~ CHARLIE ~

A rainy May day and my thoughts turn to Charlie. Why is that? It's been some thirty-eight years since I last saw Charlie. Thirty-eight years–a life time—mine, not Charlie's.

The first thing I remember about Charlie is his hair: brown, long and straight, neither coarse nor fine, wore it down to his shoulders. Not strange by 1972 standards perhaps, but it was downright unorthodox on the ball diamond then. Baseball coaches in 1972 came of age in the Forties and Fifties and early Sixties, when crew-cuts were the rage, before the mop-headed Beatles took center stage and changed men's hairstyles. Those coaches did not understand or permit long hair streaming down from under their ballplayers' caps. But Charlie proved to be an exception, a long-haired, teenage rebel who reflected his times, not only in his hair style but also in his attitude. To say that Charlie was feisty was like saying Wild Bill Hickock was wild. Yes, Charlie looked like a girl when he played, but you better not tell him that unless you were prepared to defend yourself.

I first ran into Charlie on our high school baseball diamond. Oh, I might have passed him in the school hallways a couple times, but I didn't know him. Charlie had short hair then, to match his stature. He was still a sophomore, two years behind me. Charlie really didn't stand out, until he got on the ball field. He was eager, a hustler and very intense. His skills, God bless him, were minimal, but his fire and desire were unmatched. Nobody wanted to perform better than Charlie did for himself. And if he flubbed a grounder or misfired on a throw across the infield to first, no one had to yell at him. Charlie was already dropping his head, kicking the dirt and berating himself in a string of curse words you could not imagine. When the coach told Charlie to shut it and clean up his language, I could see Charlie muttering under his breath. Even a novice lip reader could interpret Charlie's profane mutterings.

At sixteen, Charlie looked a little weird. Maybe it was because he had yet to grow out of his pimply adolescence. He was not a bad looking kid, just weird and short. With a less than strong chin, Charlie had sloping brown eyebrows and eyes that penetrated like hazel brown coals. However, the thing you first noticed about Charlie was his proboscis. His nose seemed

about two sizes too big for his frame. You thought that maybe the rest of his body would catch up to it in a year or two, as he grew. His weak chin gave the impression of Charlie being a weak guy. That impression would be mistaken, because the only other things as big, or bigger, than Charlie's nose were his mouth and his heart. The kid did have a mouth on him. He was, in fact, an older version of Tanner, the shortstop of "The Bad News Bears" fame.

Charlie played shortstop on the JayVee team my last year of school when I played on the varsity. About half way through the year a curious incident occurred. Half the varsity quit when they refused the coach's command to run wind sprints. Due to a lack of pitching, the team had been lousy that year. (In fact, we had the first losing baseball team in the school's brief history.) The losing ticked everybody off and the coach wanted to do something about it, by enforcing a long-standing but seldom enforced rule: Run five, sixty-yard wind sprints for every towel the coach picked up off the locker room floor. He had picked up six towels before he left one night. That meant thirty sprints for each varsity ballplayer. The players claimed the track team had come in from a meet after the ball players and left the towels on the floor. A Mexican stand-off ensued. Neither the coach nor his players would budge. When the coach gave his ultimatum, run the sprints or pack your bags, eight guys packed their bags and walked. But this was good news for some varsity benchwarmers and a few JayVee players who the coach brought up to play on the varsity. One of them was Charlie.

It was painful to watch Charlie play short then. The ball diamond was too big for his arm. Guys would beat out routine grounders to him for base hits. Charlie was beside himself for his lack of execution. It wasn't his fault, he just needed another year of growth, but Charlie did not want to hear that excuse. Like a Jack Russell Terrier, Charlie was fearless and he didn't realize he wasn't a big dog yet. Finally and mercifully, the coach moved Charlie to second base, where he had to learn to turn the double play. Every time Charlie screwed up, he got down on himself, but he learned. By the close of the season, everyone could see that once Charlie grew, he would be an asset to the varsity the next year.

I didn't see Charlie until the last week of May the following spring. We were both playing Legion ball together for the summer. Charlie had grown

in more ways than one. And while he still looked like he could grow into his nose a bit more, Charlie stood about five foot, eight inches tall and his straight, brown hair hung down to his shoulders. As I said, you just did not see long-haired guys under baseball caps out on the ball field in those days, especially Legion ballplayers, but, on Charlie, the long hair suited him. I seemed to recall Charlie also procured a pair of white baseball spikes, breaking another time-honored baseball tradition. Spikes, until then, had followed Henry Ford's tradition regarding automobiles, when he once had advised you could have any color car you wanted so long as it was black. The only players wearing white spikes in 1972 were the World Champion Oakland A's and they wore them as a team, not as individuals.

