

The Tale of Bobby Butts-In-Seats and the Guy Who Decked Him

By Rick Marcou

1.

Back in the New York area. Three weeks after.

“So how’d you feel after you hit him in the head?”

“How’d I feel? I felt shitty. How do you think I felt?”

“I don’t know. Did you mean to hit him?”

“No, of course not. I wouldn’t hurt another player like that.”

“What I mean is, were you just backing him off the plate, setting him up for the next pitch? Or did you throw at him? He did hit a homer earlier, I know these things happen, you guys protect each other. And Bobby did celebrate a bit on that one.”

“Yeah he did. But no, I didn’t throw at him on purpose.”

Or did I?

“That didn’t sound very convincing.”

“I had him set up at 0 and 2. I was busting him inside to go back outside with a slider on the next one. I just went too far inside.”

“That’s it? Nothing more than that?”

“Why does it matter? I hit him, it’s done. I’m sorry he got hit, that he got injured. I feel like I’m being interrogated.”

“You’re not being interrogated. I’m just trying to understand what happened, what’s inside your head, so I can help you get through it.”

“Is that why they sent me here, so you can get inside my head? They think there’s something wrong with me?”

“Listen, you’re not the same pitcher since. You’re tentative out there. The team’s concerned. That’s why you’re here.”

“I’m trying. It’s tough though.”

“I know it is. So let’s go back to that game. You looked pretty pumped up when you were pitching. Then, after he went down, you looked kind of shocked for a moment, and then when you saw not moving your expression completely changed. Worry, like it was your teammate you hit.”

“I was pretty jacked, like I always am on the mound. But after that pitch I kinda froze, couldn’t believe what happened. I was just trying to move him back a little to set up the slider. I didn’t mean to hit him. And he’s lyin’ there, not moving. I thought he might be dead. That’s why I probably looked worried. I was. I mean, I might have just killed the best player in baseball.”

“Is that it? Because he’s so good, you felt even more guilt? Maybe if he was just a scrub, a call-up from Double A, it wouldn’t be so bad. The fans wouldn’t care as much.”

“Hell yeah. This is Bobby Suarez. The All-Star from Queens, playing for his hometown team. Thought all those Mets fans were gonna kill me right there.”

“So this is guilt. You knocked down thousands of Mets fans at the same time.”

“Yeah. And I’m one of ‘em. I grew up in South Orange. Been a Met fan my whole life. I feel like I killed baseball for lots of people, including myself.”

“And you don’t feel worthy of playing anymore?”

“I don’t know about that. Why do you say that?”

“Because your velocity is down since it happened, you can’t throw strikes, and you can’t throw an inside pitch to save your life. I mean, I’m not missing something here, am I? Did you all of a sudden decide to change the way you’ve been pitching for, what, 10 years. Gonna become a crafty veteran, picking at outside corners and throwing offspeed? C’mon, Craig, I’ve been watching you, you’re 95 miles per hour and a nice slider. Deadly on lefties, pretty good on righties.”

“I’m just struggling with my control, it’ll come back.”

“You think so? It’s been 3 weeks. They gave you a couple weeks to get your head around this, work it out down at Triple A, but it’s time to move on. Bobby’s on the shelf for a while, there’s nothing you can do now. No need to hold yourself out too. These things happen. Always have, always will. It ain’t fair, but life ain’t fair. Get back in there throwing the way you know how to, or get the hell out and make way for the next lug who can bring it. There are plenty behind you, you know that.”

“Is that why you’re talking to me? The team thinks I’m worth another shot, they bring in the bigtime shrink to see if the rocks in my head can line up again.”

“Of course that’s why. You think you’re such a fucking unique conversationalist I decided to take time out of my schedule for you. This is a business. It’s my job to figure out if you can get your head straight on this thing, move past it and get back on the mound. I mean *really* on the mound, not what you’ve been throwing out there lately.”

“That’s pretty direct. Pretty harsh, if you ask me. But hey, this is your office.”

“Damn right it’s my office. And it’s my time. Yeah, I get paid nicely per hour, but certainly not as much as you get paid per hour. Think about that. You get the league minimum, what’s that about \$400,000? You’ll make about 60 appearances in a season, right? About 15 minutes in the bullpen, maybe 15 minutes in the game, maybe 30 if you get 2 innings, or 1 bad one. So that’s like 40 total hours of work, which is what, \$10,000 per hour? I make \$500 per hour and I feel fucking rich. I’ve got 2 advanced degrees, you’ve got 6’3”, 220 and a strong arm.”

