right off the ball. I swear he did. The ball flew into the sky over left field, but the cover fell just behind third base. I’d never seen that before in my life and I still haven’t seen it since. You should’ve seen the look on old Satchel’s face. It was priceless. Josh

fell off the bench and landed on the concrete floor of the dugout he was laughing so hard. He lay on his belly for a long time laughing and pounding the concrete hysterically.”

George chuckled at the memory. But the chuckles were once again replaced by a look of pain shortly afterward when he continued to speak. “The next time Terry came up, Satchel threw straight at his head. Terry ducked out of the way, brushed himself off and stepped back in quietly. Satchel threw him a curve ball next and Terry drove it over the fence in right field. In his next plate appearances Satchel would throw at him, then Terry would crush it. He went five for five that day with five home runs and I think ten or eleven RBIs. It was wonderful to watch and we took him to a diner to celebrate since he didn’t drink.”

His face turned down even more than before and I knew what was coming next. “When we left the diner Terry went off on his own as usual while the rest of us went out catin’. A few minutes after we left the diner, two white men jumped Terry and killed him beside the diner.”

He began to cry. “He was only sixteen and just the sweetest person alive. They killed him because he was big and black. Their prejudice and fear overwhelmed them. When they went to court for his murder, the knife was lost and the one eye-witness to the crime had seemed to vanish. No one could find him. They got away with it, Mr. Locke. They walked out of that courtroom with smug grins on their face talking about how the uppity nigger got what he deserved. They looked me right in my eye that day outside the courthouse and told me, “Let this be a lesson to you boy. Stay in your place or you might get what he got.”

“I wanted to kill them. But Josh grabbed my arms and walked me away. He told me, you’d be executed for it sure as shootin’. There’s no way they’d let you off because you ain’t white.”

He cried for what seemed like several minutes while I consoled him. When he regained composure, he continued. “The world just weren’t fair back then young Mr. Locke. It ain’t fair today neither, but back then it was a scary place for a black man. People like young Terry paid the ultimate price for stupidity. He can never be brought back and he done nothing but be black.”

The more he talked, the more his language was slurred and he reverted back to the time before he received a college degree in 1974. My heart was broken for him and I regretted asking about Terrence Henry now.

“I am so sorry George. I didn’t mean to hurt you my friend.” I spoke through my own tears.

He stopped me before I could continue. “Don’t you be sorry. Don’t you be sorry at all. Just remember young Terry and tell your children someday. Let his memory live on through you. Promise me that.”

“I promise George. You have my word that as long as I live, I will never forget Terry.”

George smiled at me and said, “That’s good. You’re a good man young Mr. Locke. I have to get back to work now. It sure was good talking to you. God bless you for carrying on Terry’s memory through your life. He surely deserves to be remembered.”

He stood up and I shook his hand. We said goodbye and I left the cafeteria in shock. I walked slowly back to my dorm room, I didn’t have the advantage of disbelief

this time. I had seen what happened with my own eyes, in fact I was the witness who never came to court enabling his killers to escape justice. With this guilt tacked on to my feelings of utter despair I went to my room for solitude.

Several times I looked at my notepad, how could I possibly continue to write this? I pondered this question several times, but the deciding factor was the thought of getting an "F" for this assignment. I picked the pad up and finished writing about Josh Gibson. I looked at my list of players still to go and picked Babe Ruth for my next addition.

I wrote nearly ten pages on Babe Ruth's life, his statistics in baseball and his life off the field. My heart was beating hard against my chest with every page. Wondering when I'd drift off and be at Yankee Stadium in 1927 to witness some rookie play great and then die. It didn't happen. I finished writing about Babe and breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

With renewed confidence, I began my next segment into the life and times of Rogers Hornsby. By far the greatest second baseman to ever play the game, Hornsby finished his career with a .358 batting average only 8 percentage points behind Cobb for all time. In addition he hit 300 home runs, unheard of for a second baseman, then and now. Just like Cobb, however, Hornsby was a violent man and was dubbed, "a liturgy of hatred" by one writer. He was a confessed member of the Ku Klux Klan and was proud of it. Along with being mean and full of hate, he had nothing but spite for other players. Claiming that, "no one could play the game anymore", in his later years.

