

Stephen King - Head Down

Head Down  
by Stephen King

author's note: I am breaking in here, Constant Reader, to make you aware that this is not a story but an essay -- almost a diary It originally appeared in The New Yorker in the spring of 1990  
S.K.

Head down! Keep your head down!"

It is far from the most difficult feat in sports, but anyone who has ever tried to do it will tell you that it's tough enough: using a round bat to hit a round ball squarely on the button. Tough enough so that the handful of men who do it well become rich, famous, and idolized: the Jose Cansecos, the Mike Greenwells, the Kevin Mitchells. For thousands of boys (and not a few girls), their faces, not the face of Axl Rose or Bobby Brown, are the ones that matter; their posters hold the positions of honor on bedroom walls and locker doors. Today Ron St. Pierre is teaching some of these boys -- boys who will represent Bangor West Side in District 3 Little League tournament play -- how to put the round bat on the round ball. Right now he's working with a kid named Fred Moore while my son, Owen, stands nearby, watching closely. He's due in St. Pierre's hot seat next. Owen is broad-shouldered and heavily built, like his old man; Fred looks almost painfully slim in his bright green jersey. And he is not making good contact.

"Head down, Fred!" St. Pierre shouts. He is halfway between the mound and home plate at one of the two Little League fields behind the Coke plant in Bangor; Fred is almost all the way to the backstop. The day is a hot one, but if the heat bothers either Fred or St. Pierre it does not show. They are intent on what they are doing. "Keep it down!" St. Pierre shouts again, and unloads a fat pitch.

Fred chips under it. There is that chinky aluminum-on-cowhide sound -- the sound of someone hitting a tin cup with a spoon. The ball hits the backstop, rebounds, almost bonks him on the helmet. Both of them laugh, and then St. Pierre gets another ball from the red plastic bucket beside him.

"Get ready, Freddy!" he yells. "Head down!"

Maine's District 3 is so large that it is split in two. The Penobscot County teams make up half the division; the teams from Aroostook and Washington counties make up the other half. Ail-Star kids are selected by merit and drawn from all existing district Little League teams. The dozen teams in District 3 play in simultaneous tournaments. Near the end of July, the two teams left will play off, best two out of three, to decide the district champ. That team represents District 3 in State Championship play, and it has been a long time -- eighteen years -- since a Bangor team made it into the state tourney.

This year, the State Championship games will be played in Old Town, where they make the canoes. Four of the five teams that play there will go back home. The fifth will go on to represent Maine in the Eastern Regional Tournament, this year to be held in Bristol, Connecticut. Beyond that, of course, is Williamsport, Pennsylvania, where the Little League World Series happens. The Bangor West players rarely seem to think of such dizzy heights; they will be happy just to beat Millinocket, their first-round opponent in the Penobscot County race. Coaches, however, are allowed to dream -- are, in fact, almost obligated to dream.

This time Fred, who is the team joker, does get his head down. He hits a weak grounder on the wrong side of the first-base line, foul by about six feet.

"Look," St. Pierre says, taking another ball. He holds it up. It is scuffed, dirty, and grass-stained. It is nevertheless a baseball, and Fred eyes it respectfully. "I'm going to show you a-trick. Where's the ball?"

"In your hand," Fred says.

Saint, as Dave Mansfield, the team's head coach, calls him, drops it into his glove. "Now?"

"In your glove."

Saint turns sideways; his pitching hand creeps into his glove. "Now?"

"In your hand. I think."

"You're right. So watch my hand. Watch my hand, Fred Moore, and wait for the ball to come out in it. You're looking for the ball. Nothing else. Just the ball. I should just be a blur to you. Why would you want to see me, anyway? Do you care if I'm smiling? No. You're waiting to see how I'll come -- sidearm or three-quarters or

over the top. Are you waiting?"

Fred nods.

"Are you watching?"

Fred nods again.

"O.K.," St. Pierre says, and goes into his short-arm batting-practice motion again. This time Fred drives the ball with real authority: a hard sinking liner to right field.

"All right!" Saint cries. "That's all right, Fred Moore!" He wipes sweat off his forehead. "Next batter!"

Dave Mansfield, a heavy, bearded man who comes to the park wearing aviator sunglasses and an open-neck College World Series shirt (it's a good-luck charm), brings a paper sack to the Bangor West-Millinocket game. It contains sixteen pennants, in various colors. Bangor, each one says, the word flanked by a lobster on one side and a pine tree on the other. As each Bangor West player is announced on loudspeakers that have been wired to the chain-link backstop, he takes a pennant from the bag Dave holds out, runs across the infield, and hands it to his opposite number.

Dave is a loud, restless man who happens to love baseball and the kids who play it at this level. He believes there are two purposes to All-Star Little League: to have fun and to win. Both are important, he says, but the most important thing is to keep them in the right order. The pennants are not a sly gambit to unnerve the opposition but just for fun. Dave knows that the boys on both teams will remember this game, and he wants each of the Millinocket kids to have a souvenir. It's as simple as that.

The Millinocket players seem surprised by the gesture, and they don't know exactly what to do with the pennants as someone's tape player begins to warble out the Anita Bryant version of "The Star-Spangled Banner." The Millinocket catcher, almost buried beneath his gear, solves the problem in unique fashion: he holds his Bangor pennant over his heart.

With the amenities taken care of, Bangor West administers a brisk and thorough trouncing; the final score is Bangor West 18, Millinocket 7. The loss does not devalue the souvenirs, however; when Millinocket departs on the team bus, the visitors' dugout is empty save for a few Dixie cups and Popsicle sticks. The pennants -- every single one of them -- are gone.

"Cut two!" Neil Waterman, Bangor West's field coach, shouts. "Cut two, cut two!"

It's the day after the Millinocket game. Everyone on the team is still showing up for practice, but it's early yet. Attrition will set in. That is a given: parents are not always willing to give up summer plans so their kids can play Little League after the regular, May-June season is over, and sometimes the kids themselves tire of the constant grind of practice. Some would rather be riding their bikes, trying to hang ten on their skateboards, or just hanging around the community pool and checking out the girls.

"Cut two!" Waterman yells. He is a small, compact man in khaki shorts and a Joe Coach crewcut. In real life he is a teacher and a college basketball coach, but this summer he is trying to teach these boys that baseball has more in common with chess than many would ever have believed. Know your play, he tells them over and over again. Know who it is you're backing up. Most important of all, know who your cut man is in every situation, and be able to hit him. He works patiently at showing them the truth that hides at the center of the game: that it is played more in the mind than with the body.

Ryan Larrobino, Bangor West's center fielder, fires a bullet to Casey Kinney at second base. Casey tags an invisible runner, pivots, and throws another bullet to home, where J. J. Fiddler takes the throw and tosses the ball back to Waterman.

"Double-play ball!" Waterman shouts, and hits one to Matt Kinney (not related to Casey). Matt is playing shortstop at practice today. The ball takes a funny hop and appears to be on its way to left center. Matt knocks it down, picks it up, and feeds to Casey at second; Casey pivots and throws to Mike Arnold, who is on first. Mike feeds it home to J.J.

"All right!" Waterman shouts. "Good job, Matt Kinney! Good job! One-two-one! You're covering, Mike Pelkey!" The two names. Always the two names, to avoid confusion. The team is lousy with Matts, Mikes, and guys named Kinney.

The throws are executed flawlessly. Mike Pelkey, Bangor West's number two pitcher, is right where he's supposed to be, covering first. It's a move he doesn't always

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remember to make, but this time he does. He grins and trots back to the mound as Neil Waterman gets ready to hit the next combination.

"This is the best Little League All-Star team I've seen in years," Dave Mansfield says some days after Bangor West's trouncing of Millinocket. He dumps a load of sunflower seeds into his mouth and begins to chew them. He spits hulls casually as he talks. "I don't think they can be beaten -- at least not in this division." He pauses and watches as Mike Arnold breaks toward the plate from first, grabs a practice bunt, and whirls toward the bag. He cocks his arm back -- then holds the ball. Mike Pelkey is still on the mound; this time he has forgotten that it is his job to cover, and the bag is undefended. He flashes Dave a quick guilty glance. Then he breaks into a sunny grin and gets ready to do it again. Next time he'll do it right, but will he remember to do it right during a game?

"Of course, we can beat ourselves," Dave says. "That's how it usually happens." And, raising his voice, he bellows, "Where were you, Mike Pelkey? You're s'posed to be covering first!"

Mike nods and trots over -- better late than never.

"Brewer," Dave says, and shakes his head. "Brewer at their field. That'll be tough. Brewer's always tough."

Bangor West does not trounce Brewer, but they win their first "road game" without any real strain. Matt Kinney, the team's number one pitcher, is in good form. He is far from overpowering, but his fastball has a sneaky, snaky little hop, and he also has a modest but effective breaking pitch. Ron St. Pierre is fond of saying that every Little League pitcher in America thinks he's got a killer curveball. "What they think is a curve is usually this big lollipop change," he says. "A batter with a little self-discipline can kill the poor thing."

Matt Kinney's curveball actually curves, however, and tonight he goes the distance and strikes out eight. Probably more important, he walks only four. Walks are the bane of a Little League coach's existence. "They kill you," Neil Waterman says. "The walks kill you every time. Absolutely no exceptions. Sixty per cent of batters walked score in Little League games." Not in this game: two of the batters Kinney walks are forced at second; the other two are stranded. Only one Brewer batter gets a hit: Denise Hewes, the center fielder, singles with one out in the fifth, but she is forced at second.

After the game is safely in the bag, Matt Kinney, a solemn and almost eerily self-possessed boy, flashes Dave a rare smile, revealing a set of neat braces. "She could hit!" he says, almost reverently.

"Wait until you see Hampden," Dave says dryly. "They all hit."

When the Hampden squad shows up at Bangor West's field, behind the Coke plant, on July 17th, they quickly prove Dave right. Mike Pelkey has pretty good stuff and better control than he had against Millinocket, but he isn't much of a mystery to the Hampden boys. Mike Tardif, a compact kid with an amazingly fast bat, rips Pelkey's third pitch over the left-field fence, two hundred feet away, for a home run in the first inning. Hampden adds two more runs in the second, and leads Bangor West 3-0.

In the third, however, Bangor West breaks loose. Hampden's pitching is good, Hampden's hitting is awesome, but Hampden's fielding, particularly infielding, leaves something to be desired. Bangor West puts three hits together with five errors and two walks to score seven runs. This is how Little League is most often played, and seven runs should be enough, but they aren't; the opposition chips stubbornly away, getting two in its half of the third and two more in the fifth. When Hampden comes up in the bottom of the sixth, it is trailing by only three, 10-7.

Kyle King, a twelve-year-old who started for Hampden this evening and then went to catcher in the fifth, leads off the bottom of the sixth with a double. Then Mike Pelkey strikes out Mike Tardif. Mike Wentworth, the new Hampden pitcher, singles to deep short. King and Wentworth advance on a passed ball, but are forced to hold when Jeff Carson grounds back to the pitcher. This brings up Josh Jamieson, one of five Hampden home-run threats, with two on and two out. He represents the tying run. Mike, although clearly tired, finds a little extra and strikes him out on a one-two pitch. The game is over.

The kids line up and give each other the custom-ordained high fives, but it's clear that Mike isn't the only kid who is simply exhausted after the match; with their

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slumped shoulders and lowered heads, they all look like losers. Bangor West is now 3-0 in divisional play, but the win is a fluke, the kind of game that makes Little League such a nerve-racking experience for spectators, coaches, and the players themselves. Usually sure-handed in the field, Bangor West has tonight committed something like nine errors.

