

# FICTION

## Knuckle-curve

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Mike gripped the baseball and paced the mound. The ball was scuffed and dirty, six-and-a-half innings old. They only rubbed down four baseballs before the game for Michigan high school games. He paused long enough to bring Vanderkolb, the big senior first baseman, out to the mound.

“Wassup, hoss?”

Vanderkolb was a football player slumming in the spring with the baseball team for kicks. He was a tall and powerful quarterback who had gone undefeated in his two years as a starter for South Christian High School.

“I’m fine,” Mike said. He wasn’t fine. He was upset. He looked over at the bench and saw Coach Kooiker with his foot on the top step, examining his star pitcher with squinted eyes.

“You tired or what, hoss?” Vanderkolb asked.

Mike didn’t enjoy being called “hoss.” He never wanted to be a jock for South. He wasn’t a wide receiver or a linebacker or a tackle like so many of his teammates. His catcher, DeKonig, was a tackle who would play for Eastern Michigan in the fall. Eddings, the burly third baseman, was a linebacker and would join Vanderkolb at Michigan State. Williams and VanderKodde, his speedy outfielders, were underclass speedsters who had caught so many of Vanderkolb’s bullets for scores. South Christian was a football school—winning four of the last eight state championships—that used its football talent to power the baseball team on the side. Mike never played football. He was a pitcher, not a gorilla.

Mike scowled at Vanderkolb, a scowl born more from personal animus than competitive fire. “Get out of here.” He was tired of being bossed around by the pimply quarterback who took it upon himself to be everyone’s leader. He disliked Vanderkolb—and most of the rest of his teammates, for that matter. He often sat in the dugout on days he didn’t pitch, hoping the team would lose.

On more than one occasion he found himself wishing for a serious injury to befall Vanderkolb. Something in his throwing shoulder maybe.

Vanderkolb took Mike's scowl as a good sign and bounded back to his position.

Mike had an 8-1 lead going into the bottom of the seventh and final inning. He had already struck out thirteen Wayland hitters, a typically dominant performance for him. The only run was unearned, thanks to an uncharacteristic throwing error by Jim DeKuiper at short. He toed the rubber and looked in. Steve McNeese, Wayland's sophomore center fielder, was up. He had struck McNeese out twice already. Fastball sign.

Mike went into his windup and snapped off a heater at McNeese's knees. That one felt great. He knew the scouts sitting behind the backstop with their portable radar guns would see that he was throwing harder in the later innings than in the early innings, getting stronger as the game wore on. Two more fastballs at the letters and McNeese sat down, completely outmatched.

Pitching against Wayland meant that Mike would be trying to retire his close friends. He grew up in Wayland, going to Steeby Elementary and the Pearl Street middle school with half the players on the other side of the field. However, like so many of Wayland's promising male athletes, he attended South Christian, fifteen miles north of Wayland in Cutlerville, a Grand Rapids suburb.

Preston Brown stepped to the plate. Mike had known Preston since first grade. Until ninth grade Mike, Preston, and Kevin Sessler had played ball together every summer, three Indian boys with talent and baseball flowing through their veins every day of the year. They had lost only two or three games in seven years, dominating Allegan County grade school summer baseball. In eighth grade they were the student managers for Coach Pokagon's 1986 varsity team, which had reached the regional finals, the state's final eight. The rest of that summer they played American Legion ball and talked about winning a state championship for Wayland.

Instead, Mike's dad forced him north to a sports-fanatical parochial school with no hot lunches and no busing. Mike's dad had dreamed of playing professional ball, but he could never hit a curve ball. He gave up baseball, married a Potawatomi woman, and took a job in construction. He pushed his son hard, and he lived vicariously through the boy.

Wayland and South played in the same league, so Mike faced Wayland frequently. In three years on the South varsity, he had confronted and beaten Wayland six times. That day would be the seventh and last time. Because South was only a few miles north, the games between them—baseball, football, soft-

ball, boys and girls basketball, volleyball—could be brutal. But South was a powerhouse and towered above Wayland.