I was just a page into writing about Hornsby when I again dozed off. A mistake I knew I was going to regret immediately when I woke in 1926 St. Louis. Again, I was outside a ballpark with a ticket in my hand. I sat down on a nearby bench and stared at the ticket and at the stadium. For the first time in my life, I did not want to watch a baseball game.

Finally, I decided to attend the game. I entered the ballpark, bought a program and took a seat behind home plate. I leafed through the program, looking at the lineups of the two teams. It was the St. Louis Browns vs. the Brooklyn Robins. I perused the lineups and recognized most of the players listed. When the game began, I waited for an announcement of a replacement. It never came. The game played out with no real surprises, no one stood out above anyone else. Rogers Hornsby had three hits and played well at second base.

I left the stadium elated. I was able to watch a game with no surprises, I saw Rogers Hornsby play. I was smiling so much I felt that nothing could spoil that day. I joined the crowd waiting for the Browns to exit the stadium. Maybe, just maybe, I could get an autograph from Hornsby himself. He came out last and didn't pay much attention to the crowd. In fact, he acted like they weren't even there, except for one person. He stopped and approached a young African-American male. He spoke to him briefly, smiled and walked away.

"Wow, this is great." I said to myself. "The Ku Klux Klan thing must have just been a bogus fact about Hornsby."

I wanted to ask the young man what Hornsby had said to him, but he left before I had the chance. I walked down the street and found a small restaurant. I ate a wonderful home-cooked meal and spent the next hour or so enjoying the 1926 St. Louis. As the sun was going down I passed by an alley and heard someone yelling. I turned and looked. Two men wearing Klan outfits were grabbing the same young man I'd seen earlier.

“Hey! Let him go.” I yelled. I ran down the alley toward them, but before I could get to them they threw the boy into a car and drove off. Cars in those days weren’t exactly built for speed so I followed on foot. They lost me once they reached the city limits. I continued to run after them even though I couldn’t see them any longer.

About two miles outside of town, I saw a large flame off to my right. Quickly, I ran across the field toward the flame. As I neared I saw that it was a Klan rally and though I did not see the young man they’d abducted, I knew he was there. I ran as fast as I could, though I was nearly out of breath and my legs were burning. As I reached the clearing I heard a scream unlike anything I’d ever heard before. In the middle of the clearing, the young man was engulfed in flames. His screams pierced the night air mixed with the laughter of the Klansmen. “NOOOOOOOOOOO” I screamed.

Whether anyone heard me, I have no idea. A second later I woke up on my bed. I was soaked in sweat and my legs ached badly. I put my head in my hands and cried. How long, I can’t remember, but it seemed like hours. The emotion of what I’d witnessed carried through my body. When I was able to regain composure, I sat there staring at the darkness. “Please God, tell me this was just a nightmare!” I pleaded.

To this day, I am unsure of whether this event actually happened. There was no way to prove or disprove it. In my heart, I am positive that it did and it is a nightmare that haunts me still. I can tell you that because of the event that transpired, I did not include Rogers Hornsby in my final report. Even though I did not see Hornsby participate in the rally personally, I replaced him with Eddie Collins. He was a second baseman that had a career batting average of .333. Collins played from 1906 through 1928 with the Athletics and the White Sox. Collins was one of few players that played for the 1919 White Sox that were not banned from baseball by judge Kennesaw Mountain Landis for throwing the World Series that year.

It was just after 8:00 p.m. when I went to dinner. On the way back I picked up a package of No-Doz, hoping that I would not fall asleep again while writing. My heart couldn’t stand another tragedy. Upon returning to my room, I cracked open a bottle of Mountain Dew and took two of the caffeine pills.