"I didn't sleep all night," Dave mutters at practice the next day. "Damn, we were outplayed. We should have lost that game."

Two nights later, he has something else to feel gloomy about. He and Ron St. Pierre make the six-mile trip to Hampden to watch Kyle King and his mates play Brewer. This is no scouting expedition; Bangor has played both clubs, and both men have copious notes. What they are really hoping to see, Dave admits, is Brewer getting lucky and putting Hampden out of the way. It doesn't happen; what they see isn't a baseball game but gunnery practice.

Josh Jamieson, who struck out in the clutch against Mike Pelkey, clouts a home run over everything and into the Hampden practice field. Nor is Jamieson alone. Carson hits one, Wentworth hits one, and Tardif hits a pair. The final score is Hampden 21, Brewer 9.

On the ride back to Bangor, Dave Mansfield chews a lot of sunflower seeds and says little. He rouses himself only once, as he wheels his old green Chevy into the rutted dirt parking lot beside the Coke plant. "We got lucky Tuesday night, and they know it," he says. "When we go down there Thursday, they'll be waiting for us." The diamonds, on which the teams of District 3 play out their six-inning dramas all have the same dimensions, give or take a foot here or an outfield gate there. The coaches all carry the rulebook in their back pockets, and they put it to frequent use. Dave likes to say that it never hurts to make sure. The infield is sixty feet on each side, a square standing on the point that is home plate. The backstop, according to the rulebook, must be at least twenty feet from home plate, giving both the catcher and a runner at third a fair chance on a passed ball. The fences are supposed to be 200 feet from the plate. At Bangor West's field, it's actually about 210 to dead center. And at Hampden, home of power hitters like Tardif and Jamieson, it's more like 180.

The most inflexible measurement is also the most important: the distance between the pitcher's rubber and the center of the plate. Forty-six feet -- no more, no less. When it comes to this one, nobody ever says, "Aw, close enough for government work -- let it go." Most Little League teams live and die by what happens in the forty-six feet between those two points.

The fields of District 3 vary considerably in other ways, and a quick look is usually enough to tell you something about the feel any given community has for the game. The Bangor West field is in bad shape -- a poor relation that the town regularly ignores in its recreation budget. The undersurface is a sterile clay that turns to soup when the weather is wet and to concrete when the weather is dry, as it has been this summer. Watering has kept most of the outfield reasonably green, but the infield is hopeless. Scruffy grass grows up the lines, but the area between the pitcher's rubber and home plate is almost completely bald. The backstop is rusty; passed balls and wild pitches frequently squirt through a wide gap between the ground and the chain link. Two large, hilly dunes run through short-right and center fields. These dunes have actually become a home-team advantage. Bangor West players learn to play the caroms off them, just as Red Sox left fielders learn to play caroms off the Green Monster. Visiting fielders, on the other hand, often find themselves chasing their mistakes all the way to the fence.

Brewer's field, tucked behind the local IGA grocery and a Marden's Discount Store, has to compete for space with what may be the oldest, rustiest playground equipment in New England; little brothers and sisters watch the game upside down from the swings, their heads down and their feet in the sky.

Bob Beal Field in Machias, with its pebble-pocked-skin infield, is probably the worst of the fields Bangor West will visit this year; Hampden, with its manicured outfield and neat composition infield, is probably the best. With its picnic area beyond the center-field fence and a rest-room-equipped snack bar, Hampden's diamond, behind the local VFW hall, looks like a rich kids' field. But looks can be deceiving. This team is a combination of kids from Newburgh and Hampden, and Newburgh is still farm and dairy country. Many of these kids ride to the games in old cars with primer paint around the headlights and mufflers held in place by chicken wire; they wear sunburns they got doing chores, not while they were hanging

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out at the country-club swimming pool. Town kids and country kids. Once they're in uniform, it doesn't much matter which is which.

Dave is right: the Hampden-Newburgh fans are waiting. Bangor West last won the District 3 Little League title in 1971; Hampden has never won a title, and many local fans continue to hope that this will be the year, despite the earlier loss to Bangor West. For the first time, the Bangor team really feels it is on the road; it is faced with a large hometown rooting section.

Matt Kinney gets the start. Hampden counters with Kyle King, and the game quickly shapes up as that rarest and richest of Little League commodities, a genuine pitchers' duel. At the end of the third inning, the score is Hampden 0, Bangor West 0.

In the bottom of the fourth, Bangor scores two unearned runs when Hampden's infield comes unglued once more. Owen King, Bangor West's first baseman, comes to bat with two on and one out. The two Kings, Kyle on the Hampden team and Owen on the Bangor West team, are not related. You don't need to be told; a single glance is enough. Kyle King is about five foot three. At six foot two, Owen King towers over him. Size differences are so extreme in Little League that it's easy to feel disoriented, the victim of hallucination.

Bangor's King raps a ground ball to short. It's a tailor-made double play, but the Hampden shortstop does not field it cleanly, and King, shucking his two hundred or so pounds down to first at top speed, beats the throw. Mike Pelkey and Mike Arnold scamper home.

Then, in the top of the fifth, Matt Kinney, who has been cruising, hits Chris Witcomb, number eight in Hampden's order. Brett Johnson, the number nine hitter, scorches one at Casey Kinney, Bangor West's second baseman. Again, it's a tailor-made double-play ball, but Casey gives up on it. His hands, which have been automatically dipping down, freeze about four inches off the ground, and Casey turns his face away to protect it from a possible bad hop. This is the most common of all Little League fielding errors, and the most easily understood; it is an act of naked self-preservation. The stricken look that Casey throws toward Dave and Neil as the ball squirts through into center field completes this part of the ballet.

"It's O.K., Casey! Next time!" Dave bawls in his gravelly, self-assured Yankee voice.

"New batter!" Neil shouts, ignoring Casey's look completely. "New batter! Know your play! We're still ahead! Get an out! Just concentrate on getting an out!"

Casey begins to relax, begins to get back into the game, and then, beyond the outfield fences, the Hampden Horns begin to blow. Some of them belong to late-model cars -- Toyotas and Hondas and snappy little Dodge Colts with U.S. out of Central America and split wood not atoms stickers on the bumpers. But most of the Hampden Horns reside within older cars and pick-up trucks. Many of the pick-ups have rusty doors, FM converters wired up beneath the dashboards, and Leer camper caps built over the truck beds. Who is inside these vehicles, blowing the horns? No one seems to know -- not for sure. They are not parents or relatives of the Hampden players; the parents and relatives (plus a generous complement of ice-cream-smears little brothers and sisters) are filling the bleachers and lining the fence on the third-base side of the diamond, where the Hampden dugout is. They may be local guys just off work -- guys who have stopped to watch some of the game before having a few brewskis at the VFW hall next door -- or they may be the ghosts of Hampden Little Leaguers Past, hungry for that long-denied State Championship flag. It seems at least possible; there is something both eerie and inevitable about the Hampden Horns. They toot in harmony -- high horns, low horns, a few foghorns powered by dying batteries. Several Bangor West players look uneasily back toward the sound. Behind the backstop, a local TV crew is preparing to videotape a story for the sports final on the eleven o'clock news. This causes a stir among some of the spectators, but only a few of the players on the Hampden bench seem to notice it. Matt Kinney certainly doesn't. He is totally intent on the next Hampden batter, Matt Knaide, who taps one turf shoe with his aluminum worth bat and then steps into the batter's box.

The Hampden Horns fall silent. Matt Kinney goes into his windup. Casey Kinney drops back into position just east of second, glove down. His face says it has no plans to turn away if the ball is hit to him again. The Hampden runners stand expectantly on first and second. (There is no leading away from the bag in Little League.) The spectators along the opposing arms of the diamond watch anxiously. Their

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conversations die out. Baseball at its best (and this is a very good game indeed, one you would pay money to see) is a game of restful pauses punctuated by short, sharp inhalations. The fans can now sense one of those inhalations coming. Matt Kinney winds and fires.

Knaide lines the first pitch over second for a base hit, and now the score is 2-1. Kyle King, Hampden's pitcher, steps to the plate and sends a low, screeching line drive straight back to the mound. It hits Matt Kinney on the right shin. He makes an instinctive effort to field the ball, which has already squiggled off toward the hole between third and short, before he realizes he is really hurt and folds up. Now the bases are loaded, but for the moment no one cares; the instant the umpire raises his hands, signaling time out, all the Bangor West players converge on Matt Kinney. Beyond center field, the Hampden Horns are blowing triumphantly.

Kinney is white-faced, clearly in pain. An ice pack is brought from the first-aid kit kept in the snack bar, and after a few minutes he is able to rise and limp off the field with his arms around Dave and Neil. The spectators applaud loudly and sympathetically.

Owen King, the erstwhile first baseman, becomes Bangor West's new pitcher, and the first batter he must face is Mike Tardif. The Hampden Horns send up a brief, anticipatory blat as Tardif steps in. King's third pitch goes wild to the backstop. Brett Johnson heads home; King breaks toward the plate from the mound, as he has been taught to do. In the Bangor West dugout, Neil Waterman, his arm still around Matt Kinney's shoulders, chants, "Cover-cover-cover!"

Joe Wilcox, Bangor West's starting catcher, is a foot shorter than King, but very quick. At the beginning of this All-Star season, he did not want to catch, and he still doesn't like it, but he has learned to live with it and to get tough in a position where very few small players survive for long; even in Little League, most catchers resemble human Toby jugs. Earlier in this game he made an amazing one-handed stab of a foul ball. Now he lunges toward the backstop, flinging his mask aside with his bare hand at the same instant he catches the rebounding wild pitch. He turns toward the plate and tosses to King as the Hampden Horns chorus a wild -- and premature, as it turns out -- bray of triumph.

Johnson has slowed down. On his face is an expression strikingly similar to that worn by Casey Kinney when Casey allowed Johnson's hard-hit grounder to shoot through the hole. It is a look of extreme anxiety and trepidation, the face of a boy who suddenly wishes he were someplace else. Anyplace else. The new pitcher is blocking the plate.

Johnson starts a halfhearted slide. King takes the toss from Wilcox, pivots with surprising, winsome grace, and tags the hapless Johnson out easily. He walks back toward the mound, wiping sweat from his forehead, and prepares to face Tardif once more. Behind him, the Hampden Horns have fallen silent again.

Tardif loops one toward third. Kevin Rochefort, Bangor's third baseman, takes a single step backward in response. It's an easy play, but there is an awful look of dismay on his face, and it is only then, as Rochefort starts to freeze up on what is an easy pop fly, that one can see how badly the whole team has been shaken by Matt's injury. The ball goes into Rochefort's glove, and then pops out when Rochefort -- dubbed Roach Clip first by Freddy Moore and then by the whole squad -- fails to squeeze it. Knaide, who advanced to third while King and Wilcox were dealing with Johnson, has already broken for the plate. Rochefort could have doubled Knaide up easily if he had caught the ball, but here, as in the majors, baseball is a game of ifs and inches. Rochefort doesn't catch the ball. He throws wild to first instead.

Mike Arnold has taken over there, and he is one of the best fielders on the team, but no one issued him stilts. Tardif, meanwhile, steams into second. The pitchers' duel has become a typical Little League game, and now the Hampden Horns are a cacophony of joy. The home team has their thumping shoes on, and the final score is Hampden 9, Bangor West 2. Still, there are two good things to go home on: Matt Kinney is not seriously hurt, and when Casey Kinney got another tough chance in the late innings he refused to choke, and made the play.

