



ROOKIE BLUE

by
Andy Smith

The first pitch of the game was outside for ball one. The veteran Martinez steps off the mound and glares in at the ump. A few pitches later and the batter flies out to left.

The next batter draws a walk on a few close calls, as the ump behind the plate draws more glares from the Montreal pitcher.

The third batter steps up to the plate and the first pitch is just inside for ball one. Martinez stomps off the mound, mumbling in disgust as some 35,000 fans howl in his support. The umpire yells out to the pitcher to 'knock it off!'.

The ensuing pitch was outside for ball two and Martinez goes wild, throwing up his arms as he storms off the mound delivering verbal bullets towards the ump, who takes off his mask, and steps out from behind the plate yelling at the disgruntled pitcher to get back into the game. Martinez ignores the warnings as he continues his verbal assault until the umpire has heard enough and sends the enraged pitcher to an early shower.

Larry Vanover is a rookie umpire behind the plate for the first time of the '93 season. The honeymoon was over in just twelve pitches.

For the next twenty-four hours, ESPN lead a media blitz that would analyze the four disputed pitches that resulted in Montreal's star pitcher getting the rest of the night off. It was clear that the rookie umpire had made the right call on all four pitches.

"An umpire has to walk a very tight rope in a situation like that." Larry explains,
" Your credibility is immediately challenged, and how you handle it can have an impact

on your job for a long time. If you handle it too aggressive or too soft, you can blow your credibility with the players and the coaches, which could take a long time to recover."

Welcome to the 'Big Show', Mr. Umpire!

It was April, 1992, when Larry was tuning up for his 12th year as a professional umpire, his fourth at the AAA level. He was excited about this year because Ed Vargo, the Executive Director of Major League Umpires assured him that he would be used more this year at the major league level. Larry had been called up a few times during the '91 season, and Vargo felt that there would be even more opportunities for Larry that summer.

It was early in May when Larry got the call. Vargo told him to work the game on Sunday, take Monday off to get things in order and report to Wrigley Field for Tuesday's game. He was also told to expect to spend the better part of the remaining season up in the majors.

Fate sometimes wears a peculiar face. While running his errands on Monday, he was involved in an accident that would leave him clinging to life in a Denver hospital instead of on a plane headed for Chicago.

"It was pretty rough. The first night, they told my wife they didn't think I would make it through the night. When I did, they told her they didn't think I would ever walk again. By the time I left the hospital, they were saying that I might walk again, but that certainly, I would not get to a level of being able to perform as an umpire at a major league level." Larry recalls.

"To be an umpire, you must learn to keep focused and give total concentration to your job. During this time, I used that ability to become so focused on getting healthy again, I didn't even stop to think about the missed opportunity to work in the majors." Larry reflects with a sense of relief, "When you come that close to death, your priorities can certainly change quickly."

Three weeks later, Larry and his wife, Dianne, flew back to their home in Nashville, where he began a grueling rehabilitation schedule at a local hospital and in his home.

"I got to where I could move forward pretty well, but with my pelvis broken in three places and most of my ribs broken in the back, turning from side to side was a

nightmare. I would spend hours lying on the floor stretching and exercising each day. When I wasn't doing that, Dianne would get me outside for a walk around the neighborhood. By fall, I was beginning to feel like a real person again."

He was sent to Arizona to umpire in the Arizona fall league and see if he could withstand the rigors of calling a ball game again.

"They weren't sure I was going to be physically far enough to call a ball game," Larry says with a hint of a smile, "My supervisor told me that if he had not known ahead of time, he would have never guessed that I had been near death only a few short months ago. It was everything I could do to just smile without letting on to the excruciating pain that was pulsating inside of me. I felt like an old man out there, but it was so great to be out on the field again and I wasn't going to let anything stop me."

He continued his intensive exercise program through the winter back in Nashville and was full of enthusiasm when he reported for the most important spring training of his career.

Spring training, 1993, was truly a unique opportunity for the men in blue. With the expansion of Colorado and Florida, and the retirement of Doug Harvey and Dutch Rennert, Ed Vargo was facing an unprecedented task of having to fill six positions on the major league umpire crews.