I began to write. My hands were unsteady and that absolute feeling of dread had fallen over me like a thick blanket. The next player on my list was Denton True Young, known to everyone as Cy Young. Cy is credited with being the greatest pitcher of all-time his career wins total is 511, a record that will never be beaten. I wrote several pages about Cy, his career was not one considered in the “modern era” of baseball. Modern Era baseball is from 1910 to the current day. Cy pitched from 1890 to 1911.

The problem with early years of baseball is that the statistics aren’t perfect. There was at least one occurrence where Cy Young was credited with two wins in one day when his team won a double-header. The problem is, he didn’t pitch that day.

Cy also racked up enormous numbers in strikeouts and a very low ERA (Earned Run Average). The earned run average is calculated by the number of runs allowed every nine innings. To simplify, you would take the total number of earned runs he allowed and divide it by nine to get his ERA. Sorry for that break from the story, but, I have been accused of assuming everyone understood baseball statistics in the past and I wanted to clarify this for those who didn’t know.

Perhaps the best part of Cy Young's career to me at that point was that no controversy surrounded his life and best yet, no nightmares befell me while I wrote about him.

I put away my notepad for the night after finishing the segment on Cy Young. I was past the halfway point now, I had a pitcher, catcher, first and second baseman and two outfielders. Only three remained and I can assure you, I was sweating profusely at the thought of writing those three segments. Two of the remaining players were more recent, Willie Mays played from 1951 to 1973. He was my remaining outfielder. My third baseman played from 1972 to 1989, his name was Mike Schmidt. Those were to be my last two entries in my paper, next up was going to be Honus Wagner. But, that wouldn't be until the morning.

I didn't sleep well that night, I'd be lying if I said I did. The nightmare sound of the young man screaming echoed through my head all night. But when I woke up Saturday morning and returned from breakfast, I was ready to write. I could see an end in sight and it was one I desperately looked forward to.

Honus Wagner was a shortstop for the Louisville Colonels from 1897 through 1899. In 1900 he began playing for the Pittsburgh Pirates, the team he would spend the rest of his career with. He played through 1917 and is considered by nearly everyone as by far the greatest shortstop ever. His career batting average was .338 and when he retired he held the record for stolen bases with 722. A statistic near and dear to my heart since I was a base stealing master during my playing days.

Honus is perhaps most famous not for his career but for his baseball card. I know that sounds ludicrous, but, it's true. His T206 baseball card is the only card in history to sell for over a million dollars at auction. The theory behind its scarcity is that Honus, a non-smoker, objected to his picture being displayed on a card produced by a tobacco company. Thus, the printing was halted after only a few. The problem with this theory is that Wagner appears on a tobacco piece produced by Recius in the late 1800s. Another theory postulates that Wagner was not offered any compensation for the use of his likeness. Consequently, he supposedly withdrew his permission to print any more copies. Whatever the truth behind the printing is, the T206 card is the dream card for sports memorabilia collectors worldwide.

Perhaps it was because I did not take any caffeine pills, or perhaps, as I have surmised since, God wanted to teach me the error of my ways. I don't know the reason behind what happened next, I only know it happened. I closed my eyes, not to nap, just to blink. When I opened them, I was once again outside of a ballpark. The ticket in my hand indicated the date was April 17, 1909. I was in Pittsburgh and today the Pirates were playing the defending World Series Champion Chicago Cubs. It sounds odd saying that because the Cubs haven't won a World Series since. In fact, they haven't even been in the World Series since 1945.

I entered Exposition Park and again purchased a program. My seat for this game was between home plate and first base in the second row. The pitcher that day for the Cubs was a Hall of Famer named Mordecai Brown. Being a historian I knew that at the end of the season Pittsburgh was going to win the National League by six and a half games over the Cubs who would finish second. Again I cringed, waiting to hear that Honus Wagner wouldn't play today instead it would be Joe Smith. That announcement didn't come and by the third inning I was just enjoying the game.

In the top of the fourth, however, I found out why I was there. A replacement player was announced in left field for the Pirates. His name was, I know this is going to sound like a coincidence, Joe Smith. He was a young player and during the inning he ran down a fly ball to deep left field and threw out a runner at home plate. This sound pretty simple and uneventful, however, he threw the ball 410 feet. I've never seen anything like it since, the ball took one hop and landed in the catcher's mitt. The runner for the Cubs didn't even slide. He, just like everyone else in the stadium, knew there was no way he'd be thrown out.