After the final out is recorded, the Bangor West players trudge into their dugout and sit on the bench. This is their first loss, and most of them are not coping with it very gracefully. Some toss their gloves disgustedly between their dirty sneakers. Some are crying, others look close to tears, and no one is talking. Even Freddy, Bangor's quipmaster general, has nothing to say on this, muggy Thursday evening in Hampden. Beyond the center-field fence, a few of the Hampden Horns are still tooting

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happily away.

Neil Waterman is the first person to speak. He tells the boys to get their heads up and look at him. Three of them already are: Owen King, Ryan Larrobino, and Matt Kinney. Now about half the squad manages to do as he's asked. Several others, however -- including Josh Stevens, who made the final out -- continue to seem vastly interested in their footgear.

"Get your heads up," Waterman says again. He speaks louder this time, but not unkindly, and now they all manage to look at him. "You played a pretty good game," he says softly. "You got a little rattled, and they ended up on top. It happens. It doesn't mean they're better, though -- that's something we're going to find out on Saturday. Tonight all you lost was a baseball game. The sun will still come up tomorrow." They begin to stir around on the bench a little; this old homily has apparently not lost its power to comfort. "You gave what you had tonight, and that's all we want. I'm proud of you, and you can be proud of yourselves. Nothing happened that you have to hang your heads about."

He stands aside for Dave Mansfield, who surveys his team. When Dave speaks, his usually loud voice is even quieter than Waterman's. "We knew when we came down here that they had to beat us, didn't we?" he asks. He speaks reflectively, almost as if he were talking to himself. "If they didn't, they'd be out. They'll be coming to our field on Saturday. That's when we have to beat them. Do you want to?"

They are all looking up now.

"I want you to remember what Neil told you," Dave says in that reflective voice, so unlike his practice-field bellow. "You are a team. That means you love each other. You love each other -- win or lose -- because you are a team."

The first time anyone suggested to these boys that they must come to love each other while they were on the field, they laughed uneasily at the idea. Now they don't laugh. After enduring the Hampden Horns together, they seem to understand, at least a little.

Dave surveys them again, and then nods. "O.K. Pick up the gear."

They pick up bats, helmets, catching equipment, and stuff everything into canvas duffel bags. By the time they've got it over to Dave's old green pick-up truck, some of them are laughing again.

Dave laughs with them, but he doesn't do any laughing on the ride home. Tonight the ride seems long. "I don't know if we can beat them on Saturday," he says on the way back. He is speaking in that same reflective tone of voice. "I want to, and they want to, but I just don't know. Hampden's got mo on their side, now."

Mo, of course, is momentum -- that mythic force which shapes, not only single games but whole seasons. Baseball players are quirky and superstitious at every level of play, and for some reason the Bangor West players have adopted a small plastic sandal -- a castoff of some young fan's baby doll -- as their mascot. They have named this absurd talisman Mo. They stick it in the chain-link fence of the dugout at every game, and batters often touch it furtively before stepping into the on-deck circle. Nick Trzaskos, who ordinarily plays left field for Bangor West, has been entrusted with Mo between games. Tonight, for the first time, he forgot to bring the talisman.

"Nick better remember Mo on Saturday," Dave says grimly. "But even if he remembers..." He shakes his head. "I just don't know."

There is no admission charge to Little League games; the charter expressly forbids it. Instead, a player takes around a hat during the fourth inning, soliciting donations for equipment and field maintenance. On Saturday, when Bangor West and Hampden square off in the year's final Penobscot County Little League game, at Bangor, one can judge the growth of local interest in the team's fortunes by a simple act of comparison. The collection taken up at the Bangor-Millinocket contest was \$15.45; when the hat finally comes back in the fifth inning of the Saturday-afternoon game against Hampden, it's overflowing with change and crumpled dollar bills. The total take is \$94.25. The bleachers are full; the fences are lined; the parking lot is full. Little League has one thing in common with almost all American sports and business endeavors: nothing succeeds like success.

Things start off well for Bangor -- they lead 7-3 at the end of three -- and then everything falls apart. In the fourth inning, Hampden scores six runs, most of them honest. Bangor West doesn't fold, as it did after Matt Kinney was hit in the game at Hampden -- the players do not drop their heads, to use Neil Waterman's phrase. But when they come to bat in the bottom of the sixth inning they are down by a score of

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14-12. Elimination looks very close and very real. Mo is in its accustomed place, but Bangor West is still three cuts away from the end of its season. One kid who did not need to be told to get his head up following Bangor West's 9-2 loss was Ryan Larrobino. He went two for three in that game, played well, and trotted off the field knowing he had played well. He is a tall kid, quiet, with broad shoulders and a shock of dark-brown hair. He is one of two natural athletes on the Bangor West team. Matt Kinney is the other. Although the two boys are physical opposites -- Kinney slim and still fairly short, Larrobino tall and well muscled -- they share a quality that is uncommon in boys their age: they trust their bodies. Most of the others on the Bangor West squad, no matter how talented, seem to regard feet, arms, and hands as spies and potential traitors. Larrobino is one of those boys who seem somehow more there when they are dressed for some sort of competition. He is one of the few kids on either team who can don batting helmets and not look like nerds wearing their mothers' stewpots. When Matt Kinney stands on the mound and throws a baseball, he seems perfect in his place and time. And when Ryan Larrobino steps into the right-hand batter's box and points the head of his bat out toward the pitcher for an instant before raising it to the cocked position, at his right shoulder, he also seems to be exactly where he belongs. He looks dug in even before he settles himself for the first pitch: you could draw a perfectly straight line from the ball of his shoulder to the ball of his hip and on down to the ball of his ankle. Matt Kinney was built to throw baseballs; Ryan Larrobino was built to hit them.

Last call for Bangor West. Jeff Carson, whose fourth-inning home run is really the difference in this game, and Mike Tardif, now replaces who earlier replaced Mike Wentworth on the mound for Hampden. He faces Owen King first. King goes three and two (swinging wildly for the fences at one pitch in the dirt), and then lays off a pitch just inside to work a walk. Roger Fisher follows him to the plate, pinch-hitting for the ever-gregarious Fred Moore. Roger is a small boy with Indian-dark eyes and hair. He looks like an easy out, but looks can be deceptive; Roger has good power. Today, however, he is overmatched. He strikes out. In the field, the Hampden players shift around and look at each other. They are close, and they know it. The parking lot is too far away here for the Hampden Horns to be a factor; their fans settle for simply screaming encouragement. Two women wearing purple Hampden caps are standing behind the dugout, hugging each other joyfully. Several other fans look like track runners waiting for the starter's gun; it is clear they mean to rush onto the field the moment their boys succeed in putting Bangor West away for good.

Joe Wilcox, who didn't want to be a catcher and ended up doing the job anyway, rams a one-out single up the middle and into left-center field. King stops at second. Up steps Arthur Dorr, the Bangor right fielder, who wears the world's oldest pair of high-top sneakers and has not had a hit all day. This time he rifles one, but right at the Hampden shortstop, who barely has to move. The shortstop whips the ball to second, hoping to catch King off the bag, but he's out of luck. Nevertheless, there are two out.

The Hampden fans scream further encouragement. The women behind the dugout are jumping up and down. Now there are a few Hampden Horns tootling away someplace, but they are a little early, and all one has to do to know it is to look at Mike Tardif's face as he wipes off his forehead and pounds the baseball into his glove. Ryan Larrobino steps into the right-hand batter's box. He has a fast, almost naturally perfect swing; even Ron St. Pierre will not fault him on it much. Ryan swings through Tardif's first pitch, his hardest of the day -- it makes a rifle-shot sound as it hits Kyle King's glove. Tardif then wastes one outside. King returns the ball; Tardif meditates briefly and then throws a low fastball. Ryan looks at it, and the umpire calls strike two. It has caught the outside corner -- maybe. The ump says it did, anyway, and that's the end of it.

Now the fans on both sides have fallen quiet, and so have the coaches. They're all out of it. It's only Tardif and Larrobino now, balanced on the last strike of the last out of the last game one of these teams will play. Forty-six feet between these two faces. Only, Larrobino is not watching Tardif's face. He is watching Tardif's glove, and somewhere I can hear Ron St. Pierre telling Fred, You're waiting to see how I'll come -- sidearm, three-quarters, or over the top. Larrobino is waiting to see how Tardif will come. As Tardif moves to the set position, you can faintly hear the pock-pock, pock-pock of tennis balls on a nearby



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court, but here there is only silence and the crisp black shadows of the players, lying on the dirt like silhouettes cut from black construction paper, and Larrobino is waiting to see how Tardif will come.

He comes over the top. And suddenly Larrobino is in motion, both knees and the left shoulder dipping slightly, the aluminum bat a blur in the sunlight. That aluminum-on-cowhide sound -- chink, like someone hitting a tin cup with a spoon -- is different this time. A lot different. Not chink but crunch as Ryan connects, and then the ball is in the sky, tracking out to left field -- a long shot that is clearly gone, high, wide, and handsome into the summer afternoon. The ball will later be recovered from beneath a car about 275 feet away from home plate. The expression on twelve-year-old Mike Tardif's face is stunned, thunderstruck disbelief. He takes one quick look into his glove, as if hoping to find the ball still there and discover that Larrobino's dramatic two-strike, two-out shot was only a hideous momentary dream. The two women behind the backstop look at each other in total amazement. At first, no one makes a sound. In that moment before everyone begins to scream and the Bangor west players rush out of their dugout to await Ryan at home plate and mob him when he arrives, only two people are entirely sure that it did really happen. One is Ryan himself. As he rounds first, he raises both hands to his shoulders in a brief but emphatic gesture of triumph. And, as Owen King crosses the plate with the first of the three runs that will end Hampden's Ail-Star season, Mike Tardif realizes. Standing on the pitcher's rubber for the last time as a Little Leaguer, he bursts into tears.

"You gotta remember, they're only twelve," each of the three coaches says at one time or another, and each time one of them says it, the listener feels that he -- Mansfield, Waterman, or St. Pierre -- is really reminding himself.

"When you are on the field, we'll love you and you will love each other," Waterman tells the boys again and again, and in the wake of Bangor's eleventh-hour, 15-14 win over Hampden, when they all did love each other, the boys no longer laugh at this. He continues, "From now on, I'm going to be hard on you -- very hard. When you're playing, you'll get nothing but unconditional love from me. But when we're practicing on our home field some of you are going to find out how loud I can yell. If you're goofing off, you're going to sit down. If I tell you to do something and you don't do it, you're going to sit down. Recess is over, guys -- everybody out of the pool. This is where the hard work starts."

A few nights later, Waterman hits a shot to right during fielding practice. It almost amputates Arthur Dorr's nose on the way by.

Arthur has been busy making sure his fly is zipped. Or inspecting the laces of his Keds. Or some damn thing.

"Arthur!" Neil Waterman bellows, and Arthur flinches more at the sound of that voice than he did at the close passage of the baseball. "Get in here! On the bench! Now!"

"But -- " Arthur begins.

"In here!" Neil yells back. "You're on the pine!"

Arthur trots sullenly in, head down, and J. J. Fiddler takes his place. A few nights later, Nick Trzaskos loses his chance to hit away when he fails to bunt two pitches in five tries or so. He sits on the bench by himself, cheeks flaming.

Machias, the Aroostook County/Washington County winner, is next on the docket -- a two-out-of-three series, and the winner will be District 3 champion. The first game is to be played at the Bangor field, behind the Coke plant, the second at Bob Beal Field in Machias. The last game, if needed, will be played on neutral ground between the two towns.