“What’s your point? My career might only last 5 years, you got 30 or 40 doing this.”

“First of all, seeing as your career is only 2 months in, that 5 years isn’t looking too good unless you get yourself straight. And my point? My point is SUCK IT UP! You

made a mistake, a guy got hurt, but you didn't. He could've gotten the same deal running into the outfield fence, or getting hit with a line drive on the basepath. It's happened before. So decide if you want that \$10,000 per hour, because it's real nice. And if you do it well enough, I'll tell you something, you can sign a contract and you'll make more like \$100,000 per hour."

"You know, your numbers are a little high. What about the hours of practice and side throwing for every hour of game time? That counts too."

"No it doesn't. You don't get paid to practice. I read up in my spare time, I write notes, do research, but I don't get paid for that, it's not billable. It just makes me better in my billable time. Same as your practice time. Trust me, you're making \$10,000 per hour. Go try and make that much painting houses."

2.

June 8, Citi Field, 7th inning, 1 out, Reds lead 4-2

"Purnell gets Williams on an easy groundout, so Bobby will come up with the bases empty."

"Yeah, that's what he wanted. Suarez is hot, already has a homer and a single tonight, and is hitting .462 in his last 5 games. We'll see if Purnell pitches around him, or tries to get him to chase the slider."

Bobby Butts-in-Seats steps into the box, plants his left foot and rotates it on the ball like he's squishing a bug. He then positions his right foot, does a couple half-squats, and takes two slow half-swings of the bat off his left shoulder as he peers out to the mound. Same routine every time. Routine is a ballplayer's friend.

“Bobby’s ready. Purnell, working from the windup, delivers a big breaking slider that catches the inside corner. Bobby watches it, probably wants to see what the rookie has before taking a cut.”

“Yeah, this is the first time he’s seeing the big lefty, makes sense to take a look.”

“Purnell, working fast, comes with another slider, this time a nasty one that sails way outside, but Suarez bites. Took a real awkward swing at that one.”

“I don’t think he saw the rotation out of the kid’s hand, that pitch moved a foot off the plate. Must have thought he was coming with a fastball and committed early. That wasn’t one of Bobby’s prettier swings.

“No, definitely not. He steps out and looks around. Calls time and walks back to the on deck circle to wipe the pine tar on the bat a couple times. Probably trying to regroup a little before stepping back in.”

“Definitely Jim, he needs to figure out this kid. I say kid, but I think these guys are actually the same age. But of course Bobby’s been in the majors about 4 years longer than Craig Purnell.”

“Maybe they’ve actually seen each other before. Purnell’s a Jersey kid, Bobby’s from Queens. You never know. Back in our day only the American Legion teams used to travel a bit. These days these kids have separate travel teams, they play all over.”

“Bobby seems to be in no hurry, still wiping down the handle. Purnell doesn’t look happy, seems to saying something to himself. Maybe getting himself psyched up.”

“Yeah, here comes Willets out to the mound to talk to him, maybe about what they should throw.”

“Willets is doing all the talking, glove over his mouth. Purnell is nodding, but still looks like he’s chomping at the bit. If Bobby is stalling, trying to get in the kid’s head, I think it’s working.”

“Yeah, welcome to the big leagues kid. Probably didn’t see a lot of that type of tactic in Louisville.”

“Meeting’s over now, Willets jogs back to the plate. Bobby’s coming back too. Funny, Dale Tellefson just stood back there and didn’t signal to either player. He seemed fine with it all. He’s not usually that patient.”

“No, he’s not.”

“But Bobby’s finally ready. Purnell peers in, shakes off the first, nods to the second. Winds up, and it’s a fastball. Whoa, that hit Bobby square in the helmet and he’s down. Not moving.”

3.

Craig turned the knob and entered the house. Walked into the foyer, kicked his sneakers off, and headed back to the kitchen. His mother came out of the kitchen at the same time, surprised to see him.

“Mom, why are you leaving the door unlocked? This is still South Orange.”

“It’s fine. Nobody’s coming in. And it was locked before, Marnie just left a few minutes ago. I guess I forgot to lock it behind her.”

“How’s she doin’?”

“Good. Tommy finally got a job, helping out in the construction office. Gonna learn the administration end of the business, since he can’t be on the sites anymore.”

“He still getting headaches?”

“Yeah, but not as bad. They just don’t want to risk it. Insurance company won’t allow him out there anyway, the company won’t be covered for another injury.”