Mike threw a fastball at Preston's knees for strike one—Preston always took strike one. Mike wondered if the pitch registered ninety on any of the three radar guns behind home plate. Preston stepped out of the box, smiling like he knew he would smack the next pitch over the scoreboard beyond the left-field fence. Mike had told his friend more than once that he was the high school equivalent of the Mike Hargrove-style human rain delay.

Preston was born to play ball for Coach Pokagon, his uncle. Coach Pokagon was a big Potawatomi guy who once drove a ball to the wall off of Dave Rozema during tryouts for the Grand Rapids J.C. team a few days before Rozema signed with the Tigers in the 1970s. Preston had been going to Wayland baseball games since he was seven, when his uncle, an English teacher, took over the team. During Coach Pokagon's tenure Wayland's teams were always in the top half of the league and made a deep run into the state tournament every few years.

Preston had been devastated when Mike said he would be going to South. They both knew Wayland wouldn't have a good chance of doing any damage in the state tournament without Mike's fastball. Preston had actually challenged Mike to a fight but instead broke down into adolescent tears. He made Mike promise never to tell anyone about the crying.

Preston returned to the box and settled in. Mike knew Preston was a right-handed, dead-pull hitter who could drive a fastball up and over the plate to the gap, so he threw the slurve thing he'd been throwing since the summer after fourth grade in neighborhood whiffle ball tournaments, the one that started at the batter's head and broke down on the inside corner. Preston knew what was coming from the way Mike grunted and where the ball was headed—he'd seen Mike do the same thing for almost a decade—and waited on the pitch. He took a beautiful cut—probably the best cut he would ever take at a breaking pitch in his life, the same cut he'd been taking in hundreds of whiffle ball games for years—and fouled the pitch off down the left-field line. With a taped-up wooden broom handle or a plastic bat, he would have taken the pitch inside-out to right field for a hit, but he had never acquired the strength or timing to do it with a thirty-ounce aluminum bat and a live baseball.

Preston walked back to the plate from halfway down the first base line, still smiling but looking a little desperate. Mike knew his friend's best chance to get a hit off him was gone. He wouldn't make contact with another of Mike's pitches. Mike had faced Preston nineteen times in high school games and had struck him out eleven times, popped him up four times, forced three weak

grounders, and plunked him in the armpit once—the first time they had faced each other, almost laughing too hard to play.

For both teams that day's game was the final game of the regular season. Mike watched Preston milk his last at-bat for everything he could. Preston's baseball career would be over in a few days or weeks, but Mike's career was just beginning. Mike would decide after the season whether to take the scholarship with the University of Michigan or sign with the Phillies scout sitting behind the backstop, chain-smoking cigarettes and telling bad jokes and making promises to Mike's father. Preston had already decided to go to Notre Dame on an academic scholarship.

Preston picked up his bat, bending his stout frame like an old man. He squeezed it and looked like he was going to step back in for another pitch when, like an afterthought, he licked the tip of his finger and held it aloft, signaling in their ancient language that the wind was blowing out and he was about to take Mike deep. Mike chuckled in spite of himself, and he could hear Kevin in the dugout laughing out loud at the private joke. A couple of the other guys in the Wayland dugout tittered because they knew the joke, too, from the summer days of whiffle ball in Preston's backyard.

Mike threw the 0-2 pitch at Preston's eyes to see if he would bite. The hitter let it go by and stepped back out of the box.

Mike wiped the sweat off his forehead and looked over at the Wayland dugout. He wondered what it would have been like if he had stayed at Wayland. Would he be out there facing Vanderkolb with a 2-1 lead, hoping to keep the muscular power hitter in the park and preserve the lead? Would Wayland be 25-4 like South instead of 17-12 coming in? Would any of the scouts sitting behind home be there to watch him? Wayland had no sports legacy. He remembered Preston telling him about the seniors from two years earlier who cried like babies in the dugout after the game near the end of the year that guaranteed them a winning season. For these seniors who had played basketball and football and baseball, it was the first time they had ever recorded a winning record in any sport in high school.