As Neil Waterman has promised, the coaching staff is all encouragement once the national anthem has been played and the first game starts.

"That's all right, no damage!" Dave Mansfield cries as Arthur Dorr misjudges a long shot to right and the ball lands behind him. "Get an out, now! Belly play! Let's just get an out!" No one seems to know exactly what "belly play" is, but since it seems to involve winning ball games, the boys are all for it.

No third game against Machias is necessary. Bangor West gets a strong pitching performance from Matt Kinney in the first one and wins 17-5. Winning the second game is a little tougher only because the weather does not cooperate: a drenching summer downpour washes out the first try, and it is necessary for Bangor West to make the 168-mile round trip to Machias twice in order to clinch the division. They finally get the game in, on the twenty-ninth of July. Mike Pelkey's family has spirited Bangor West's number two pitcher off to Disney World in Orlando, making Mike the

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third player to fade from the team, but Owen King steps quietly in and pitches a five-hitter, striking out eight before tiring and giving way to Mike Arnold in the sixth inning. Bangor West wins, 12-2, and becomes District 3 Little League champ. At moments like these, the pros retire to their air-conditioned locker rooms and pour champagne over each other's heads. The Bangor West team goes out to Helen's, the best (maybe the only) restaurant in Machias, to celebrate with hot dogs, hamburgers, gallons of Pepsi-Cola, and mountains of French fries. Looking at them as they laugh at each other, razz each other, and blow napkin pellets through their straws at each other, it is impossible not to be aware of how soon they will discover gaudier modes of celebration.

For now, however, this is perfectly O.K. -- great, in fact. They are not overwhelmed by what they have done, but they seem tremendously pleased, tremendously content, and entirely here. If they have been touched with magic this summer, they do not know it, and no one has as yet been unkind enough to tell them that it may be so. For now they are allowed the deep-fried simplicities of Helen's, and those simplicities are quite enough. They have won their division; the State Championship Tournament, where bigger and better teams from the more heavily populated regions downstate will probably blow them out, is still a week away.

Ryan Larrobino has changed back into his tank top. Arthur Donhas a rakish smear of ketchup on one cheek. And Owen King, who struck terror into the hearts of the Machias batters by coming at them with a powerful sidearm fastball on 0-2 counts, is burbling happily into his glass of Pepsi. Nick Trzaskos, who can look unhappier than any boy on earth when things don't break his way, looks supremely happy tonight. And why not? Tonight they're twelve and they're winners.

Not that they don't remind you themselves from time to time. Halfway back from Machias after the first trip, the rainout, J. J. Fiddler begins to wriggle around uneasily in the back seat of the car he is riding in. "I gotta go," he says. He clutches at himself and adds ominously, "Man, I gotta go bad. I mean big time." "J.J.'s gonna do it!" Joe Wilcox cries gleefully. "Watch this! J.J.'s gonna flood the car!"

"Shut up, Joey," J.J. says, and then begins to wriggle around again.

He has waited until the worst possible moment to make his announcement. The eighty-four-mile trip between Machias and Bangor is, for the most part, an exercise in emptiness. There isn't even a decent stand of trees into which J.J. can disappear for a few moments along this stretch of road -- only mile after mile of open hayfields, with Route 1A cutting a winding course through them.

Just as J.J.'s bladder is going to DEFCON-1, a providential gas station appears. The assistant coach swings in and tops up his tank while J.J. splits for the men's room. "Boy!" he says, brushing his hair out of his eyes as he jogs back to the car. "That was close!"

"Got some on your pants, J.J.," Joe Wilcox says casually, and everyone goes into spasms of wild laughter as J.J. checks.

On the trip back to Machias the next day, Matt Kinney reveals one of the chief attractions People magazine holds for boys of Little League age. "I'm sure there's one in here someplace," he says, leafing slowly through an issue he has found on the back seat. "There almost always is."

"What? What are you looking for?" third baseman Kevin Rochefort asks, peering over Matt's shoulder as Matt leafs past the week's celebs, barely giving them a look.

"The breast-examination ad," Matt explains. "You can't see everything, but you can see quite a lot. Here it is!" He holds the magazine up triumphantly.

Four other heads, each wearing a red Bangor West baseball cap, immediately cluster around the magazine. For a few minutes, at least, baseball is the furthest thing from these boys' minds.

The 1989 Maine State Little League Championship Tournament begins on August 3, just over four weeks after All-Star play began for the teams involved. The state is divided into five districts, and all five send teams to Old Town, where this year's tourney is to be held. The participants are Yarmouth, Belfast, Lewiston, York, and Bangor West. All the teams but Belfast are bigger than the Bangor West All-Stars, and Belfast is supposed to have a secret weapon. Their number one pitcher is this year's tourney wunderkind.

The naming of the tourney wunderkind is a yearly ceremony, a small tumor that seems to defy all attempts to remove it. This boy, who is anointed Kid Baseball whether he wants the honor or not, finds himself in a heretofore unsuspected spotlight, the

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object of discussion, speculation, and, inevitably, wagering. He also finds himself in the unenviable position of having to live up to all sorts of pretournament hype. A Little League tournament is a pressure situation for any kid; when you get to Tourney Town and discover you have somehow become an instant legend as well, it's usually too much.

This year's object of myth and discussion is Belfast's southpaw Stanley Sturgis. In his two outings for Belfast he has chalked up thirty strikeouts -- fourteen in his first game, sixteen in his second. Thirty K's in two games is an impressive statistic in any league, but to fully understand Sturgis's accomplishment one has to remember that Little League games consist of only six innings. That means that 83 per cent of the outs Belfast recorded with Sturgis on the hill came on strikeouts. Then there is York. All the teams that come to the Knights of Columbus field in Old Town to compete in the tourney have excellent records, but York, which is undefeated, is the clear favorite to win a ticket to the Eastern Regionals. None of their players are giants, but several of them are over five-ten, and their best pitcher, Phil Tarbox, has a fastball that may top seventy miles an hour on some pitches -- extravagant by Little League standards. Like Yarmouth and Belfast, the York players come dressed in special All-Star uniforms and matching turf shoes, which make them look like pros.

Only Bangor West and Lewiston come wearing mufti -- which is to say, shirts of many colors bearing the names of their regular-season team sponsors. Owen King wears Elks orange, Ryan Larrobino and Nick Trzaskos wear Bangor Hydro red, Roger Fisher and Fred Moore wear Lions green, and so on. The Lewiston team is dressed in similar fashion, but they have at least been provided with matching shoes and stirrups. Compared with Lewiston, the Bangor team, dressed in a variety of baggy gray sweatpants and nondescript street sneakers, looks eccentric. Next to the other teams, however, they look like out-and-out ragamuffins. No one, with the possible exception of the Bangor West coaches and the players themselves, takes them very seriously. In its first article on the tourney the local newspaper gives more coverage to Sturgis, of Belfast, than it does to the entire Bangor West team. Dave, Neil, and Saint, the odd but surprisingly effective brain trust that has brought the team this far, watch Belfast take infield and batting practice without saying much. The Belfast kids are resplendent in their new purple-and-white uniforms -- uniforms that have not worn so much as a speck of infield dirt until today. At last, Dave says, "Well, we finally got here again. We did that much. Nobody can take that away from us."

Bangor West comes from the district in which the tournament is being held this year, and the team will not have to play until two of the five teams have been eliminated. This is called a first-round bye, and right now it's the biggest, perhaps the only, advantage this team has. In their own district, they looked like champions (except for that one awful game against Hampden), but Dave, Neil, and Saint have been around long enough to know that they are now looking at an entirely different level of baseball. Their silence as they stand by the fence watching Belfast work out acknowledges this eloquently.

In contrast, York has already ordered District 4 pins. Trading pins is a tradition at the regional tournaments, and the fact that York has already laid in a supply tells an interesting tale. The pins say York means to play with the best of the East Coast, in Bristol. The pins say they don't think Yarmouth can stop them; or Belfast, with its wunderkind southpaw; or Lewiston, which clawed its way to the Division 2 championship through the losers' bracket, after dropping their first game 15-12; or, least of all, fourteen badly dressed pipsqueaks from the west side of Bangor.

"At least we'll get a chance to play," Dave says, "and we'll try to make them remember we were here."

But first Belfast and Lewiston have their chance to play, and after the Boston Pops has steamed through a recorded version of the national anthem, and a local writer of some repute has tossed out the obligatory first pitch (it sails all the way to the backstop), they have at it.

Area sports reporters have spilled a lot of ink on the subject of Stanley Sturgis, but reporters are not allowed on the field once the game starts (a situation caused by a mistake in the rules as they were originally laid out, some of them seem to feel). Once the umpire has commanded the teams to play ball, Sturgis finds himself on his own. The writers, the pundits, and the entire Belfast hot-stove league are now all on the other side of the fence.

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Baseball is a team sport, but there is only one player with a ball at the center of each diamond and only one player with a bat at the diamond's lowest point. The man with the bat keeps changing, but the pitcher remains -- unless he can no longer cut it, that is. Today is Stan Sturgis's day to discover the hard truth of tourney play: sooner or later, every wunderkind meets his match.

Sturgis struck out thirty men in his last pair of games, but that was District 2. The team Belfast is playing today, a tough bunch of scrappers out of Lewiston's Elliot Avenue League, is a different plate of beans altogether. They are not as big as the boys from York and don't field as smoothly as the boys from Yarmouth, but they are pesky and persistent. The first batter, Carlton Gagnon, personifies the gnawing, clawing spirit of the team. He singles up the middle, steals second, is sacrificed to third, and then bolts home on a steal play sent in from the bench. In the third inning, with the score 1-0, Gagnon reaches base again, this time on a fielder's choice. Randy Gervais, who follows this pest in the lineup, strikes out, but before he does, Gagnon has gone to second on a passed ball and stolen third. He scores on a two-out base hit by Bill Paradis, the third baseman.

Belfast comes up with a run in the fourth, briefly making a game of it, but then Lewiston puts them, and Stanley Sturgis, away for good, scoring two in the fifth and four more in the sixth. The final tally is 9-1. Sturgis strikes out eleven, but he also gives up seven hits, while Carlton Gagnon, Lewiston's pitcher, strikes out eight and allows only three hits. When Sturgis leaves the field at the end of the game, he looks both depressed and relieved. For him the hype and hoopla are over. He can quit being a newspaper sidebar and go back to being a kid again. His face suggests that he sees certain advantages in that.

Later, in a battle of the giants, tourney favorite York knocks off Yarmouth. Then everybody goes home (or, in the case of the visiting players, back to their motels or to the homes of their host families). Tomorrow, Friday, it will be Bangor west's turn to play while York waits to meet the winner in the closer.

Friday comes in hot, foggy, and cloudy. Rain threatens from first light, and an hour or so before Bangor west and Lewiston are scheduled to square off the rain comes -- a deluge of rain. When this sort of weather struck in Machias, the game was quickly cancelled. Not here. This is a different field -- one with a grass infield instead of dirt -- but that isn't the only factor. The major one is TV. This year, for the first time, two stations have pooled their resources and will telecast the tournament final statewide on Saturday afternoon. If the semifinal between Bangor and Lewiston is postponed, it means trouble with the schedule, and even in Maine, even in this most amateur of amateur sports, the one thing you don't jiggle is the media's schedule.