We were all wrong. Through the remainder of the game, Joe Smith played outstanding defense. He ran down fly balls that I didn't think anyone would ever get to. He threw out two more runners at home plate and managed two hits in three times at bat. It was without a doubt the most amazing display of outfield defense in the history of the game. I was proud to have been there to witness it and Joe Smith assured himself a place in my story. Not as one of the nine greatest, but as a great player in his own right.

When the Pirates were coming off the field after the top of the ninth inning, his place in my story took on an entirely different light. It went quickly from awe-inspiring to tragic. A loud blast came from the left field stands. There was an incredible commotion down in that area of the ballpark. Out on the field, Joe Smith lay motionless. He'd been fatally wounded by a gunshot. I shook my head repeatedly saying the word, NO. Then, just as quickly as I'd been at the ballpark, I was back on my bed.

I jumped out of bed and paced back and forth in my room. I couldn't understand why this was happening. I loved baseball and now, it would forever be tainted by these horrific memories. Lying on my desk was the baseball almanac. I flipped through the index of names and there were four Joe Smith's listed. Only one had 1909 next to his name.

I flipped to page 737 and there was only one paragraph under his name. It said that he is credited with the longest throw in baseball history with the ball traveling an estimated 400 feet in the air before bouncing once and hitting the catcher's mitt. Then, it gave explanation to what I had witnessed first hand. There was an altercation in the stands between to fans. One of the fans pulled out a gun and the two men struggled. The weapon discharged once and the bullet struck Joe Smith in the head as he was coming off the field. He was 19-years-old when he died.

I closed the almanac slowly. There was no way for me to determine if this incident actually occurred before I began my story or after. I know that sounds odd since it happened 73 years before I wrote, but Harold Abbott didn't exist prior to two days ago. There is no way I was mistaken about Cobb's statistics, I'm sure of it. So, now I pondered whether any of this would've happened had I not began writing this tale. Would Terrence Henry, Joe Smith and Harold Abbott have lived long lives were it not for me? Would they have even existed were it not for me? My mind was racing trying to contemplate the possibilities.

During the night, an answer came to me. With the line between reality and fantasy all but erased, perhaps what I'd dreamed was true as well. I'm not sure how to say this without coming off completely insane, but I was told in my sleep that night that the recent occurrences were because my perception of greatness was askew. Who told me? I have no idea. Maybe it was an angel, maybe it was a demon or perhaps it was

God Himself. No matter who it was, I took it to heart. When I woke up, I knew I had to alter my perception of greatness somehow.

I did my morning ritual, I had breakfast and I came back to complete my paper. Willie Mays was the first topic of the day and it was an easy one for me. I knew all about Willie, dubbed “The Say Hey Kid”. Willie’s claims to fame were many. In 1951, the New York Giants mounted a highly improbable comeback at the end of the season to overtake the Dodgers. The “Shot heard ‘round the world” was delivered in September of 1951. Bobby Thompson launched a deep fly ball that left the stadium for a home run. Thus prompting announcer Russ Hodges of WMCA-AM Radio, Giants baseball to give the most famous radio call in history: *“There’s a long drive, it’s gonna be, I believe...**THE GIANTS WIN THE PENNANT!! THE GIANTS WIN THE PENNANT! THE GIANTS WIN THE PENNANT! THE GIANTS WIN THE PENNANT! THE GIANTS WIN THE PENNANT! Bobby Thomson hits into the lower deck of the left-field stands! The Giants win the pennant and they’re going crazy, they’re going crazy! Ohhhhh-oh!!!!**”* These words have been the bane of Dodger fans existence ever since. The Giants went on to lose the 1951 World Series to the New York Yankees four games to two. I realize that has no real bearing, but being a Yankees fan I had to add it for spice!