Then Mike heard Coach Pokagon's deep growl rumble out from the third base coach's box. "Get back in there, Brown. It's getting dark."

It was getting dark and the wind was picking up, blowing out to right field. It would rain hard right after the game ended.

Mike saw Preston's mom leaning on the fence down the left-field side beyond the dugout, pointing her 35-millimeter camera at her son. He saw Preston's dad training a camcorder toward home plate from behind the backstop. They went to every one of Preston's games. They had even traveled to Battle

Creek the year before when Mike pitched for South in the state semifinals against Harper Creek.

Preston heeded his uncle and stepped back in. He wasn't smiling anymore; he was trying to survive for a few more seconds, trying to get the bat on the ball and make something happen. Mike took the sign for another fastball and delivered. Preston took a cut, and it looked to Mike that he had just nicked it foul. DeKonig thought so too and asked the umpire for another ball. When the ump just stared at the catcher, Preston took off running to first as fast as his short little legs would allow, which wasn't very fast at all. The catcher held out his hand even as he stupidly stared at Preston before he realized the ball was in play. The backup infielder wearing a battling helmet and coaching first for Wayland frantically waved Preston to second before DeKonig recovered the ball. There was no play at second.

Mike received the ball back from his slow-witted catcher and scowled. He looked over at Preston on second and shook his head. Preston stood there clapping his hands like a little boy, as he always did. Mike would never admit it until they were both decades older, but he envied Preston. While Mike and Kevin did roadwork and lifted free weights after school, Preston read Foucault, Emily Dickinson, and Dostoyevsky and rented imported art films from the Rite-Aid next to Harding's Market. Preston's future rested with his mind, a much more resilient organ than Mike's throwing arm or Kevin's powerful wrists and hands. A slip on wet grass during a low-key jog in the outfield could terminate their budding baseball careers. Preston would have no such worries. An injury to his chubby body would only make him a little later for class. Preston had a much better chance to become a professional writer or an Indian lawyer than Mike would have of making it to the big leagues. In fact, it was statistically probable that Mike's baseball career would be over before Preston finished graduate school.

Mike toed the rubber and heard a smattering of excitement from the Wayland dugout. The game wasn't legitimately in doubt, but Preston was only the third hitter to reach base and he represented a second run. Mike hadn't given up more than one run in a game since the semifinal against Harper Creek the year before.

Richie Rivas came up to the plate. Along with Preston and Kevin, he was one of the three Potawatomi kids to play for Coach Pokagon. George Mamagona, the light-hitting outfielder, was the fourth Indian on the team, an Ottawa. Unlike the other Indian players, Richie was loud and brash, bad-tempered, and occasionally violent. His mom had died when he was young, and his dad was an alcoholic and had disappeared a few months earlier. Richie lived half the

time with his older brother and the other half of the time over Coach Pokagon's garage on Maple Street.

Richie was also a fantastic athlete, loaded with speed, power, and grace, and he could dominate a baseball field, a football field, or a basketball court at any given moment. The first time Richie faced Mike, he had cranked a long homer over the plastic center-field fence at South Christian. He bragged about it endlessly but, since then, had struck out nine times in a row against Mike.

Seeing Richie was always hard on Mike because he was a long-ball threat and also because it reminded him of something his father had said. In his arguments with his dad about going to South, he complained to his dad that he didn't want to go there because it was loaded with arrogant, self-righteous Dutch Christian Reformed kids. His dad responded harshly. "Boy," he said, "you have to think about your future. Playing ball with those stinking Indians will get you nowhere. Indians like Richie."

Mike looked in, but DeKonig was standing up and the ump was calling time. Vanderkolb had trotted out to the mound.

"What?" Mike asked.

"I want you to brain this punk. He took some cheap shots at us in football, and I want you to hurt this guy."

Mike was tired of the macho crap. "No." He turned away.