“Yeah, makes sense.”

“When’s the last time you talked to him? Marnie says he hasn’t heard from you in a while.”

“Probably a month or so. It’s hard, I don’t know what to say. First his head injury, then my thing.”

“You coming from the psychiatrist?”

“Psychologist. Yeah. You should have seen this guy’s office. Top floor of the Prudential building in Newark. Views of downtown New York, the Hudson. Pretty cool.”

“And how was the session? Did it help?”

“I don’t know. They say I gotta see this guy, maybe talk to him from the road once in a while.”

“For how long?”

“Til I’m better, whatever that means. I guess probably til I’m back up with the team, because I don’t think they’re bringing me back up until then.”

“So you have to stay with Louisville?”

“Yeah, for now.”

“You have to go back there today?”

“No, I told you, we’re playing Scranton tonight. I’ll drive out in a little while. Only takes about an hour and a half, and I don’t need to be at the field til 4:30.”

“Are you pitching tonight?”

“I don’t know. I’ll be in the bullpen, I’m available. I didn’t pitch yesterday. I think they want me to get more work, so I’ll probably go an inning.”

“What do they need to see to put you back with the team?”

“I don’t know. Throw hard, throw strikes. They think I’m not the same pitcher since. That my head is all screwed up because of it.”

“Is it?”

“I don’t know.....I don’t know.”

4.

*12 years earlier, Little League Mid-Atlantic Regional
Semifinal game, Bristol CT*

“This Queens team is finally getting to Mr. Purnell. He sailed through the first 3 innings, 7 strikeouts, but here in the 4th it’s a different story.”

“You’re right Chip, he seems to be struggling with his fastball. Hasn’t thrown it for a strike yet in this inning. Walked 2 and given up a squibber, and all of a sudden the bases are loaded.”

“He’s had to rely on his change-up, which could be dangerous with the next batter. Bobby Suarez is a definite threat to go deep.”

“Let’s see how he deals. First pitch he tries the slider but that bounces in front of the plate. Mikey Davis does a great job blocking that, saving a run.”

“Craig stares in, then comes set in the stretch. Throws a fast ball, but that misses outside. I think he was trying to stay outside, away from Suarez, make him chase. But he has no room on the bases, he’s going to have to come in to him. Don’t want to fall behind 3 and oh on him.”

“Yeah, if the lead was more than just the 1 run maybe you’d consider walking him. Kinda like the Barry Bonds treatment. But he has to pitch to him.”

“He looks in, shakes off the first, nods on the second signal Davis threw down, and now he’s set. I think he’s going with a change-up.”

“Wow. He did Chip, and Bobby Suarez just hit it a long way. That ball is gone! Bobby flashes that great smile of his as he trots down the first base line. Oh my, he hit that about 250 feet. Not exactly Barry Bonds distance, but pretty good for a 12 year old.”

“And Craig Purnell is completely distraught, bent over at the waist, his glove covering his face. He laid that change-up right down the middle. I think Suarez knew it was coming, he timed it perfectly. Shot it out to dead center, well over the fence. That makes the score now 4-1 Queens, a complete turnaround of how this game was going for the first 3 innings.”

5.

6 years earlier, MLB Draft, Day 3

“Hello, this is Craig.”

“Craig Purnell, this is Bob Miller, Assistant GM of the Cincinnati Reds. I just want to tell you that we just drafted you and we’re real excited to have you join our organization.”

“Wow, the Reds. That’s awesome. Thank you, Mr. Miller. I’m psyched to be a Red. I can’t wait to get out there and get started.”

“That’s what I like to hear. We saw you throw a bunch of times, we know you can bring it, we think you have a big future ahead of you. Hopefully you’ll be suiting up in Great American Ballpark someday soon.”

“That would be amazing.”

“Well, son, one of our team coordinators will be in touch with you in the next day or so and tell you what the next steps are. There’ll be a contract to be signed, and then you’ll report to rookie ball. The adventure starts, you’ll be a pro baseball player. Sound good?”

“Sounds great. What I’ve always dreamed of.”

“Well, good luck son. And again, welcome to the Reds.”

“Thank you sir. Goodbye.”

“Well?” Craig’s father asked, his mom close behind holding his arm.

“The Reds. That was the assistant GM. He said they just drafted me.”

“That’s great. We’re so proud of you Craig. You earned this.”