Why does this relate to Willie Mays? He was on-deck, he was the next batter due up, when Thompson homered. In 1952 Willie Mays was drafted into the Army despite being the sole provider for his unemployed stepfather, stepbrothers and stepsisters. He missed most of the 1952 season and all of the 1953 season. In 1954 he returned with a vengeance batting .345 with 41 home runs. Most people surmise that had Mays played all of 1952 and 1953 that instead of finishing his career with 660 home runs, he would have broken Babe Ruth’s record of 714.

In addition to being a great hitter, Mays was a tremendous defensive outfielder. In the 1954 World Series against the Cleveland Indians, Cleveland’s Vic Wertz hit a deep fly ball to center field. Mays ran back on the ball, no one in the stadium thought it could be caught. Without looking back, he held out his glove and caught the ball with his back to home plate. This single event in baseball history is referred to simply as, The Catch. The Giants went on to win that World Series and Mays won the Most Valuable Player Award.

Willie’s life off the field was peaceful. He had no real conspiracies to name and his only black mark wasn’t really a black mark at all. When he was asked at his Hall of Fame induction ceremony who the greatest player he ever saw was, he responded; “Not to be bashful but, I was.” This caused some fallout amongst other players and as usual sports writers put a spin on it that he was arrogant. In my opinion, if I were Willie Mays I’d be a little arrogant as well.

I finished writing about Willie very early on Sunday morning. I was excited about the possibility of putting the finishing touches on this story and immediately began writing about Mike Schmidt.

Mike Schmidt played third base for the Philadelphia Phillies throughout his entire eighteen year career. He ended with a career batting average of only .267 however, that wasn’t what defined Schmidt as the greatest third baseman ever. Schmidt was a slugger, he had 548 home runs in his career. When he retired that was seventh best in the history of baseball. Today it still stands as the most home runs by a third baseman.

That still wasn't what made Schmidt the greatest ever. His defense was astounding. He won ten Gold Glove Awards in his career, the Gold Glove is given to the player at each position with the best fielding percentage in the league. In addition he was a three-time Most Valuable Player. In 1980, the Philadelphia Phillies won the World Series. In that World Series, Schmidt hit two home runs and drove in seven runs. He was named the Series Most Valuable Player.

In 1989 Schmidt, who was known to everyone as "Captain Cool" for his coolness towards reporters, got off to a slow start. Consequently, he announced his retirement on May 29. During the press conference, he displayed emotion that no one had ever seen from him previously. He cried throughout and was in tears when he exited the press room. In July of 1989, two months after his retirement, the fans voted him as the starting third baseman in the annual All-Star Game. He is the only player ever to have been voted in as an All-Star after he retired.

In 1995 he was voted into the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame receiving 96.52% of the vote. It was the fourth highest percentage in history at that time. During his induction he expressed his bitterness at the city of Philadelphia. He was always playing in the shadows of a former Phillie named Richie Ashburn who played from 1948 to 1962. Schmidt's less than charming personality, made him less than Philadelphia's favorite son despite his on-field accomplishments. It caused him a great deal of stress, he was often booed at his home ballpark. Since then he has become a popular Philadelphian and those who once placed him in Ashburn's shadow consider him the greatest Phillie ever.

I had the opportunity to watch Mays as a youth, but I had the privilege of watching Schmidt play as I grew older. I followed his career closely and watched him play in Philadelphia's stadium several times. I was even there when his Philadelphia Phillies won the World Series in 1980. As a child I patterned my defense after he and Brooks Robinson. Though I played shortstop, they were my idols.

I finished writing my segment on Mike Schmidt just after noon. I decided to take a walk and get some spring air into my lungs before I wrote the final pages tying everything together. Looking back, I am still unsure of why I did this. I certainly didn't need to, in fact I really wanted to complete the paper for my class. But, I guess just as before, someone else had other ideas and they compelled me to take a walk.

A few blocks away from campus I saw a baseball game. I strolled over and asked one of the men there what was happening. He informed me that it was an exhibition game between last year's Little League All-Stars and last year's Pony League All-Stars.

