

Throws Left, Bats Left

by David Cirillo

Throws left, bats left.

That's what Will Benton's baseball card would say one day, he was sure of it. And how could he not be?

Throughout Little Leagues, he batted .515, one hundred and thirty points higher than his closest teammate. His team won three championships, and in all three, the coach called him the MVP. Catching, throwing, clutch hits. He did it all.

High school didn't slow him down. He went to St. Stephen's and inherited a mediocre team. In freshman year, he made varsity. During his sophomore year, he was made captain, and the team reached the playoffs. St. Stephen's won championships in his junior and senior years.

Twenty-four MLB teams recruited him; he signed with the Cardinals. He would play minor league ball for a few years, and if all went as planned, he would join the bigs by the time he was twenty-one.

Will Benton. Bats left, throws left. Future All-Star.

Will started with the Peoria Chiefs, an advanced Class A affiliate. Very few new signees started at that level. It was a big first step.

A few weeks in, Will already had everyone's attention. The crack of the ball off his bat excited the coaches, and the speed he displayed running down line drives had them calling him a 5-tool player.

After practice one evening, Will noticed a woman walking to her car just as he was walking to his. She had on flowery flip-flops and a matching sundress. A nest of brown hair hung mid-back tied in a thick ponytail, and she walked much like a child, with a little bit of wandering and a little bit of skip. She had a bag over her left shoulder and took no notice of Will.

"You work here?" he yelled after her.

"What?" she asked, turning. "You want to know if I work at the stadium? You think I'm a hotdog vendor or something?"

"Yeah," he said, taking a few steps in her direction. "Thought maybe I could get a redhot with relish and mustard."

She smiled at him.

"I'm a player for the Chiefs. I figured if you're here, you must work in the front office or something."

"No, no," she said. "I come here sometimes just to get out of the office. I bring my laptop, clear my head, watch some of the practice. It relaxes me. It's like meditation. Plus the fresh air."

"I'm Will Benton," he said.

"Yes, I recognize you. It's nice to meet you."

"You recognize me, huh?"

"Don't get too cocky. I told you I watch the practices sometimes. I have no idea who you are in the baseball world."

"Well that hurts a little," he joked. "I figured everyone knew me."

"Humility is a good thing to have, no matter what walk of life."

They talked for a bit more. She told him she worked as a "boring accountant," grew up in Peoria, and doubted she would ever leave. Will said he hoped he was good enough to make the big leagues some day. He expected he would. Not bragging, he explained. Just based on how many teams recruited him. He mentioned that he thought Peoria a fine town.

"I better get going," the woman said. Her name was Marcy. "It was nice meeting you. I hope you achieve all your dreams."

"But wait," Will said. "Would you like to go on a date or something?"

"I don't know," she said. "I've met ball players before. They're here for a few months, maybe a year, and then they're gone. That's not what I'm looking for."

To his surprise, Will said, "Me neither."

They went to dinner two nights later and had a nice time.

Things continued to go well for Will. The season started and he was hitting .334 with a couple dingers. His manager figured he'd be in Peoria for a few more months before getting the call to double A.

"Assuming no setbacks or injuries," the manager said.

"No worries there," Will said. He didn't mention his ankle. He'd been having some pain, but nothing unexpected. The body would ache, he knew that. This week it was the ankle, next week the hamstring, the week after that the shoulder. That's how it went with professional athletes. Always a nagging

injury. Just another part of life. Nothing to worry about.

That night he called his parents and told them what the manager said. "If I keep it up, I'll be moving up sooner than expected. I might be in the bigs before I can legally buy booze."

"We'll keep you in our prayers," Mom said.

He and Marcy had been dating for several months and while out to eat at Bo's Smokehouse, Marcy had a question for him.

"How do you define success, Will?"

"Making the bigs. Being a star. What else?"

"That's what I want to know. What else?"

"It all just falls into place after that," he said. "Success breeds success."

"So you say."

"Well what about you?" he asked. "What do you think success is?"

"Making a difference in people's lives."

"But you're an accountant," Will snarled. He regretted his words the moment they were out.

"I'll make a difference in ways other than a career. There's more to life than work, Willie. I assume you can imagine that."

He nodded as if he could, but he wasn't sure.

The bad news hit like a sledgehammer.

The ankle injury was much more serious than anyone would have guessed.

Will Benton, big-time prospect, future big-leaguer, had bone cancer concentrated in his ankle. He broke the ankle running down a fly ball, and that's when they found the cancer.

"You're lucky," the doctor told him before the anesthesia started to pump. They would be amputating his left foot. "We might have caught the cancer early enough. That broken ankle might have saved your life."

After surgery, Will's parents were there. No one said a thing. Words held no consolation, no healing.

Will looked blankly at the ceiling, and his mother held his hand. His father stared out the window. He felt a deep guilt for making his son believe

life's truest meaning came from baseball.

Marcy peeked her head into the sanitized, white room, her sweet face troubled but glowing with hope.

"I brought flowers, Willie," she whispered. "Maybe it'll help you remember, there's still beauty in this world."

Will looked at her. Those brown eyes with their child-like innocence. Yes, perhaps there was beauty to be found.

Yet he couldn't help but think, the most important part of him was forever dead.