“Yeah, I feel like I did. Wish I could’ve been picked earlier. I think it was like the 30th round, maybe even the 35th. Money’s not that great at that level.”

“Son, it’s not about the money. It’s the opportunity. You work hard, show them what you can do, you’ll rise up through the minors. Then the money will come. These first contracts won’t support anyone for a lifetime.”

“Oh yeah, wait and see what the Mets sign Bobby Suarez to.”

“That the kid they drafted in the first round?”

“Yeah, 4th pick. He’s gonna get a couple million signing bonus.”

“Seriously? Boy, times have changed. Is...that the kid....”

“Yeah, that’s him.”

6.

Louisville, 5 weeks after

“This is Bobby, speak.”

“Bobby, this is Craig Purnell. I’m callin’ to see how you’re doin’.”

“How I’m doin’? I’m doin’ shitty, cause a you.”

“Yeah, I heard. Listen, I’m sorry man. I didn’t mean to hit you, to get that pitch so far up and in. I was just trying to bust it inside a bit, but it got way from me.”

“Yeah, it did. You guys think you can come inside like that, that’s my life you’re messin’ with. I’m lucky to be here

right now. You throw a 96 mile an hour fastball at a dude's head, you gonna kill 'em."

"I know, I gotta have better control. I'm workin' on it."

"You sure it wasn't on purpose. You an' me got history. Not many people know about that, they haven't checked it up I guess. You still pissed off all these years later?"

"No, no, that's not it. Yeah I was pissed as hell then, I gave you a changeup right down the middle and you crushed it. But that was what, 12 or 13 years ago. I moved on man."

"OK, but it sure didn't look like it out there. Unless you can't control your fastball. Then get your ass back down to the minors."

"Yeah, I hear ya. But it was a mistake, nothing more, no intention. I swear. I just wanted to check in and make sure you're doing OK, that you're gonna be able to come back. I'm still a Mets fan, just like you, they need you back. And I know you need it too. I hope it's soon."

"I appreciate it. How about you, you back in the minors right?"

"Yeah, I can't seem to throw strikes anymore. Kinda lost my nerve with inside pitches. Gotta figure it out."

"Well, I'll be honest. One side of me is happy to hear it. You put me on ice, you should be there too. And hearing about pitchers afraid to throw inside is music to my ears. But I'll be bigger than that. Don't be a pussy. Man up, get back on the mound and throw like you know how to. Bust guys inside, then throw that nasty slider outside. But you keep hitting guys and I'll be the first guy in line to light you up."

"I appreciate that Bobby, I know you got bigger issues than my welfare. You're a good dude."

"I am, that's true. But part of it is because I wanna face you again, and take you over the damn apple in center."

7.

August 16th, Citi Field, 6th inning, 2 outs, game tied 5-5

“So with Bobby due up, Lowry is going back to his bullpen. And won’t this be interesting, it’s Craig Purnell coming in.”

“Jim, I tell ya, sometimes you can’t even make these things up. And here’s why. Sure, everyone knows the recent history. Purnell beamed Bobby two months ago right here. Bobby missed 52 games, but a week after he returns he will have to face the same guy. Purnell was in the minors for just as long, he came back up to the Reds just two weeks ago, but he’s been throwing really well since. But folks, here’s what we’ve learned since then. These two faced each other once before, when they were 12 years old. Little League World Series, in a regional game between Bobby’s Queens team and Purnell’s South Orange New Jersey team. And wouldn’t you know it, in true Bobby Suarez fashion, he hit a grand slam off him to lead Queens to the win, and eventually to Williamsport.”

“Wow Chuck, that’s amazing. So was there some additional purpose to that pitch back in June? Hate to think that kind of thing can linger for twelve years, but who knows.”

“Yep, who knows. But we have round three here, don’t we? Should be interesting.”

“Purnell is finishing his warm up tosses. Willets comes out again to talk to him. Probably going over the signs one more time, or maybe Willets saw something in Purnell’s pitches.”

“That’s true, he relies so heavily on that slider, some days it doesn’t break like you want it, maybe Willets saw something.”

“Meeting’s over, and Bobby strolls up to the plate. And look at this. Bobby’s looking out at Purnell the entire time

he's walking up. Purnell is staring right back at him. And wait a sec. I think Purnell just tipped his cap. Could that be Chuck?"

"He did, because Bobby just nodded back. Wow, you don't see that often. Great sportsmanship, especially considering the history."

"Agreed. Classy move by Purnell."

"Now let's see how the battle ensues."