Vanderkolb grabbed his shoulder. His grip was amazing and painful. Mike wondered if the quarterback could end his promising pitching prospects with one twist of his wrist. He put his nose up close to Mike's face. Mike could smell Skoal.

"I ain't askin, Singel. I want you to fuckin break this timber nigger's jaw."

Mike watched the big man return to first. The game wasn't fun anymore. He looked over at Preston, who hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary. He toed the rubber and looked in. Fastball, up and in. Jesus, everyone wanted Richie decapitated. He went into his set and checked Preston. He had his standard two-foot lead. He could have been sitting at his Gram's dinner table, eating spaghetti, and reading *The Sporting News* for all the intensity on his face.

Mike's pitch headed for the outside corner and Richie lunged for it, popping it up on the first base side. Vanderkolb drifted over and hovered below it. For an instant Mike suspected the big man would drop the ball on purpose, but it settled into his glove. He jogged back to the mound to deliver the ball to Mike personally.

"Weak, Singel," he said.

Mike looked away.

"What did you call me?" Richie was yelling at Dekonig. "Say it again," he

said. "Say it again so the ump will hear you and toss your butt out of here. I dare you."

Dekonig ignored Richie.

"Sit down, Rivas," Vanderkolb yelled from the mound.

Richie turned and looked at Vanderkolb. "Shut up," he said, "you big hick."

"Sit down, batter," the ump said. "That's enough."

Mike knew little Freddie Munsen, the second baseman, was up next, but he wasn't coming to the plate. Instead, he saw Kevin Sessler whipping around a weighted bat, warming up. Coach Pokagon had sat Kevin because he had wrenched his ankle the night before at Kenowa Hills, so he hadn't played yet.

Unlike Preston, Kevin had cut his long hair when he started basketball in ninth grade. His older brother Charles Sessler had played basketball and baseball for Wayland fifteen years before, averaging twenty points a game and hitting .375, an all-stater in both sports. The sports-mad locals referred to Kevin as "Little Sess," or "Little Sis" when he played badly. Kevin was taller and more of a rebounder and defender in hoops, so he didn't score as much as Big Sess. But in baseball, Kevin was the real deal, breaking Big Sess's RBI record the Monday before the South game. Like his older brother, Kevin was going to Western Michigan, an invited walk-on.

Mike's battles with Kevin were always exciting. Kevin only hit .250 against Mike, but his four hits were all doubles and he had driven in six against the hard-throwing righty. Scouts came to watch Kevin because of a long foul ball he had hit off one of Mike's fastballs up and in the year before in a summer league game.

It was Preston and Kevin who had gotten Mike interested in baseball way back in third grade. His own father's attempts to teach him to catch and throw never caught on. He preferred his Intellivision video game console. When Preston moved in next door, he talked Preston into coming outside, where they would get muddy climbing trees, riding their dirt bikes, and stalking each other as Cowboy and Indian. Mike started going with Preston to family picnics in Salem or Dorr. Preston's family—dozens of Anishinaabes, Ottawas, Potawatomis, and a few Chippewas—would meet and play softball and eat hot dogs and fry bread all day long. Playing ball with the Pokagons and Pigeons and Mamagonas and Churches was fun, and Mike discovered he was really good at it. He met Kevin, Richie, George, and Preston's uncle there and developed his love for the game.

Mike joined the Little League and was placed on Kevin and Preston's teams—first with Dancer's Fashions in the junior division and then with Harding's Market in the senior division. In their four years in Little League,

they lost only two games and won the league every year. Ditto the Babe Ruth league playing for Wayland Standard.

Kevin dug in a little gingerly and looked up at Mike. Mike knew the scouts would be more interested in their match-up. He looked in and got the sign for a straight change. He liked Dekonig's call and moved into his delivery. As he let the ball go he heard Eddings yell, "Going!" and knew he had forgotten about Preston completely.