So the Bangor west and Lewiston teams are not dismissed when they come to the field. Instead, they sit in cars or cluster in little groups beneath the candy-striped canvas of the central concession booth. Then they wait for a break in the weather. And wait. And wait. Restlessness sets in, of course. Many of these kids will play in bigger games before their athletic careers end, but this is the biggest to date for all of them; they are pumped to the max.

Someone eventually has a brainstorm. After a few quick phone calls, two Old Town school buses, gleaming bright yellow in the drenching rain, pull up to the nearby Elks Club, and the players are whisked off on a tour of the Old Town Canoe Company factory and the local James River paper mill. (The James River Corporation is the prime buyer of ad time on the upcoming championship telecast.) None of the players look particularly happy as they climb aboard the buses; they don't look much happier when they arrive back. Each player is carrying a small canoe paddle, about the right size for a well-built elf. Freebies from the canoe factory. None of the boys seem to know just what they should do with the paddles, but when I check later they're all gone, just like the Bangor pennants after that first game against Millinocket. Free souvenirs -- good deal.

And there will be a game after all, it seems. At some point -- perhaps while the Little Leaguers were watching the fellows at the James River mill turn trees into toilet paper -- the rain stopped. The field has drained well, the pitcher's mound and the batters' boxes have been dusted with Quick-Dry, and now, at just past three in the afternoon, a watery sun takes its first peek through the clouds.

The Bangor west team has come back from the field trip flat and listless. No one has thrown a ball or swung a bat or run a single base so far today, but everybody already seems tired. The players walk toward the practice field without looking at

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each other; gloves dangle at the ends of arms. They walk like losers, and they talk like losers.

Instead of lecturing them, Dave lines them up and begins playing his version of pepper with them. Soon the Bangor players are razzing each other, catcalling, trying for circus catches, groaning and bitching when Dave calls an error and sends someone to the end of the line. Then, just before Dave is ready to call the workout off and take them over to Neil and Saint for batting practice, Roger Fisher steps out of the line and bends over with his glove against his belly. Dave goes to him at once, his smile becoming an expression of concern. He wants to know if Roger is all right. "Yes," Roger says. "I just wanted to get this." He bends down a little farther, dark eyes intent, plucks something out of the grass, and hands it to Dave. It is a four-leaf clover.

In Little League tournament games, the home team is always decided by a coin toss. Dave has been extremely lucky at winning these, but today he loses, and Bangor West is designated the visiting team. Sometimes even bad luck turns out to be good, though, and this is one of those days. Nick Trzaskos is the reason.

The skills of all the players have improved during their six-week season, but in some cases attitudes have improved as well. Nick started deep on the bench, despite his proven skills as a defensive player and his potential as a hitter; his fear of failure made him unready to play. Little by little, he has begun to trust himself, and now Dave is ready to try starting him. "Nick finally figured out that the other guys weren't going to give him a hard time if he dropped a ball or struck out," St. Pierre says. "For a kid like Nick, that's a big change."

Today, Nick cranks the third pitch of the game to deep center field. It is a hard, rising line drive, over the fence and gone before the center fielder has a chance to turn and look, let alone cruise back and grab it. As Nick Trzaskos rounds second and slows down, breaking into the home-run trot all these boys know so well from TV, the fans behind the backstop are treated to a rare sight: Nick is grinning. As he crosses home plate and his surprised, happy teammates mob him, he actually begins to laugh. As he enters the dugout, Neil claps him on the back, and Dave Mansfield gives him a brief, hard hug.

Nick has also finished what Dave started with his game of pepper: the team is fully awake now, and ready to do some business. Matt Kinney gives up a lead-off single to Carl Gagnon, the pest who began the process of dismantling Stanley Sturgis. Gagnon goes to second on Ryan Stretton's sacrifice, advances to third on a wild pitch, and scores on another wild pitch. It is an almost uncanny repetition of his first at bat against Belfast. Kinney's control is not great this afternoon, but Gagnon's is the only run the team from Lewiston can manage in the early going. This is unfortunate for them, because Bangor comes up hitting in the top of the second.

Owen King leads off with a deep single; Arthur Dorr follows with another; Mike Arnold reaches when Lewiston's catcher, Jason Auger, picks up Arnold's bunt and throws wild to first base. King scores on the error, putting Bangor West back on top, 2-1. Joe Wilcox, Bangor's catcher, scratches out an infield hit to load the bases. Nick Trzaskos strikes out his second time up, and that brings Ryan Larrobino to the plate. He struck out his first time up, but not now. He turns Matt Noyes's first pitch into a grand-slam home run, and after an inning and a half the score is Bangor West 6, Lewiston 1.

Up to the sixth, it is an authentic four-leaf-clover day for Bangor West. When Lewiston comes to bat for what the Bangor fans hope will be the last time, they are down by a score of 9-1. The pest, Carlton Gagnon, leads off and reaches on an error. The next batter, Ryan Stretton, also reaches on an error. The Bangor fans, who have been cheering wildly, begin to look a little uneasy. It's hard to choke when you're eight runs ahead, but not impossible. These northern New Englanders are Red Sox fans. They have seen it happen many times.

Bill Paradis makes the jitters worse by singling sharply up the middle. Both Gagnon and Stretton come home. The score is now 9-3, runner on first, nobody out. The Bangor fans shuffle and look at each other uneasily. It can't really get away from us this late in the game, can it? their looks ask. The answer is, Of course, you bet it can. In Little League, anything can and often does happen.

But not this time. Lewiston scores one more time, and that's it. Noyes, who fanned three times against Sturgis, fans for the third time today, and there is finally one out. Auger, Lewiston's catcher, hits the first pitch hard to the shortstop, Roger Fisher. Roger booted Carl Gagnon's ball earlier in the inning to open the door, but

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he picks this one up easily and shovels it to Mike Arnold, who feeds it on to Owen King at first. Auger is slow, and King's reach is long. The result is a game-ending 6-4-3 double play. You don't often see around-the-horn d.p.s in the scaled-down world of Little League, where the base paths are only sixty feet long, but Roger found a four-leaf clover today. If you have to chalk it up to anything, it might as well be that. Whatever you chalk it up to, the boys from Bangor have won another one, 9-4.

Tomorrow, there are the giants from York.

It is August 5, 1989, and in the state of Maine only twenty-nine boys are still playing Little League ball -- fourteen on the Bangor west squad and fifteen on York's team. The day is an almost exact replica of the day before: hot, foggy, and threatening. The game is scheduled to begin promptly at 12:30, but the skies open once again, and by 11 it looks as though the game will be -- must be -- cancelled. The rain comes pouring down in buckets.

Dave, Neil, and Saint are taking no chances, however. None of them liked the flat mood the kids were in when they returned from their impromptu tour of the day before, and they have no intention of allowing a repeat. No one wants to end up counting on a game of pepper or a four-leaf clover today. If there is a game -- and TV is a powerful motivator, no matter how murky the weather -- it will be for all the marbles. The winners go on to Bristol; the losers go home.

So a makeshift cavalcade of vans and station wagons driven by coaches and parents is assembled at the field behind the Coke plant, and the team is ferried the ten miles up to the University of Maine field house, a barnlike indoor facility where Neil and Saint rally them through their paces until the boys are soaked with sweat. Dave has arranged for the York team to use the field house, too, and as the Bangor team exits into the overcast the York team, dressed in their natty blue uniforms, troops in. The rain is down to isolated dribbles by three o'clock, and the ground crew works frantically to return the field to playable shape. Five makeshift TV platforms have been constructed on steel frames around the field. In a nearby parking lot is a huge truck with Maine Broadcasting System Live Remote painted on the side. Thick bundles of cable, held together with cinches of electrician's tape, lead from the cameras and the temporary announcer's booth back to this truck. One door stands open, and many TV monitors glimmer within.

York hasn't arrived from the field house yet. The Bangor west squad begins throwing outside the left-field fence, mostly to have something to do and keep the jitters at bay; they certainly don't need to warm up after the humid hour they just spent at the University. The camerapersons stand on their towers and watch the ground crew try to get rid of the water.

The outfield is in fair shape, and the skin parts of the infield have been raked and coated with Quick-Dry. The real problem is the area between home plate and the pitcher's mound. This section of the diamond was freshly resodded before the tournament began, and there has been no time for the roots to take hold and provide some natural drainage. The result is a swampy mess in front of home plate -- a mess that slopes off toward the third-base line.

Someone has an idea -- an inspiration, as it turns out -- that involves actually removing a large section of the wounded infield. While this is being done, a truck arrives from Old Town High School and two industrial-size Rinsenvacs are off-loaded. Five minutes later, the ground crew is literally vacuuming the subsurface of the infield. It works. By 3:25, the groundskeepers are replacing chunks of sod like pieces in a large green jigsaw puzzle. By 3:35, a local music teacher, accompanying herself on an acoustic guitar, is winging her way through a gorgeous rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner." And at 3:37 Bangor West's Roger Fisher, Dave's dark-horse pick to start in place of the absent Mike Pelkey, is warming up. Did Roger's find of the day before have anything to do with Dave's decision to start him instead of King or Arnold? Dave only puts his finger on the side of his nose and smiles wisely.

At 3:40, the umpire steps in. "Send it down, catcher," he says briskly. Joey does. Mike Arnold makes the sweep tag on the invisible runner, then sends the baseball on its quick journey around the infield. A TV audience that stretches from New Hampshire to the Maritime Provinces of Canada watches as Roger fusses nervously with the sleeves of his green jersey and the gray warm-up shirt he wears beneath it. Owen King tosses him the ball from first base. Fisher takes it and holds it against his hip.

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"Let's play ball," the umpire invites -- an invitation that umpires have been extending to Little League players for fifty years now -- and Dan Bouchard, York's catcher and leadoff hitter, steps into the box. Roger goes to the set position and prepares to throw the first pitch of the 1989 State Championship game.

Five days earlier:

Dave and I take the Bangor West pitching staff up to Old Town. Dave wants them all to know how the mound feels when they come up here to play for real. With Mike Pelkey gone, the staff consists of Matt Kinney (his triumph over Lewiston still four days in the future), Owen King, Roger Fisher, and Mike Arnold. We get off to a late start, and as the four boys take turns throwing, Dave and I sit in the visitors' dugout, watching the boys as the light slowly leaves the summer sky.

On the mound, Matt Kinney is throwing one hard curve after another to J. J. Fiddler. In the home dugout, across the diamond, the three other pitchers, their workouts finished, are sitting on the bench with a few teammates who have come along for the ride. Although the talk comes to me only in snatches, I can tell it's mostly about school -- a subject that comes up with greater and greater frequency during the last month of summer vacation. They talk about teachers past and teachers future, passing on the anecdotes that form an important part of their preadolescent mythology: the teacher who blew her cool during the last month of the school year because her oldest son was in a car accident; the crazy grammar-school coach (they make him sound like a lethal combination of Jason, Freddy, and Leatherface); the science teacher who supposedly once threw a kid against his locker so hard the kid was knocked out; the home-room teacher who will give you lunch money if you forget, or if you just say you forgot. It is junior high apocrypha, powerful stuff, and they tell it with great relish as twilight closes in.

Between the two dugouts, the baseball is a white streak as Matt throws it again and again. His rhythm is a kind of hypnosis: Set, wind, and fire. Set, wind, and fire. Set, wind, and fire. J.J.'s mitt cracks with each reception.

"What are they going to take with them?" I ask Dave. "When this is all over, what are they going to take with them? What difference does it make for them, do you think?"

The look on Dave's face is surprised and considering. Then he turns back to look at Matt and smiles. "They're going to take each other," he says.