"Wow, 12-year-olds vs. 15 year-olds? This should be a massacre." I quipped.

"Let's see if you think that after you watch Kevin Morris pitch for the Little Leaguers." He responded and walked away smiling.

I climbed up into the bleachers anxiously. I always enjoyed watching the kids play even after my playing days were finished. The Pony League All-Stars were in the field first. As I expected, the 15-year-old pitcher, whom I was told was named Mark, got the first three batters out quickly.

It was the bottom half of the first inning that filled me with awe. Kevin Morris pitched for the Little League team and struck out all three batters he faced. He had an amazing curve ball, a slider, a change up and a dominating fast ball. This is unheard of

for a kid his age. Generally at 12-years-old a pitcher has a fastball, a changeup and a developing curve ball that is both easily recognizable and hittable.

In addition to being a dominating pitcher, he was a pretty good hitter. In the top of the second he hit a fast ball over the center field fence giving his team a 1-0 lead. In the second inning, he struck out the next three hitters as well. The third inning, the same routine. Three batters came up for the 15-year-olds, three batters struck out. In the fourth inning one kid managed to hit a ground ball to first base against him, the other two struck out.

The game was seven innings long and when it was over, the Little League team comprised of all 12-year-olds won 1-0. Kevin Morris did not allow a hit to kids three years older than he. He struck out 18 batters out of 21 he faced and he mustered three hits in the game.

I, along with many, waited to congratulate him on his performance. The same man I'd spoken to before the game approached me with a huge smile. "So, what'd you think?"

"Phenomenal" I replied. "This kid has an amazing talent.

"Told you. I've been around baseball for thirty years and I have never seen a kid this young with such development in his pitches."

"Neither have I. I played until I was 18 and got injured. I don't think that I would've been able to hit this kid at 18."

"It's funny you should say that. He pitched an exhibition against the local high school team. He only allowed four hits over three innings and no one scored. He struck out six of them. One kid, James Mallory, has a full scholarship to play at the University of Miami and he struck out once against Kevin."

"I'll bet that embarrassed the hell out of him." I joked.

"Not at all. He told the local press, I'm just one in a long line of guys that Kevin is going to show up in his career."

"Sounds like we'll be seeing Kevin in the major leagues in about six years." When I said those words a deep feeling of dread came over me. I had no idea why at the time though.

"You most likely will. I'm a scout for the New York Yankees." The man said and handed me his business card. "Myself and ten other major league teams have been watching him since he was eleven. Without a doubt the greatest natural pitcher I have ever seen."

I was still stuck on the words, "New York Yankees." I didn't really hear the rest of what he said for several minutes.

"Are you okay?" He asked. "You look a little flushed."

"Sorry. It's just that I'm a huge Yankee fan and to be here talking to a representative of the best sports organization in baseball is overwhelming."

He laughed and replied, "You can tell a true baseball fan by the NY on their cap."

"I couldn't agree more." I responded.

We shook hands and said goodbye. I moved in the direction of young Kevin Morris. The crowd had thinned out considerably and I was able to get to him with relative ease. He looked up at me with a huge smile on his face when I approached.

I shook his hand gently, I was leery from the past few days' experiences and did not want to risk hurting his pitching hand. "That was fantastic." I began.

“Thank you.” He said still smiling.

“Congratulations on such an impressive performance. I hope to be watching you pitch for the Yankees someday.”

“That’d be awesome.” He replied.

By his juvenile response and giddiness, I realized just how young he was. A detail that had actually escaped me before. I smiled at him and wished him the best of luck in his baseball career. Then I shook his father’s hand and congratulated him as well.

When I was walking away, I heard his father tell him to go on out to the car because he wanted to talk to the coach.

I thought nothing of it until a minute or so later when I heard the squealing of a car’s brakes followed by a thump and screams.

I looked out toward the parking lot and saw a kid lying in the road. I ran in that direction, then stopped about twenty feet away. It was Kevin Morris and his body was mangled badly. I could see his eyes open but glazed over. Blood was everywhere, his skull was cracked open and I could see a faint trace of gray matter. I turned away and vomited. Then I walked a few steps and fainted.

