

High and Inside

Clyde J. Steckel

Mike Barsen squirmed uneasily in his seat in the press box and peered over onto the playing field, now nearly completely shrouded by the shadows of the west grandstand and bleachers. The game had gone into extra innings, and there was apparently little hope for an immediate break in the one-to-one deadlock. Al Rosar was pitching for the Giants, starting the game with a won-lost record of eight and thirteen for the 1948 season. But Mike Barsen, covering the game for the Gazette, knew, perhaps better than anyone else in the stands, how bitterly Al Rosar needed to win the game, for Mike had been in the Giant dressing-room not over a week ago when Al Rosar had lost his game with the Phils, and Mike had heard the conversation between Al Rosar and the young New York catcher, Tex Radcliffe. Mike had been standing in one corner of the locker room talking to the old man when Al and Tex had come down the ramp and in the door from the field. Mike wasn't able to see the men as they talked, but he was close enough to hear the soft-spoken Texan.

"Well, Al, I guess that's the way it goes with any club. Some days you win, and some days you lose."

There was a pause, and then Al replied, "Yeah, sure, Tex, I guess so."

There was another pause, and then Tex said, "I—I guess if I'd played 'em smarter they wouldn't have hit so well. The catcher's got a big job, pickin' the pitches they're not looking for or can't hit. I guess it's just a matter of experience. Experience makes a big difference in any outfit."

"Yeah, look at me," Al replied, "—eighteen years of experience, and what have I got? A sore arm. Experience don't cure a sore arm. Experience don't get the ball over the plate any faster, either. I had more experience than any guy on the field today, and what did it get me? Another loss in the win-lose tally marked Al Rosar. That don't speak so well for your damned experience, does it?"

"Sure, Al, but . . . well, that's different. You're, well, you're . . ."

"I know. You might as well say it. Everybody else says it. Go ahead. Call me an old man. A forty-year-old pitcher is as old as they come in this racket. He's a has-been; he's all through. He's trying to compete with the young guys. That's what that half-baked water-boy says that writes sports for the Gazette. What the hell does he know about pitching? Has he ever tried to lob a ball across the plate with a sore arm?"

"You're not old, Al," said Tex. "Look at Satch Paige. Nobody knows how old he is; and he's one of the smartest in the American League. Remember how Fat Freddie pitched the best game of his life when he was forty-four?"

"Yeah, I know they're good. I'm good, too, stacked up against some bush-leaguer, but they don't play bush-league ball in this circuit; they play hard and fast. Look at me, playing ball with you young guys—me, an old man." There was another pause, and then Al went on, "A pitcher don't have much of a future when he gets my age What a record this season—Al Rosar, won 8, lost 13. Don't that look dandy stacked up against guys like Lemon, and Sain, and Spahn?"

"Sure, Al, they got you beat on percentage this season, but your record when you were their age is just as good as theirs. When was it, '36, or '37 when you . . ."

"Yeah. Way back when you were in rompers, looking at pictures of Carl Hubbell and Dizzy Dean. That was fine in those days. You could pick your club and laugh at the rest of the world. When a pitcher gets my age, he's no longer a rare, popular article. He's an old, worn tire that gets thrown from one junk-yard to another. At the end of the years the guys up in the offices look at the record: Al Rosar, won 8, lost 13. Then they say, 'We'll send him off to St. Joe and get some young guys on the way up.' That's the way you go—down to the minors, then down to the farm. That's the hell of being

a has-been. You don't count any more, so you're just kicked and scuffed around until they forget all about you. Then what have you got? A coaching job, if you're lucky. A little section in the record books, if you're like most guys, and a whole lifetime to think. There's nothing I'd rather do than think."

There was another pause, and then Tex said, "Well, what the hell, Al, this was just one game. The season lasts two more weeks. You'll get another chance. The old man needs guys with plenty of experience when the chips are down. Maybe he'll start you against the Cards next Monday."

"Another chance. Well, it's a cinch I couldn't do any worse than I did today."

Then Tex went to the shower room, and Mike left the dressing room to go back to the offices of the Gazette.

Now, a week later, Al Rosar was working again on the mound, and Mike Barsen, high up in the press box, couldn't help remembering something about a "worn tire, thrown from one junk-yard to another." Down on the field, the game had gone into the last of the thirteenth, and the Giants had succeeded in loading the bases with only one down. All that was needed was to get another man to first base or to left a fly-ball out of the infield. When the third Giant batter had been passed and it came time for Al to bat, everyone expected that the old man would jerk him for a pinch hitter, but out he came, swinging his bat in large circles over his head. Maybe the old man had left Al in because he had the experience to judge the pitches and knew when it was a good one. At any rate, Al took his stance in the batter's box, dug his spikes firmly into the dirt, and swung his bat a few times. The first effort on the part of the St. Louis pitcher was in the dirt. Then the old man, coaching down at third, tugged at the visor of his cap twice—the signal for a squeeze play. Mike saw Al give a slight nod of recognition and set himself for the bunt. The pitcher received his sign, toed the rubber, and wound up. The pitch came sizzling toward the plate, high and inside. Mike leaned forward in his seat in the press-box, and said, almost audibly, "Why the . . .," but before he could finish, there was a sickening crack, and the ball ricocheted straight up into the air off Al Rosar's left temple. Al crumpled up beside the plate, and the throng of players, managers, and trainers swarmed around him. Everyone else in the Polo Grounds had risen to his feet, peering anxiously down at the knot of people around home plate, but Mike Barsen had a job to perform, in spite of the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He lifted the phone beside him, moistened his lips, and said, "Chief, Al Rosar has just won his ninth ball game."