It is not the answer I have been expecting -- far from it. There was an article about Little League in the paper today -- one of those think pieces that usually run in the ad-littered wasteland between the obituaries and the horoscopes. This one summarized the findings of a sociologist who spent a season monitoring Little Leaguers, and then followed their progress for a short time thereafter. He wanted to find out if the game did what Little League boosters claim it does -- that is, pass on such old-fashioned American values as fair play, hard work, and the virtue of team effort. The fellow who did the study reported that it did, sort of. But he also reported that Little League did little to change the individual lives of the players. School troublemakers were still school troublemakers when classes started again in September; good scholars were still good scholars; the class clown (read Fred Moore) who took June and July off to play some serious Little League ball was still the class clown after Labor Day. The sociologist found exceptions; exceptional play sometimes bred exceptional changes. But in the main this fellow found that the boys were about the same coming out as they were going in.

I suppose my confusion at Dave's answer grows out of my knowledge of him -- he is an almost fanatic booster of Little League. I'm sure he must have read the article, and I have been expecting him to refute the sociologist's conclusions, using the question as a springboard. Instead, he has delivered one of the hoariest chestnuts of the sports world.

On the mound, Matt continues to throw to J.J., harder than ever now. He has found that mystic place pitchers call "the groove," and even though this is only an informal practice session to familiarize the boys with the field, he is reluctant to quit.

I ask Dave if he can explain a little more fully, but I do so in a gingerly way, half expecting that I am on the verge of hitting a hitherto unsuspected jackpot of cliches: night owls never fly in the daytime; winners never quit and quitters never win; use it, don't lose it. Maybe even, God save us, a little Hummm, baby.

"Look at them," Dave says, still smiling. Something in that smile suggests he may be

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reading my mind. "Take a good look." I do. There are perhaps half a dozen of them on the bench, still laughing and telling junior high school war stories. One of them breaks out of the discussion long enough to ask Matt Kinney to throw the curve, and Matt does -- one with a particularly nasty break. The boys on the bench all laugh and cheer.

"Look at those two guys," Dave says, pointing. "One of them comes from a good home. The other one, not so good." He tosses some sunflower seeds into his mouth and then indicates another boy. "Or that one. He was born in one of the worst sections of Boston. Do you think he'd know a kid like Matt Kinney or Kevin Rochefort, if it wasn't for Little League? They won't be in the same classes at junior high, wouldn't talk to each other in the halls, wouldn't have the slightest idea the other one was alive." Matt throws another curve; this one so nasty J.J. can't handle it. It rolls all the way to the backstop, and as J.J. gets up and trots after it the boys on the bench cheer again.

"But this changes all that," Dave says. "These boys have played together and won their district together. Some come from families that are well-to-do, and there's a couple from families as poor as used dishwasher, but when they put on the uniform and cross the chalk they leave all that on the other side. Your school grades can't help you between the chalk, or what your parents do, or what they don't do. Between the chalk, what happens is the kids' business. They tend it, too, as well as they can. All the rest -- " Dave makes a shooing gesture with one hand. "All left behind. And they know it, too. Just look at them if you don't believe me, because the proof is right there."

I look across the field and see my own kid and one of the boys Dave has mentioned sitting side-by-side, heads together, talking something over seriously. They look at each other in amazement, then break out laughing.

"They played together," Dave repeats. "They practiced together, day after day, and that's probably even more important than the games. Now they're going into the State Tournament. They've even got a chance to win it. I don't think they will, but that doesn't matter. They're going to be there, and that's enough. Even if Lewiston knocks them out in the first round, that's enough. Because it's something they did together between those chalk lines. They're going to remember that. They're going to remember how that felt."

"Between the chalk," I say, and all at once I get it -- the penny drops. Dave Mansfield believes this old chestnut. Not only that, he can afford to believe it. Such cliches may be hollow in the big leagues, where some player or other tests positive for drugs every week or two and the free agent is God, but this is not the big leagues. This is where Anita Bryant sings the national anthem over battered PA speakers that have been wired to the chain-link behind the dugouts. This is where, instead of paying admission, to watch the game, you put something in the hat when it comes around. If you want to, of course. None of these kids are going to spend the off-season playing fantasy baseball in Florida with overweight businessmen, or signing expensive baseball cards at memorabilia shows, or touring the chicken circuit at two thousand bucks a night. When it's all free, Dave's smile suggests, they have to give the cliches back and let you own them again, fair and square. You are once more allowed to believe in Red Barber, John Tunis, and the Kid from Tomkinsville. Dave Mansfield believes what he is saying about how the boys are equal between the chalk, and he has a right to believe, because he and Neil and Saint have patiently led these kids to a point where they believe it. They do believe it; I can see it on their faces as they sit in the dugout on the far side of the diamond. It could be why Dave Mansfield and all the other Dave Mansfields across the country keep on doing this, year after year. It's a free pass. Not back into childhood -- it doesn't work that way -- but back into the dream.

Dave falls silent for a moment, thinking, bouncing a few sunflower seeds up and down in the palm of his hand.

"It's not about winning or losing," he says finally. "That comes later. It's about how they'll pass each other in the corridor this year, or even down the road in high school, and look at each other, and remember. In a way, they're going to be on the team that won the district in 1989 for a long time." Dave glances across into the shadowy first-base dugout, where Fred Moore is now laughing about something with Mike Arnold. Owen King glances from one to the other, grinning. "It's about knowing who your teammates are. The people you had to depend on, whether you wanted to or not."



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He watches the boys as they laugh and joke four days before their tournament is scheduled to begin, then raises his voice and tells Matt to throw four or five more and knock off.

Not all coaches who win the coin toss -- as Dave Mansfield does on August 5, for the sixth time in nine postseason games -- elect to be the home team. Some of them (the coach from Brewer, for instance) believe the so-called home-team advantage is a complete fiction, especially in a tournament game, where neither team is actually playing on its home field. The argument for being the visitors in a jackpot game runs like this: At the start of such a game, the kids on both teams are nervous. The way to take advantage of those nerves, the reasoning goes, is to bat first and let the defending team commit enough walks, balks, and errors to put you in the driver's seat. If you bat first and score four runs, these theorists conclude, you own the game before it's barely begun. QED. It's a theory Dave Mansfield has never subscribed to. "I want my lasties," he says, and for him that's the end of it. Except today is a little different. It is not only a tournament game, it is a championship tournament game -- a televised championship game, in fact. And as Roger Fisher winds and fires his first pitch past everything for ball one, Dave Mansfield's face is that of a man who is fervently hoping he hasn't made a mistake. Roger knows that he is a spot starter -- that Mike Pelkey would be out here in his place if Pelkey weren't currently shaking hands with Goofy down in Disney World -- but he manages his first-inning jitters as well as one could expect, maybe a little better. He backs off the mound following each return from the catcher, Joe Wilcox, studies the batter, fiddles with his shirtsleeves, and takes all the time he needs. Most important of all, he understands how necessary it is to keep the ball in the lowest quarter of the strike zone. The York lineup is packed with power from top to bottom. If Roger makes a mistake and gets one up in the batter's eyes -- especially a batter like Tarbox, who hits as powerfully as he throws -- it's going to get lost in a hurry.

He loses the first York batter nevertheless. Bouchard trots down to first, accompanied by the hysterical cheers of the York rooting section. The next batter is Philbrick, the shortstop. He bangs the first pitch back to Fisher. In one of those plays that sometimes decide ball games, Roger elects to go to second and try to force the lead runner. In most Little League games, this turns out to be a bad idea. Either the pitcher throws wild into center field, allowing the lead runner to get to third, or he discovers that his short-stop has not moved over to cover second and the bag is undefended. Today, however, it works. St. Pierre has drilled these boys well on their defensive positions. Matt Kinney, today's shortstop, is right where he's supposed to be. So is Roger's throw. Philbrick reaches first on a fielder's choice, but Bouchard is out. This time, it is the Bangor West fans who roar out their approval.

The play settles most of Bangor West's jitters and gives Roger Fisher some badly needed confidence. Phil Tarbox, York's most consistent hitter as well as their ace pitcher, strikes out on a pitch low and out of the strike zone. "Get him next time, Phil!" a York player calls from the bench. "You're just not used to pitching this slow!"

But speed is not the problem the York batters are having with Roger; it's location. Ron St. Pierre has preached the gospel of the low pitch all season long, and Roger Fisher -- Fish, the boys call him -- has been a quiet but extremely attentive student during Saint's ball-yard seminars. Dave's decisions to pitch Roger and bat last look pretty good as Bangor comes in to bat in the bottom of the first. I see several of the boys touch Mo, the little plastic sandal, as they enter the dugout. Confidence -- of the team, of the fans, of the coaches -- is a quality that can be measured in different ways, but whatever yardstick you choose, York comes out on the long side. The hometown cheering section has hung a sign on the lower posts of the scoreboard. York is Bristol Bound, this exuberant Fan-O-Gram reads. And there is the matter of those District 4 pins, all made up and ready for trading. But the clearest indicator of the deep confidence York's coach has in his players is revealed in his starting pitcher. All the other clubs, including Bangor West, pitched their number one starter in their first game, bearing an old playoff axiom in mind: if you don't get a date, you can't dance at the prom. If you can't win your prelim, you don't have to worry about the final. Only the coach from York ran counter to this wisdom, and pitched his number two starter, Ryan Fernald, in the first game, against Yarmouth. He got away with it -- by a whisker -- as his team outlasted Yarmouth,

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9-8. That was a close shave, but today should be the payoff. He has saved Phil Tarbox for the final, and while Tarbox may not be technically as good as Stanley Sturgis, he's got something going for him that Sturgis did not. Phil Tarbox is scary.

Nolan Ryan, probably the greatest fastball pitcher ever to play the game of baseball, likes to tell a story about a Babe Ruth League tournament game he pitched in. He hit the opposing team's leadoff batter in the arm, breaking it. He hit the second batter in the head, splitting the boy's helmet in two and knocking him out for a few moments. While this second boy was being attended to, the number three batter, ashen-faced and trembling, went up to his coach and begged the man not to make him hit. "And I didn't blame him," Ryan adds.

Tarbox is no Nolan Ryan, but he throws hard and he is aware that intimidation is the pitcher's secret weapon. Sturgis also threw hard, but he kept the ball low and outside. Sturgis was polite. Tarbox likes to work high and tight. Bangor West has got to where they are today by swinging the bat. If Tarbox can intimidate them, he will take the bats out of their hands, and if he does that Bangor is finished.

Nick Trzaskos doesn't come anywhere near a leadoff home run today. Tarbox strikes him out with an intimate fastball that has Nick ducking out of the box. Nick looks around unbelievably at the home-plate umpire and opens his mouth to protest. "Don't say a word, Nick!" Dave blares from the dugout. "Just hustle back in there!" Nick does, but his face has resumed its former narrow look. Once inside the dugout, he slings his batting helmet disgustedly under the bench.

Tarbox will try to work everyone but Ryan Larrobino high and tight today. Word on Larrobino has got around, and not even Phil Tarbox, confident as he appears to be, will challenge him. He works Ryan low and outside, finally walking him. He also walks Matt Kinney, who follows Ryan, but now he is high and tight again. Matt has superb reflexes, and he needs them to avoid being hit, and hit hard. By the time he is awarded first base, Larrobino is already at second, courtesy of a wild pitch that came within inches of Matt's face. Then Tarbox settles down a little, striking out Kevin Rochefort and Roger Fisher to end the first inning.