When I came to, I was hoping that just as before I’d find out it was all just a horrible nightmare. Or at least I’d be able to tell myself that. Not this time. I woke up and the crowd was gathered around Kevin Morris’ body. A couple people were helping me up and speaking, but I heard nothing. I was in shock. When they helped me to my feet, I thanked them and assured them I was fine. Then I walked away from the park, back in the direction of the campus.

On the way home, the visit I’d had the previous night finally sunk in. The voice in my dream, or perhaps a nightmare, said “Altered perception of greatness can end your torment.” I honestly thought that I had altered my perception of greatness before I began writing about Willie Mays. I was wrong. Yes, I had realized that there was more to greatness than career stats and lifetime achievement. However, I didn’t realize just how greatness should be measured. It took watching Kevin Morris pitch before that realization sunk in. Ultimately, I now understand that it was his demise that made everything clear in my mind.

I returned to my dorm room and took two caffeine pills to ensure that I finished the story without anymore tragedy. The last part of the story had changed drastically from the time I left my room and my return. For the purposes of an example, here is the final pages of the story that I turned in on Monday, April 5, 1982.

When I began this essay, my intention was to prove beyond all doubt that the players named within were the greatest to ever play the game. I think I have indeed shown that they accumulated some of the most eye-popping, jaw-dropping statistics in the history of the game. But are they really the greatest to ever play the game? The answer to this question is no longer as black and white as I thought it was just a week ago. To answer that question, you must first define greatness. If you define greatness solely on numbers, then indeed these were the greatest. However, if you are of that opinion, as I once was, I truly feel sorry for you.

Greatness, as I have learned, is not in a long career of consistency alone. Greatness is inside. For example, Henry Abbott pitched one game in the major leagues. His line for that game was zero runs allowed, two hits, one walk and nine strikeouts. There are two footnotes to these statistics as well. In that one game he struck out Ty

Cobb swinging four times. He is responsible for four of the six times that Cobb did this in his career. He only pitched one game because the game he pitched was against Detroit and Ty Cobb became so angry after striking out a third time that he stabbed Abbott in the chest with his cleat. Less than an hour later, Henry Abbott died from the wounds he sustained. He was 18 years old.

Terrence "Terry" Henry only played one game as well and not in the major leagues. Instead, he played in the Negro Leagues. In one game he hit five home runs off of the great Satchel Paige. He was murdered later that night by two racist white men in an alley beside a diner in Homestead, Pennsylvania. Terry was devoted to religion. He spent his nights reading the Bible and praying. The two men who murdered him never spent one night in jail because evidence mysteriously vanished before their trial. He was 16 years old.

Joe Smith played one game for the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1909. In that game he displayed more defensive brilliance than any player ever. He holds the record for the longest in-flight throw in major league baseball history. That ball traveled 400 feet in the air, bounced once, landed right in the catcher's mitt and resulted in a runner being tagged out at home plate. In the ninth inning he was coming off the field when a fight broke out in the stands. Two spectators scuffled, one pulled out a gun. During their skirmish, one single shot was fired. It struck and killed Joe Smith on the baseball field. He was 19 years old.

Kevin Morris was a 12-year-old phenomenon. In a game Saturday, April 3, 1982 he pitched against a team filled with 15-year-old all-stars. He allowed no hits and struck out 18 of the 21 batters he faced. At twelve he had pinpoint command of four different pitches, a fastball, changeup, curveball and a slider. Never before has there ever been a ballplayer his age with command of more than two pitches. Twenty minutes after the game against the 15-year-old all-stars Kevin Morris was struck by a car and killed.

Were these for players among the greatest to ever play the game? I say yes because had they not been struck down at a young age, it's inconceivable what each of them may have accomplished. Are these the only four who belong amongst the elite? Not even close. Since Abner Doubleday invented the game of baseball in 1839, or at least he's credited for it, there have most assuredly been hundreds if not thousands of players just like these four. All of them having two things in common, lots of heart and a love for the game.

