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The man I call Coach Crass was a pathologically competitive sports attorney who counted major league All-Star Randy Johnson among his clients. Seven of us gathered in his suburban mansion to choose little league teams from a list of sixth grade boys. I knew enough to create rosters and buy snacks. But a player draft? Was this normal or was our wealthy host already rigging the system?

The list of names made the rounds, Crass interjecting crude comments about young mothers, players, their appearance or performance in other sports. The teams seemed evenly balanced, with two exceptions. Crass built a dream team that would go on to play college ball. I went home with a roster for the Bad News Bears. I disliked Coach Crass intensely by the end of the evening, and made it my goal to beat his team.

It wasn't surprising that Crass snagged New York team jerseys with no discussion. We were given the Reds. As luck would have it, our first opponents were the Yankees. Crass bought his players new leather bat bags and matching batting gloves. Our equipment was dragged into the dugout and dumped from dusty canvas.

Crass's son had been professionally trained for several years. Crass counted his pitches and tracked the number of innings he played in a week. He was notoriously wild.

The details of our first matchup are unimportant. We were routed and in several cases, injured. Bobby Sellers took a glancing line drive to his head that knocked him down, dazed and fighting back tears. Crass Junior continually hit players in the head, but batting helmets prevented at-bats from turning into emergency room visits. Tim Anderson dove for a line drive

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about a half second late and spat dirt for the next two innings. It should be noted that Anderson honed this skill during our short season, mastering diving catches from which he was somehow able to spring to his feet and rocket a ball to either first or second base. It was his superpower.

We lost our first game 17 to zero.

Rotating the boys through all positions gave them a chance to discover new skills. We had several good pitchers, my son among them. Sellers, who had a surprising lack of fear considering his early season blow to the head was a marvel behind the plate. Catcher's gear was his shield of invincibility. Anderson could play either third or shortstop. But still, we only won a single game all season.

We eventually found ourselves at the bottom of the standings. Our second match with the New Yorkers was our last game of the season. The boys looked downhearted. We huddled.

"We're doing something different today," I began. "No changing positions."

The boys looked uncertain, but I had their attention.

"Dennis, you're at first."

"Yes!" he ran down the baseline and took his place behind the bag.

"Sellers, catcher. Gear up."

"Ok coach!"

I looked at my son. He looked up at me expectantly.

"Can you pitch the whole game?" I asked.

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His eyes lit up, but ever the serious one, he simply nodded and trotted to the mound. I hadn't pitched him all week. I was saving him for this.

"Gray, Anderson, Bergland. Third, Short, Second," I continued.

I placed willing volunteers in the field. With any luck they wouldn't be needed.

It was game time, Reds in the field, the home team. Coach Crass strutted along his dugout, laughing and spitting sunflower seeds at his players. The teams appeared evenly matched. Surprising perhaps to Crass, who began to pay attention when we finished the third inning with the Reds up one to nothing. Losing a game would have no effect on the standings, but losing a game to the worst team in the league would be an embarrassment.

Crass stopped pacing and looked out over the field, his fingers threaded through the dugout's chain link as he studied our players. He turned his head, muttered something to his assistant coach and then shook his head. The Reds were playing position.

We scored again in the bottom of the fourth, and then struck out the Yankees side in the top of the fifth. The first Yankee batter to the plate in the sixth inning went down swinging. Crass called time out and sauntered over to me.

"How many innings has he pitched this week?" he asked me, gesturing toward the mound.

"Who, him?" I said, glancing at my son who stood stone faced, twisting the ball in his glove. I winked and smiled before looking back at Crass.

"Yeah, how many?" he said.

“Let me see,” I said, looking at my clipboard unnecessarily. I traced the innings from previous games with my pen as if counting and then decisively jabbed the ballpoint into the paper like an exclamation point.

“Yep. Now I remember. None.”

His look was fierce, but he had nothing. He turned in disgust for the walk back to his dugout. He knew he’d been suckered.

A quick change in order brought the best Yankees hitters to bat. I nodded at our pitcher. He nodded back.

“Ready in the field,” I shouted to the Reds.

The second batter crowded the plate. He ran up the count and then leaned into a pitch. He rubbed his shoulder where the ball struck and grimaced, but was unable to suppress a wide grin as he jogged slowly to first.

The first strike took the next batter by surprise. On the second pitch, the force of his swing sent his bat flying. The third base coach ducked and jumped aside. The batter glanced at his glaring coach. Our team laughed in the field.

“Guys!” I shouted, shaking my head.

The third pitch struck the bat with a loud crack as a cloud of dust rose from the scrambling batter’s feet. A screaming grounder headed between third and second. Anderson dove, snagged the ball on a shallow bounce, leapt to his feet and fired it to Bergland, crouching

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at second with one foot on the bag. Bergland pivoted and fired the ball to Dennis at first with major league accuracy.

“You’re out!” yelled the Ump at first, motioning the same result to second base. It was our only double play of the season.

A rare cheer went up in the bleachers from the Reds’ parents. Most of them had come only because it was the final game. Coach Crass, mouth agape, threw a bat bag against the wall of the dugout. The sides were retired.

The Yankees put a man on base during the seventh inning and advanced him to second. With one out, the next batter connected with a low inside pitch and sent the ball to deep center field. Mikey Gross tracked it back to the fence and made the catch. The man on second tagged up and rounded third as Gross hesitated slightly, gauging distance, then stepped forward and launched the ball toward Sellers at home.

In the three seconds that missile was in the air, time slowed. I glanced at home, at the runner speeding toward the plate, at Gross in the outfield, arm frozen in air where the ball had left his hand, and finally at the arcing ball, flying with purpose, with eyes, its trajectory taking it over the heads of our infielders like some perfect physics demonstration, into the waiting glove of our invincible catcher who tagged the runner and held onto the ball amid a cloud of dust and flailing spikes.

“YOU’RE OUT!” yelled the ump. It was a beautiful thing.

We held our opponents to one run during the final innings and scored one more of our own. The final score was three to one. When they were least expecting it, we beat the Yankees.

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The boys ran to the mound after the final pitch of the game, a strike, and melded into a bouncing, shouting red molecule. A standing ovation from parents on both teams paid tribute to our achievement. I looked to the bleachers, smiled and nodded with a tip of my cap.

After an eventual lineup and player parade, with “good game” and high fives exchanged, we packed up our equipment and sipped juice boxes in the dugout. The boys were jubilant. Sadly, Crass refused to shake my hand, and I overheard an exchange of comments as he walked away.

“I hope he enjoyed the win. We let them have it,” he said to a father of one of the boys on their team.

“That’s bull Crass!” he replied. “They had you for lunch!”

We beat the unbeatable Yankees, the dream team. And although winning isn’t always everything, sometimes it’s really nice. That’s just reality in the competition called life. And occasionally its not the things you get that are your reward, it’s the things you don’t, because I can honestly say, looking back on my life, that handshake I was refused was the best one I never got.