"Once you make it to AAA, you can wait years for one or two positions to open up in the majors." explains Larry, "Coming into spring training with six positions up for grabs was really unheard of."

Fifteen AAA umpires with some limited major league experience were brought together and told that they would be competing for the six open positions during the spring.

"It was really tough. We had all worked together before and knew that each one of us deserved to be called up. We also knew that those who would not get the call would likely not see another opportunity to reach the majors any time soon. I think the accident really helped me, though. I was so excited about being healthy and able to go out on the field and call a game, I didn't even think about the pressure of competing for those six positions. All I wanted to do was go out there and call a good game every day and let fate take care of itself."

On March 31, fate did take care of itself, as Larry found out that he was one of the six that would be assigned to a major league crew. After twelve years of honing his skills in the minors, Larry Vanover had finally realized his dream of becoming a major league umpire.

After all his hard work, it seemed a bit ironic that Larry's first assignment would be a week's vacation.

"While everyone else was headed for opening day, I was headed back to Nashville." says the rookie with an accepting grin. "When you are a rookie ump, you don't have a lot of say in the vacation schedules. You pretty much take the leftovers. With all the excitement of opening day, you don't have a lot of calls for a vacation on the first week of the season."

So it wasn't until the second week of the season before Larry took the field with his crew lead by veteran Harry Wendlestedt, in Montreal. It was the third game of the series when the infamous Martinez incident occurred.

"I don't know of any umpire who takes pleasure in throwing someone out of the game. Our job is to control the flow of the game. When you throw someone out of the game, you break up the flow and create an atmosphere of chaos, which is exactly what an umpire wants to avoid. But you must take charge and control the game, even if it may create a little chaos at the time."

Larry certainly made a first impression on that night. With all the media attention given the Martinez ejection, Vanover established himself as an umpire who would not hesitate in taking control of any given situation.

His years of work within the minor leagues certainly helped make his rookie year a bit easier, too.

"I had already worked with many of the ballplayers and coaches before, so I wasn't that overwhelmed about working with them now in the majors. Most of them knew who I was and how I called a game, so I didn't really have that much of a problem adjusting to the majors."

Most people don't realize the pressures of being a major league umpire. If you are a rookie player, you can afford to take a few years to establish yourself at the major league level. A rookie umpire, on the other hand, is expected to be perfect on the first

night and improve every day thereafter. And this doesn't even account for the fact that you are also adjusting from the minor league format of using three umpires each game, to the major league format of using four man crews. It is a completely different approach in positioning yourself on every play.

"I found that being out of position was a lot worse than making a bad call," recalls Larry, "If you make a close call but are in the right position to make the call, they won't argue with you nearly as much as if you are out of position. Baseball is a game with very small margins. You simply cannot make those close calls unless you position yourself properly on every play."

Another big adjustment from the minors to the majors was the traveling. In the majors, an umpire crew cannot work the same team in consecutive series, so the umpires do a lot of zig-zagging across the country.

"You can work in San Diego, then on to Houston, then to Montreal. You get your schedule about a month in advance and every umpire is responsible for making their own reservations for travel and hotels. Needless to say, you don't have a lot of free time on your hands."

But Larry survived his rookie year without causing much chaos. He made all his reservations, was in the right position on most every call and seemed to gain the respect as a rookie umpire from most of the players and coaches.

From standing on the field in Riverfront Stadium, recalling his dad bringing him to games as a youth growing up in Owensboro, Kentucky, to standing on the tradition-rich soil of Wrigley Field. From being there the night a young St. Louis player hit four home runs in one game, to calling the plays at first base the night the Phillies clinched their division. From that stormy twelve pitches in Montreal, to the last pitch of the season in Florida. Larry Vanover became a major league umpire.

"Overall, I'm very pleased with how my first year turned out. To think that thirteen years ago, I was just one of hundreds of others starting out in umpire school on a quest to becoming a major league umpire. The odds are slim to none, yet here I sit as a major league umpire. So much of it is just pure luck."

Maybe so. But we're talking about a guy who doctors weren't sure was going to make it through the night.