Somewhere out there is an eight-year-old who is smashing the ball over the fence. Or perhaps a ten-year-old who is striking out every batter he faces. The next time you are near a park and kids are playing ball, take the time to stop and watch. You might just be watching the greatest player to ever play the game.

When our papers were handed back on Wednesday, April 7, 1982 Professor Walton asked me to come up front. She handed me my paper and told me to read the last ten pages aloud to the class. I dutifully acknowledged. It took me several minutes and I never looked up from it once. When I was done and looked at the class, there were only a few dry eyes. I turned to Professor Walton and she too was teary-eyed.

She asked me how I was able to write such a soulful paper when I had no true appreciation of literature. I told her, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times. I was able to attend games in which I was able to watch some of the legends I'd known since I was a child. For an added bonus I was treated to seeing true greatness shine from

unexpected sources. In the blink of an eye, that greatness was taken away tragically. I now fully comprehend what Dickens meant, it was the best of times and it was the worst of times.”

She looked at me curiously and asked what I meant by “I was able to attend games in which I was able to watch some of the legends I’d known since I was a child”?

I smiled at her and said, “It’s amazing what the mind can perceive as reality.”

She accepted that response and said, “You get an A+.”

I returned to my seat. Although I normally would’ve been thrilled to receive an A+ in any English class, this one came at such a high price I couldn’t even muster a smile.

In your mind you are probably trying to determine what was real, what wasn’t. Could this truly have happened to someone?

I pondered these questions night and day for weeks after the events occurred. It was April 23 of the same year when an answer presented itself most unexpectedly. I was reading HG Wells’ *The Time Machine*, of all things, when my study partner noticed what appeared to be a magazine sticking out of my mattress.

She pulled it out curiously, fully expecting to find pornographic material. What she was instead could be considered horrorgraphic material is there were such a word. It was a baseball program from Detroit dated June 6, 1913. I looked at it in disbelief, both the Detroit Tigers and Washington Senators rosters were listed. The name that caught my attention the most was listed near the bottom of the Washington Senators roster, Henry Abbott.

I asked my study partner to stand up and lifted the mattress. There were three more baseball programs under there. Each appeared dated, but in nearly perfect condition. I glanced through each of them, August 3, 1934 Homestead Greys. The entire roster was listed, including Terrence Abbott. The next day I gave this program to George Calwell. He and I remained close friends until his death in 1988. In his will, he bequeathed me that very same program.

Also under the bed was a program dated May 9, 1926. It was from the St Louis Browns. I looked at it and my eyes glared with anger when I came to the name Rogers Hornsby. Of all my trips back in the past, the trip to St. Louis hurt me the most. True, I have no proof Hornsby was involved and a man is innocent until proven guilty but given the lessons I was learning and the event that occurred it’s hard for me to accept that Hornsby was innocent.

The final program was, of course, from April 17, 1909. I smiled when I saw the name, Joe Smith listed. Though it pained me to remember that his life ended way too soon, I could see his face. He beamed with happiness and his eyes glowed so brightly they could probably light a darkened room. He truly loved the game and I was proud to know that I watched him play. That thought carried over to all of the others as well. I was proud to have watched them shine, playing the game they loved.

Not that I needed more verification, I pulled out my wallet and looked inside. There were four ticket stubs tucked in the folds. I still have the stubs and the programs today. Whenever I lose focus on what true greatness is I look at them and I’m slapped back to reality.

To this day, I still blame myself for Kevin Morris’ death as well as Henry Abbott, Terrence Henry, the young man in St Louis and Joe Smith. Perhaps it is wrong

of me to take the blame for their deaths, after all, they say that life and ultimately death is all a part of God's plan. If that is true then instead of me being to blame for their deaths, their deaths were a device by which God taught me a harsh lesson. However you view it, I most assuredly learned a lesson in that four day span and after reading these pages, I hope you have to.

If you still think greatness lies within the numbers, I wish you the best of luck when you close your eyes tonight.

The End