Roger Fisher continues to work slowly and methodically, fiddling with his sleeves between pitches, glancing around at his infield, occasionally even checking the sky, possibly for UFOs. With two on and one out, Estes, who reached on a walk, breaks for third on a pitch that bounces out of Joe Wilcox's glove and lands at his feet. Joe recovers quickly and guns the ball down to Kevin Rochefort at third. The ball is waiting for Estes when he arrives, and he trots back to the dugout. Two out; Fernald has gone to second on the play.

Wyatt, York's number eight hitter, dribbles one up the right side of the infield. The ball's progress is slowed further by the soggy condition of the ground. Fisher goes for the ball. So does King, the first baseman. Roger grabs it, then slips on the wet grass and crawls for the bag, ball in hand. Wyatt beats him easily. Fernald comes all the way home on the play to score the first run of the game.

If Roger is going to crack, one would expect it to happen right here. He checks his infield, and examines the ball. He appears ready to pitch, and then steps off the rubber. His sleeves, it seems, are not quite to his liking after all. He takes his time fixing them while Matt Francke, the York batter, grows old and mouldy in the batter's box. By the time Fisher finally gets around to throwing, he all but owns Francke, who hits an easy hopper to Kevin Rochefort at third. Rochefort throws on to Matt Kinney, forcing Wyatt. Still, York has drawn first blood and leads, 1-0, at the end of an inning and a half.

Bangor West doesn't put any runs on the board in the second inning, either, but they score against Phil Tarbox just the same. The rangy York pitcher trotted off the mound with his head up at the end of the first inning. Going in after pitching the second, he trudges with his head down, and some of his teammates glance at him uneasily.

Tarbox doesn't intimidate Owen King, who bats first in Bangor's half of the second, but he is a big boy, much slower than Matt Kinney. After running the count full, Tarbox tries to jam him inside. The fastball turns up and in -- too much of both. King is hit hard in the armpit. He falls to the ground, clutching the hurt place, too stunned to cry at first, but obviously in pain. Eventually, the tears do come -- not a lot of them, but real tears, for all that. At six foot two and over two hundred pounds, he's as big as a man, but he's still only twelve and not used to being hit by seventy-mile-an-hour inside fastballs. Tarbox immediately rushes off

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the mound toward him, his face a mask of concern and contrition. The umpire, already bending over the downed player, waves him off impatiently. The on-duty paramedic who hurries out doesn't even give Tarbox a second look. The fans do, however. The fans are giving him all kinds of second looks.

"Take him out before he hits someone else!" one yells.

"Pull him before someone really gets hurt!" another adds, as if being hit in the ribcage by a fastball weren't really getting hurt.

"Warn im, ump!" a third voice chimes in. "That was a deliberate brushback! Warn im what happens if he does it again!"

Tarbox glances toward the fans, and for a moment this boy, who has formerly radiated a kind of serene confidence, looks very young and very uncertain. He looks, in fact, the way Stanley Sturgis did as the Belfast-Lewiston game neared its conclusion. As he goes back to the mound, he slams the ball into his glove in frustration.

King, meanwhile, has been helped to his feet. After making it clear to Neil Waterman, the paramedic, and the umpire that he wants to stay in the game and is capable of doing so, he trots down to first base. Both sets of fans give him a solid round of applause.

Phil Tarbox, who of course had no intention of hitting the lead-off batter in a one-run game, immediately shows how shaken he is by grooving one right down the middle to Arthur Dorr. Arthur, the second-smallest boy in Bangor West's starting lineup, accepts this unexpected but welcome gift by driving it deep to right center. King is off at the crack of the bat. He rounds third, knowing he can't score but hoping to draw the throw that will assure Arthur of second base, and, as he does, the wet conditions become a factor. The third-base side of the diamond is still damp. When King tries to put on the brakes, his feet go out from under him and he lands on his ass. The relay has come in to Tarbox, and Tarbox will not risk a throw; he charges King, who is making feeble efforts to regain his feet. At the end, Bangor's biggest player just raises his arms in an eloquent, touching gesture: I surrender. Thanks to the slippery conditions, Tarbox now has a runner on second with one out instead of runners on second and third with none out. It is a big difference, and Tarbox displays his renewed confidence by sinking out Mike Arnold. Then, on his third pitch to Joe Wilcox, the next batter, he hits him smack in the elbow. This time, the cries of outrage from the Bangor West fans are louder, and tinged with threat. Several of them direct their ire at the home-plate umpire, demanding that Tarbox be taken out. The ump, who understands this situation completely, does not bother even to warn Tarbox. The stricken look on the boy's face as Wilcox jogs shakily down to first undoubtedly tells him it isn't necessary. But York's manager has to come out and settle the pitcher down, to point out the obvious: You have two outs and first base was open anyway. There's no problem. But for Tarbox there is a problem. He has hit two boys this inning, hit both of them hard enough to make them cry. If that weren't a problem, he would need a mental examination.

York puts together three singles to score two runs in the top of the third, opening up a 3-0 lead. If these runs, both solidly earned, had come in the top of the first, Bangor would have been in serious trouble, but when the players come in for their raps they look eager and excited. There is no feeling among them that the game is lost, no whiff of failure.

Ryan Larrobino is Bangor's first batter in the bottom of the third, and Tarbox works him carefully -- too carefully. He has begun to aim the ball, and the result is fairly predictable. With the count at 1-2, he plinks Larrobino on the shoulder. Larrobino turns and pounds his bat once on the ground -- whether in pain, frustration, or anger is impossible to tell. Most probably it is all three. Reading the mood of the crowd is much easier. The Bangor fans are on their feet, yelling angrily at Tarbox and at the ump. On the York side, the fans are silent and bewildered; it is not the game they were expecting. As Ryan trots down to first, he glances over at Tarbox. It is brief, that glance, but it seems clear enough: That's the third time, you. Make it the last time.

Tarbox confers briefly with his coach, then faces Matt Kinney. His confidence is in shambles, and his first pitch to Matt, a wild one, suggests that he wants to continue pitching this game about as much as a cat wants a bubble bath. Larrobino beats York catcher Dan Bouchard's throw to second easily. Tarbox walks Kinney. The next batter is Kevin Rochefort. After two failed bunt attempts, Roach settles back and allows Phil Tarbox the chance to dig his hole a little deeper. He does, walking

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Kevin after having him 1-1. Tarbox has now thrown more than sixty pitches in less than three innings.

Roger Fisher also goes 3-2 with Tarbox, who is now relying almost exclusively on soft breaking stuff; he seems to have decided that if he does hit another batter he will not hit him hard. There is no place to put Fish; the bases are jammed. Tarbox knows it and takes a calculated risk, grooving another one, believing Fish will lay off in the hope of a walk. Roger snaps hungrily at it instead, bouncing one between first and second for a base hit. Larrobino trots home with Bangor's first run. Owen King, the player who was at bat when Phil Tarbox started to self-destruct, is the next batter. The York coach, suspecting his ace will work even less successfully to King this time, has seen enough. Matt Francke comes in to relieve, and Tarbox becomes York's catcher. As he squats behind the plate to warm Francke up, he looks both resigned and relieved. Francke doesn't hit anyone, but he is unable to stop the bleeding. At the end of three innings, Bangor West has only two hits, but they lead York, 5-3.

It is now the fifth inning. The air is full of gray moisture, and the York is Bristol Bound banner tacked to the scoreboard uprights has begun to sag. The fans look a little saggy themselves, and increasingly uneasy. Is York Bristol bound? Well, we're supposed to be, their faces say, but it's the fifth inning now, and we're still two runs behind. My God, how did it get so late so early?

Roger Fisher continues to cruise, and in the bottom of the fifth Bangor West puts what appear to be the final nails in York's coffin. Mike Arnold leads off with a single. Joe Wilcox sacrifices pinch-runner Fred Moore to second, and Larrobino doubles off Francke, scoring Moore. This brings Matt Kinney to the plate. After a passed ball advances Ryan to third, Kinney hits an easy grounder to short, but it squirts off the infielder's glove and Larrobino trots home. Bangor West takes the field jubilantly, owning a 7-3 lead and only needing three more outs.

When Roger Fisher takes the mound to face York in the top of the sixth, he has thrown ninety-seven pitches, and he's a tired boy. He shows it at once by walking pinch-hitter Tim Pollack on a full count. Dave and Neil have seen enough. Fisher goes to second base, and Mike Arnold, who has been warming up between innings, takes over on the mound. He is ordinarily a good reliever, but it's not his day. Tension, maybe, or maybe it's just that the damp dirt of the mound has caused a change in his normal motion. He gets Francke to fly out, but then Bouchard walks, Philbrick doubles, and Pollack, the runner charged to Fish, scores, and Bouchard is held up at third; by itself, Pollack's run means nothing. The important thing is that York now has runners on second and third, and the potential tying run is coming to the plate. The potential tying run is someone with a very personal interest in getting a hit, because he is the main reason York is only two outs away from extinction. The potential tying run is Phil Tarbox.

Mike works the count to 1-1, and then throws a fastball right down the middle of the plate. In the Bangor West dugout, Dave Mansfield winces and raises one hand toward his forehead in a warding-off gesture even as Tarbox begins his swing. There is the hard sound of Tarbox accomplishing that most difficult of baseball feats: using the round bat to hit the round ball squarely on the button.

Ryan Larrobino takes off the instant Tarbox connects, but he runs out of room much too early. The ball clears the fence by twenty feet, bangs off a TV camera, and bounces back onto the field. Ryan looks at it disconsolately as the York fans go mad, and the entire York team boils out of the dugout to greet Tarbox, who has hit a three-run homer and redeemed himself in spectacular fashion. He does not step on home plate but jumps on it. His face wears an expression of near-beatific satisfaction. He is mobbed by his ecstatic teammates; on his way back to the dugout, his feet are barely allowed to touch the ground.

The Bangor fans sit in silence, utterly stunned by this awful reversal. Yesterday, against Lewiston, Bangor flirted with disaster; today they have swooned in its arms. Mo has changed sides again, and the fans are clearly afraid that this time it has changed for good. Mike Arnold confers with Dave and Neil. They are telling him to go on back and pitch hard, that the game is only tied, not lost, but Mike is clearly a dejected, unhappy boy.

The next batter, Hutchins, hits an easy two-hopper to Matt Kinney, but Arnold is not the only one who is shaken; the usually dependable Kinney boots the ball, and Hutchins is on. Andy Estes pops out to Rochefort at third, but Hutchins advances to

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second on a passed ball. King grabs Matt Hoyt's pop-up for the third out, and Bangor West is out of trouble.

The team has a chance to put it away in the bottom of the sixth, except that doesn't quite happen, either. They go one-two-three against Matt Francke, and all at once Bangor West is in its first extra-innings game of postseason play, tied 7-7 with York.

During the game against Lewiston, the muddy weather eventually unraveled. Not today. As Bangor West takes the field in the top of the seventh, the skies grow steadily darker. It's now approaching six o'clock, and even under these conditions the field should still be clear and fairly bright, but fog has begun to creep in. Watching a videotape of the game would make someone who wasn't there believe something was wrong with the TV cameras; everything looks listless, dull, underexposed.

Shirtsleeve fans in the center-field bleachers are becoming disembodied heads and hands; in the outfield, Trzaskos, Larrobino, and Arthur Dorr are discernible chiefly by their shirts.

Just before Mike throws the first pitch of the seventh, Neil elbows Dave and points out to right field. Dave immediately calls time and trots out to see what's the matter with Arthur Dorr, who is standing bent over, with his head almost between his knees.