Preston was slow afoot, but he took a gigantic lead to see if he could get Mike's attention, and when he didn't he took off. Kevin saw the huge jump Preston had and laid the bat on his shoulder.

Dekonig caught the ball cleanly but had to throw over a six-five batter who made no effort to move out of the way. The ball sailed and Preston slid in, well ahead of the tag.

As Eddings returned the ball to his pitcher, Coach Pokagon said to Preston, "And what the hell are you doing here?"

Preston, huffing and puffing and wiping the dust off, said, "He forgot about me."

"So what, Brown." Coach Pokagon refused to treat his nephew different than the other players. "You forgot the golden rule."

"I know—never make the first or third out at third. But he completely forgot about me. I had a great jump."

"Your run doesn't mean anything."

"Yeah, but when will I ever get a chance to steal third off a future Hall-of-Famer?"

"I think you're too smart for your own good, Brown."

Mike listened to the whole exchange with a great degree of envy. He couldn't ever see himself having a conversation like theirs with Coach Kooiker. And then he wondered if the scouts would make a big deal about the fact that he had let Wayland's slowest player steal third. He shook his head and tried to focus.

It wasn't hard. The three of them had been in the same situation dozens—maybe hundreds—of times before in their backyards. Preston on base. Mike pitching, facing Kevin. The fourth player—usually George or even Preston's younger brother Ed—roaming the yard, waiting to chase down the hard plastic ball covered in duct tape.

Mike worked from the windup. Coach Pokagon was right when he said the run didn't mean anything. Preston wasn't going anywhere. Kevin had been sitting on the bench all day, so Dekonig called for a high fastball.

Kevin fouled it straight back, making it 0-2.

Mike thought about throwing the knuckle-curve Kevin taught him to throw

maybe six, seven years earlier. It was the most vicious pitch he had in his repertoire, but he couldn't control it. He tried throwing it in hardball practice a few years back—the first time the pitch surprised Dekonig and smashed right into his junk—but he hadn't tried it in a real game until a month earlier. He'd only throw it 0-2, nobody on, and at least a five-run lead—the situation here—or if a real hitter was up. He had struck out Berrios from Ottawa Hills and Curtis from Forest Hills Central with the pitch in the last few weeks. They'd be playing for LSU and the Florida State League, respectively, in the next year.

Dekonig called for another change, and Mike agreed. Kevin had seen it already in the at-bat—not to mention the hundreds of times he'd seen it in the backyard—and knew it would start in the left-handed batter's box and tail in to the outside corner. He waited and smacked a ferocious line drive over Vanderkolb's head that drifted just foul down the line.

The scouts were loving it.

Do I show him the knuckle-curve? Mike thought. He's never seen the real thing, only the whiffle ball version. He looked over at Preston, who was looking away toward the plate but pointing with his left hand to the knuckles on his right hand as if reading Mike's mind. Mike realized that Kevin was taking signs from Coach Pokagon but could have noticed Preston's signal. He shook his head, looked down, and smiled. He hadn't had so much fun since whiffle ball. He turned and Vanderkolb was standing right in front of him, an angry ogre with a bad smell.

"What?" Mike said.

Vanderkolb turned away and spoke into his glove. "Throw the high heat and strike this brown piece of shit out." Then he left the mound.

Mike shook off the bigotry. Did Vanderkolb even know he was an Anishinaabe too? The last two outs had been alternately fun and horrifying. He looked around the diamond—teammates he despised, opponents he respected, scouts in the bleachers, pitching against his home team, darkness approaching, and rain coming. He decided to throw the knuckle-curve and, to his astonishment, Dekonig called for it. He saw Kevin fighting off a smile.

Kevin had saved Mike. After Mike began attending South Christian, Wayland football players and wrestlers started egging his house and setting his family's trashcan on fire. It got worse right before the big football game with South but stopped altogether when Mike rode to the game with Kevin, Preston, Big Sess, and Old Man Sess. He sat on the Wayland side with his friends. He sat with what amounted to Wayland sports royalty.