Not only had Charlie grown, but he also had improved tremendously as a ballplayer. He could make the throw from short without difficulty now. In his loping fashion with his trademark hair flapping out behind him, he gobbled up ground balls with relative ease. I say "with relative ease," because the way Charlie always fought against himself in everything he did, nothing he did looked easy. As the shortstop, Charlie took command of the infield as naturally as Patton had taken command of the Third Army in World War II. I could not get over how much the kid had matured in a year. Of course, he still had the mouth, but now he did not restrict its use to himself. He'd tell me or anyone else when they screwed up. But Charlie was also the first one at your side to defend you against insults, real or imagined, from any opponents. Always ready for a scrap and, cocky now, Charlie stomped over the field as if he were a giant, with his long hair rolling from side to side against his neck.

Charley's batting style always gave me a kick. Previously, he had been lucky if he could draw a walk or get hit by a pitch (which was still his favorite means of procuring first base), but now he could actually hit the ball once in a while. For Charlie, each at bat was his own personal war, not only against the pitcher but against himself as well. He stood right on top of the plate with his feet wide apart and his bat over his shoulder almost parallel to the ground, hiding most of his face inside the crook of his left elbow, daring the pitcher to hit him. But that was only for a second, because, once he set himself, Charlie started shuffling both feet, as if he were impatient to go to the bathroom. He used a wood-chopping swing that Paul Bunyan would have admired. Charlie was baseball's forerunner of Happy Gilmore. He shuffled both feet, sliding up in the

batter's box towards the pitcher, before he flailed away. You got the impression Charlie would rather have taken a spade or anything else he could seize to clobber the ball (which he rarely did). You actually felt badly that Charlie couldn't find something a little larger than his bat to use to attack the pitch. Usually after each delivery, Charlie would wind up out of the batter's boxing, shaking his hair and cursing the pitcher for some imagined sin. Charlie had no qualms about taking one for the team. Sometimes after a beaning, induced by his excessive crowding of home plate, he would drop his bat and advance on the mound in retaliation. Once, his aggressive actions prompted a bench-clearing brawl, ejections and a forfeit.

Charlie was a bit of a hothead on the diamond, no question about that. However, when you played with him, he made you and his teammates feel part of an invisible bond. No matter what happened, win, lose or rain out, you knew Charlie was with you and vice-versa. Charlie wasn't the slickest of fielders, but he would make the routine play and get the all important third out to end the inning and get you out of a jam. He didn't hit for much of an average or drive in many runs, except when the game was on the line and you really needed one. Then, if he failed to induce a beaning or a walk, somehow Charlie would manage to snake a ball though the infield or bloop one over it by sheer force of will, certainly not by any kind of refined batting technique but rather in spite of the lack of one. He wasn't what you would call fast, couldn't steal a base, unless the game was tied or you were down a run late. Then, from his lead off first base, Charlie would get into a jawin' match with the pitcher and catcher and rattle them so, that he'd take off for second and prompt an angered, hurried throw from the catcher that would wind up in the outfield with Charlie more than likely standing in scoring position on second, if not third. And Charlie ran like he played—all out, with his long hair trailing behind him and his legs going one way, his arms another and his body, seemingly yet some way else. He ran as if he was trying to beat himself, rather than his opponent's throw, to the next base and sometimes he did.

Perhaps I'm laying it on a bit thick here. I'd like to say of Charlie, as a ballplayer, what Leo Durocher once said of Eddie Stanky: "He can't hit, he can't field and he can't run. All he can do is beat ya." Maybe Charlie's clutch-playing abilities really weren't all that. Maybe thirty-eight years has deepened the shade of my rose-colored glasses. Forgive me a common and

likeable tendency towards exaggeration. But after all, do you honestly believe Cool Hand Luke actually ate “all them eggs?”

I don’t know what prompted Charlie’s intense anger. I had heard he had had a rough time at home and that he came from a less affluent neighborhood than most of the other ballplayers. After the last game of the Legion season in August, I said goodbye to Charlie. That was the last time I saw him. When I returned home from college the following May, I had not been home very long when I got a phone call: Charlie Crawford was dead. He was eighteen, about to graduate high school, had a girl friend and a motorcycle and now he was gone. The latter had proved his undoing. I attended the funeral along with hundreds of other teenagers, teenagers, who, for the first time, because of Charlie, were coming to grips with their own mortality. Sadly, despite the desolation and the mourning, not everyone I spoke with seemed entirely surprised at Charlie’s tragic, youthful demise. Some of those, much closer to him than I, expressed a kind of forlorn resignation to Charlie’s fatal tragedy, as if his death on the motorbike had been inevitable. Evidently, Charlie had driven his motorcycle with the same intense fury with which he had played baseball. He had faced the ultimate test and had beaten himself to home plate one last time and, in the process, had beaten himself into the ground for good. I guess you could say, it was the last time he scored.

That was thirty-seven years ago. Charlie would have been fifty-five today. God bless you, Charlie.

CHARLIE