Arthur looks up at Dave with some surprise as he approaches. "I'm O.K.," he says in answer to the unspoken question.

"Then what in hell are you doing?" Dave asks.

"Looking for four-leaf clovers," Arthur responds.

Dave is too flabbergasted, or too amused, to lecture the boy. He simply tells Arthur it might be more appropriate to look for them after the game is over.

Arthur glances around at the creeping fog before looking back at Dave. "I think by then it's gonna be too dark," he says.

With Arthur set to rights, the game can continue, and Mike Arnold does a creditable job -- possibly because he's facing the substitute-riddled bottom of York's order. York does not score, and Bangor comes up in the bottom of the seventh with another chance to win it.

They come close to doing just that. With the bases loaded and two out, Roger Fisher hits one hard up the first-base line. Matt Hoyt is right there to pounce on it, however, and the teams change sides again.

Philbrick flies out to Nick Trzaskos to open the eighth, and then Phil Tarbox steps in. Tarbox is not finished working Bangor West over yet. He has regained his confidence; his face is utterly serene as he takes Mike's first pitch for a called strike. He swings at the next one, a pretty decent changeup that bounces off Joe Wilcox's shin guard. He steps out of the box, squats with the bat between his knees, and concentrates. This is a Zen technique the York coach has taught these boys -- Francke has done it several times on the mound while in tight spots -- and it works for Tarbox this time, along with a little help from Mike Arnold.

Arnold's final pitch to Tarbox is a hanging curve up in the batter's eyes, exactly where Dave and Neil hoped no pitch would be today, and Tarbox creams it. It goes deep to left center, high over the fence. There is no camera stanchion to stop this one; it ends up in the woods, and the York fans are on their feet again, chanting "Phil-Phil-Phil" as Tarbox circles third, comes down the line, and jumps high in the air. He doesn't just jump on home plate; he spikes it.

Nor, it seems at first, will that be all. Hutchins bangs a single up the middle and gets second on an error. Estes follows this by hitting one to third, and Rochefort throws badly to second. Luckily, Roger Fisher is backed up by Arthur Dorr, saving a second run, but now York has guys at first and second with only one out.

Dave calls Owen King in to pitch, and Mike Arnold moves over to first. Following a wild pitch that moves the runners up to second and third, Matt Hoyt bangs one on the ground to Kevin Rochefort. In the game that Bangor West lost to Hampden, Casey Kinney was able to come back and make the play after committing an error. Rochefort does it today, and in spades. He comes up with the ball, and then holds it for a moment, making sure Hutchins isn't going to break for the plate. Then he throws across the diamond to Mike, getting the slow-running Matt Hoyt by two steps.

Considering the wringer these boys have been through, it is an incredibly canny piece of baseball. Bangor West has recovered itself, and King works Ryan Fernald -- who hit a three-run homer against Yarmouth -- perfectly, nipping at the corners, using his weirdly effective sidearm delivery to supplement the over-the-top

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fastball. Fernald pops weakly to first and the inning is over. At the end of seven and a half, York leads Bangor, 8-7. Six of York's RBIs belong to Philip Tarbox. Matt Francke, York's pitcher, is as tired as Fisher was when Dave finally elected to replace him with Mike Arnold. The difference is that Dave had a Mike Arnold and, behind Mike, an Owen King. The York coach has no one; he used Ryan Fernald against Yarmouth, making him ineligible to pitch today, and now it's Francke forever. He starts off the eighth well enough, striking out King. Arthur Dorr comes up next, one for four on the day (a double off Tarbox). Francke, obviously struggling now but just as obviously determined to finish this game, goes full with Arthur, then serves one up that's way outside. Arthur trots down to first. Mike Arnold comes up next. It wasn't his day on the mound, but he does well this time at the plate, laying down a perfect bunt. The intent is not to sacrifice; Mike is bunting for the base hit, and almost gets it. But the ball will not quite die in that soggy patch between home and the pitcher's mound. Francke snatches it, glances toward second, and then elects to go to first. Now there are two men out with a runner at second. Bangor West is an out away from the end. Joe Wilcox, the catcher, is up next. With the count 2-1, he hits a chalk hugger up the first-base line. Matt Hoyt grabs it, but just an instant too late; he takes the ball less than half a foot into foul territory, and the first-base umpire is right there to call it. Hoyt, who has been ready to charge the mound and embrace Matt Francke, instead returns the ball. Now the count on Joey is 2-2. Francke steps off the rubber, stares straight up into the sky, and concentrates. Then he steps back on and delivers one high and out of the strike zone. Joey goes for it anyway, not even looking, swinging in self-defense. The bat makes contact with the ball -- pure luck -- and it bounces foul. Francke does the concentration bit again, and then throws -- just outside. Ball three. Now comes what may be the pitch of the game. It appears to be a high strike, a game-ending strike, but the umpire calls ball four. Joe Wilcox trots down to first base with a faint expression of disbelief on his face. It is only later, watching the slow-motion replay on the TV tape of the game, that one can see how right, and how good, the umpire's call was. Joe Wilcox, so anxious that he is pin-wheeling the bat in his hands like a golf club right up to the moment of the pitch, rises on his tiptoes as the ball approaches, and this is the reason it appears to be letter-high to him as it crosses the plate. The umpire, who never moves, discounts all of Joe's nervous tics and makes a major league call. The rules say you cannot shrink the strike zone by crouching; by the same token, you cannot expand it by stretching. If Joe hadn't gone up on his toes, Francke's pitch would have been throat-high instead of letter-high. So, instead of becoming the third out and ending the game, Joe becomes another base runner. One of the TV cameras was trained on York's Matt Francke as he made the pitch, and it caught a remarkable image. A video replay shows Francke light up as the ball breaks downward just a moment too late to earn the strike. His pitching hand comes up in a victorious fistful salute. At this moment, he begins to move to his right, toward the York dugout, and the umpire blocks him out. When he returns to view a second later, his expression has become one of unhappiness and incredulity. He does not argue with the call -- these kids are taught not to do that in their regular seasons, and to never, never, never do it in a championship situation -- but as he prepares to work the next batter Francke appears to be crying. Bangor West is still alive, and as Nick Trzaskos approaches the plate they come to their feet and begin to yell. Nick is obviously hoping for a free ride, and he gets one. Francke walks him on five pitches. It is the eleventh walk given up by York pitching today. Nick trots down to first, loading the bases, and Ryan Larrobino steps in. Again and again, it has been Ryan Larrobino in these situations, and now it is Ryan once more. The Bangor West fans are on their feet, screaming. The Bangor players crowd the dugout, fingers hooked through the mesh, watching anxiously. "I can't believe it," one of the TV commentators says. "I can't believe the script of this game."

His partner chips in, "Well, I'll tell you what. Either way, this is how both teams would want the game to end."

As he speaks, the camera offers its own ghastly counterpoint to the comment by focusing on the stricken face of Matt Francke. The image strongly suggests that this is the last thing the stricken York lefty wanted. Why would he? Larrobino has doubled twice,

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walked twice, and been hit by a pitch. York hasn't retired him a single time. Francke throws high and outside, then low. These are his 135th and 136th pitches. The boy is exhausted. Chuck Bittner, the York manager, calls him over for a brief conference. Larrobino waits for the conference to end, then steps in again. Matt Francke concentrates, head back and eyes closed; he looks like a baby bird waiting to be fed. Then he winds up and throws the last pitch of the Maine Little League season.

Larrobino has not been watching the concentration bit. His head is down; he is only watching to see how Francke will come, and his eyes never leave the ball. It is a fastball, low and tailing toward the outside corner of the plate. Ryan Larrobino dips a little. The head of the bat whips around. He catches all of this one, really cranks it, and as the ball flies out of the park to deep right-center field, his arms shoot up over his head and he begins to tap-dance deliriously down the first-base line.

On the mound, Matt Francke, who was twice within inches of winning his game, lowers his head, not wanting to look. And as Ryan rounds second and starts back toward home, he seems to finally understand what he has done, and at that point he begins to weep.

The fans are in hysterics; the sports commentators are in hysterics; even Dave and Neil seem close to hysterics as they block the plate, making room for Ryan to touch it. Rounding third, he passes the umpire there, who is still twirling one magisterial finger in the gray air, signaling home run.

Behind the plate, Phil Tarbox takes off his mask and walks away from the celebration. He stamps his foot once, his face clenched with deep frustration. He walks off-camera and out of Little League for good. He will play Babe Ruth ball next year, and probably he will play it well, but there will be no more games like this for Tarbox, or for any of these boys. This one is, as they say, in the books.

Ryan Larrobino, laughing, crying, holding his helmet on his head with one hand and pointing straight up to the gray sky with the other, leaps high, comes down on home plate, and then leaps again, straight into the arms of his teammates, who bear him away in triumph. The game is over; Bangor West has won, 11-8. They are Maine's 1989 Little League Champions.

I look toward the fence on the first-base side and see a remarkable sight: a forest of waving hands. The parents of the players have crowded against the chain-link and are reaching across the top to touch their sons. Many of the parents are also in tears. The boys all wear identical expressions of happy disbelief, and all these hands -- hundreds of them, it seems -- wave toward them, wanting to touch, wanting to congratulate, wanting to hug, wanting to feel.

The boys ignore them. Later, there will be touches and hugs. First, however, there is business to take care of. They line up and slap hands with the boys from York, crossing at home plate in the ritual manner. Most of the boys on both teams are crying now, - some so hard they can barely walk.

Then, in the instant before the Bangor boys go to the fence, where all those hands are still waving, they surround their coaches and pummel them and each other in joyful triumph. They have held on to win their tournament -- Ryan and Matt, Owen and Arthur, Mike and Roger Fisher, finder of four-leaf clovers. At this moment they are cheering each other, and everything else will just have to wait. Then they break for the fence, going toward their crying, cheering, laughing parents, and the world begins to turn in its ordinary course once again.

"How long are we gonna keep on playing, Coach?" J. J. Fiddler asked Neil Waterman after Bangor clinched the division against Machias.

"JJ.," Neil replied, "we're gonna play until someone makes us stop."

The team that finally made Bangor West stop was Westfield, Massachusetts. Bangor West played them in the second round of the Eastern Regional Little League Championship, at Bristol, Connecticut, on August 15th, 1989. Matt Kinney pitched for Bangor West and threw the game of his life, striking out nine, walking five (one intentional), and giving up only three hits. Bangor West, however, got only one hit off Westfield pitcher Tim Laurita, and that one belonged, predictably enough, to Ryan Larrobino. The final score was 2-1, Westfield. Credit Bangor's one RBI in the game to King, on a bases-loaded walk. Credit the game-winning RBI to Laurita, also on a bases-loaded walk. It was a hell of a game, a purist's game, but it couldn't match the one against York.

In the pro world, it was a bad year for baseball. A future Hall of Famer was banned

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from the sport for life; a retired pitcher shot his wife and then took his own life; the commissioner suffered a fatal heart attack; the first world Series game to be played at Candlestick Park in over twenty years was postponed when an earthquake shook northern California. But the majors are only a small part of what baseball is about. In other places and in other leagues -- Little League, for instance, where there are no free agents, no salaries, and no gate admissions -- it was a pretty fine year. The Eastern Regional Tournament winner was Trumbull, Connecticut. On August 26, 1989, Trumbull beat Taiwan to win the Little League world Series. It was the first time an American team had won the Williamsport world Series since 1983, and the first time in fourteen years that the winner had come from the region in which Bangor West plays.

In September, the Maine division of the United States Baseball Federation voted Dave Mansfield amateur coach of the year.