Mike notched his fingernail on the ball and delivered the knuckle-curve to Kevin. Kevin had already guessed from the way Mike held the ball in his glove what the pitch would be and waited. He checked his swing because the ball

dropped too sharply and hit the edge of the plate. Dekonig had trouble blocking the pitch because of an old football injury to his hip. He couldn't get his knee down fast enough. Instead of the ball bouncing off his fleshy thigh and going nowhere, it hit the hard plastic of his knee guard and shot straight back out to the mound.

Preston saw the whole thing and was waiting for a pitch in the dirt. When he saw the ball get away from Dekonig, he sprinted toward home.

Mike, surprised to see the ball back in his glove, was slow to react. He saw Preston move, so he threw the ball back to Dekonig. Too late.

Preston slid home and popped up like a jack-in-the-box. He gave Kevin a high-five, and they laughed like the whole thing was planned.

Then, for no good reason, especially given the fact that South had a six-run lead with two outs in the bottom of the final inning with no one on base, Dekonig shoved Preston in the back and sent the kid sprawling across the dirt. Kevin, utterly shocked by Dekonig's action, stared first at Preston on the ground and then at the catcher, who was smiling like a mean little boy who has pulled the wings of a fly, and he never saw Vanderkolb fly across the diamond with a bead on him. The quarterback had been waiting for something to happen and jumped on his opportunity, moving like a linebacker with amazing closing speed. Eddings, who actually was a linebacker with amazing closing speed, flew toward the melee from his third base station but was intercepted by Coach Pokagon and George Mamagona, who had rushed to his teammates' and friends' assistance.

Simultaneously, Richie Rivas leaped out the dugout and leveled Dekonig as though on a corner blitz. The catcher, screaming epithets at Kevin and Preston about drunken Indians, retarded Indians, and faggot Indians, never knew what hit him.

Coach Kooiker screamed across the diamond at Coach Pokagon to let Eddings go and exercise control over his damn players. The coach and George did everything they could to hold back Eddings, who was shouting and squirming and threatening their lives.

Richie was Vanderkolb's real target, and they squared off. Distracted by Eddings, no one noticed them at first. Richie, a veteran of more than thirty brutal fistfights with his older brother, punched Vanderkolb in the face five times before the big kid could react. He fell to the ground gushing blood.

When it was over the umpires declared a forfeit, Richie was arrested, and Vanderkolb and Dekonig rode a Wayland Area Ambulance to Allegan County General Hospital.

Mike did not leave with the rest of his team. He lived only a few hundreds yards away from the field, right next door to the school. He didn't speak

to anyone on his way out, even when Kevin and Preston said he played a good game.

A week later Wayland's season ended when a corn-fed flamethrower from Comstock came into town and tossed a one-hitter in the predistrict qualifier. Mike pitched South Christian to the state semifinals in Battle Creek again. He pitched shutout ball for eight innings, matched by his opponent, but lost on a ninth-inning home run by an all-state quarterback from Brighton with massive forearms.

Preston, Kevin, Ed, and Preston's parents were in attendance.

After the game they all went to Preston's house and sat around in the backyard. The grass had grown up over the base paths and the mound, but there were still deep grooves in the lawn. They talked about Little League and Babe Ruth, about how they never lost when they were all together. They talked about how Mike had learned to pitch and Kevin had learned to hit over the years they played whiffle ball. They talked about the hundreds of games they had played, all the baseball dramas they had acted out.

Mike said that after the Wayland-South game he had wanted to quit the team and the school, but his dad talked him into finishing.

They sat in silence for several minutes. It was late, but it wouldn't be getting dark for a while.

"Let's play a game," Preston said. "One last game. Me and Ed. We'll take you guys on right now."

Mike, tired, sore, and emotionally spent, looked around at his friends and jumped up out of his lawn chair. He had been waiting for someone to say something. He went into the garage to see if his old glove—the one he always kept at Preston's house for whiffle ball—was still there. It was, hanging from the same old nail. He grabbed it and bounded into the outfield.