

The Curator Says...Ken Autrey's refreshing account of his freshman year in baseball will remind readers of their own awkward attempts to engage in unsuited behaviors. What is so good in the story is the author's honesty. Although he dearly loved the game of baseball, he came to realize that he would be much better off spending his time in the library.

My Final Baseball Season

Ken Autrey

As a freshman in college, I had no business going out for the baseball team. Several of my moderately athletic friends challenged me to join them for tryouts one early spring afternoon, although I hadn't played organized ball in several years. My high school had not fielded a team, and my summer American Legion hardball days were well in the past. I was enticed partly because back then freshmen didn't play for the varsity but had a separate team, so I figured I had at least a slim chance of making the cut.

At that point in my grueling first year of college, I was struggling with my Humanities class, not to mention the headache of Chemistry. I would have done better to spend my afternoons in the library rather than on the baseball diamond.

The tryouts that first afternoon turned out to be mostly try-ons. Before hitting the field we were issued threadbare practice uniforms and worn cleats. Once I ventured onto the diamond, I saw that there were barely enough of us to fill out a full squad; it became obvious that unless I wore my glove backwards or held the bat upside down, I would make the team.

I convinced myself that a good workout every day in a sweaty flannel uniform was just what I needed to clear my head and help me focus on my studies at night. Instead, I soon found that after two-hours of exertion in the sun, it was a short hop between dinner and bed.

As the days wore on and we approached our first game, I slowly got into shape and was usually able to salvage a couple hours for study in the evening before turning in. Still, my grades were terrible, and I began to wonder whether I should quit the team. My hitting was never anything to write home (or to run home) about, and to make matters worse, I was having trouble throwing. I was not a starter, but Coach used me as a kind of utility infielder, playing me at either second or third. I was having trouble rediscovering my natural throwing motion. I couldn't seem to follow through. In baseball lingo, this is known as "failing to give it up" or "pulling the string" on a throw. Try as I might, I could not loosen up and get comfortable as a fielder.

New York Yankees second baseman Chuck Knoblauch, once Rookie of the Year and an All-Star for several seasons, suddenly in 2000 lost his throw. Overnight, he went from being a Golden Glove fielder to a complete disaster. When he handled a ground ball, his short throw to first was liable to wind up in the dugout or the bleacher seats. No amount of

instruction, practice, or therapy helped. Sportswriters said he had “the yips.” Eventually this drove him into an early retirement.

I would never compare myself to Knoblauch. I never showed much promise to begin with, and I certainly had no brilliant past to look back on. It’s just that many years after my own ignominious stab at collegiate ball, when the former all-star Yankee began to choke, I could sympathize. My throwing didn’t attract much attention one way or another because I seldom played unless we were way behind or way ahead in the late innings. I could usually coax the ball to first, but it never felt easy or natural, and I felt self-conscious about my motion, as though, God forbid, I was throwing “like a girl.” These days, of course, no respectable woman softball player throws anything like a girl.

It is telling that I remember no moments of glory from that spring, no significant hits or razzle-dazzle double plays. Back then, our team played an abbreviated schedule and even struggled against some of the better high school squads in the area. My only specific batter’s memory is a couple ugly strikeouts at the hands of a high school hurler from Gastonia whose curve ball arced like a speeding boomerang on its way into the catcher’s mitt. We found out later that he had signed a handsome contract with the Pittsburgh Pirates.

There were players on our freshman team who later went on to distinguish themselves in varsity baseball, but I knew my career was over after our mercifully short season. My foray into college ball was a challenge that was beyond me, a learning experience that probably wasn’t worth it. I’d have done better if I had spent more time reading my Humanities assignments. I struck out there too. But that’s another story.

Ken Autrey Says... I taught English at Francis Marion University in South Carolina from 1989 to 2011. Following retirement, my wife Janne Debes and I moved to Auburn, my hometown. Previously, I served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ghana, a middle school teacher in upstate New York, and a writing instructor at Tougaloo College in Mississippi. In 1996-97 I was a visiting professor at Hiroshima University in Japan. In 2012, I conducted summer writing workshops in Guangzhou, China. I have been active in the OLLI program since retiring to Auburn in 2011. My poems and essays have appeared in various periodicals and anthologies. My poetry chapbook, *Pilgrims*, was published in 2010 by Main Street Rag, and in 2013, Longleaf Press published my chapbook, *Rope Lesson*. More recently, Solomon and George published *The Wake of the Year*, a chapbook of my poetry paired with art by local painter Gloe Herbert Dyne. Janne and I have two daughters (Nell and Tess) and six grandchildren.