

Stay In The Game

by Bill Judge

Twenty seven year old Mike Greeley sat on the far end of the Freighters' dugout and tapped his thirty three ounce bat against his scruffy black baseball spikes. From underneath his forest green cap, his eyes tracked the ball thrown back from Bixby, the Mudhens' catcher to Gassoneau, the Mudhens' pitcher. He glanced up into the stands. He always did when the Freighters played in Ohio. Even though they were far from Dayton, playing the Mudhens reminded him of a man he hoped to see again.

Someday.

A man – no, the man – who trudged with him through rain, sleet, snow and fire, and dropped with him from the sky, for almost four years. Four long, hellish years.

A lifetime.

He dropped his gaze. The man wasn't there.

The national anthem had been played. The crowd of almost a thousand had settled in their seats. The umpire took a couple of steps closer to the Mudhens' catcher and called out, "Play ball!"

Two middle-aged men in rumpled suits, dark ties, sunglasses and black banded fedoras sat together and opened their scorecards and notebooks. They each had a pair of binoculars on their chests that dangled from black lanyards. They sat about twelve rows behind home plate.

One of the men licked the tip of his pencil and wrote the date and teams on a clean page.

"I like this kid," the other man said. He wore a light brown suit.

"Uh-huh." The pencil licker grunted and wrote the kid's name below the date and teams.

"Do the Pirates have any plans to trade for him?"

The pencil licker hesitated and then asked, "Do the Giants?"

The other man gave a light smile. "Fair enough."

"I think they know what they've got here."

"Probably," the man in the brown suit said.

The kid, Horatio Armbruster, stepped into the batter's box, dressed in the Freighters' grey fannel road uniform and dark green striped baseball stirrup socks. He was the Freighters' second baseman, leadoff hitter and hottest property.

Greeley settled his eyes on him. Batting almost three fifty, Bruiser was young, just nineteen. He was so young, he didn't even get drafted into the services during the war. By the time the kid had graduated from high school, Germany had surrendered and the atomic bomb had been dropped twice on Japan. Greeley shook his head and gripped the handle of his bat. He remembered gripping the stock of a rifle not too long ago. He eased up and went back to tapping.

The kid breezed through single A ball and moved up to the double A Freighters by June. He hit four hundred in single A and was hitting over three eighty in double A during the last two weeks. Greeley figured he'd be in triple A by August. He was fast, young, a good fielder and could hit a ton. He was a big reason the Freighters were in a pennant race.

Greeley hit his cleats again and again. He wasn't bored. He wasn't anxious. But he was just – uncomfortable. Again.

He was uncomfortable every game of the season and every day since the war. The toes on his right foot burned. His left foot did too, but his right foot was worse. He kicked the bench post to try to get a different feeling in his foot, other than fire. It didn't help. He decided he had to focus on the game.

Bruiser had a good grip on his bat, tight but light, if that made any sense to anybody. It did to Greeley.

He watched everything he could about the kid, looking for that "something new" that might help him get over his two seventy two batting average.

Two seventy two wasn't bad. It's just that about half the outfielders in the league batted two seventy, give or take, and he had to do something to stand out. Something that could get him to the majors. He also knew his time was running out at his age. Lots of ballplayers came back from the war and lots of kids were looking for their first break, and never appreciating it. Just like Bruiser. He had to get something going.

Gassoneau stared at the plate, went into his wind up and a blur flew home.

"Ball one."

The crowd buzzed. A couple of men clapped. A vendor called out "Peanuts!" Greeley could smell hot dogs and popcorn.

At first, neither of the two men in the stands said anything. One of the men added a plus sign next to Gassoneau's name. He turned the pencil around and hovered over the mark as if he was going to erase it but then stuck the pencil back behind his ear.

"Little extra gas in Gassoneau," the man with the pencil finally remarked.

"Maybe."

A pretty decent fastball, Greeley thought. It just missed the outside part of the plate. Bruiser waited for Bixby to throw the ball back to Gassoneau before Bruiser reached with his bat over the plate and touched the black outside edge.

Maybe he was just stretching. And maybe, Greeley thought, he just showed Gassoneau how little he cared about him. That he knew the strike zone quite well, thank you very much. The kid had talent and nerve.

Nerve could be a good thing.

When Greeley first started in the minors, six years before, he was like the kid. Everything was easy. He ripped through single A ball, batting three twenty with twelve homers in twenty five games before they moved him up to double A. He started off good there, too, and ended with a three hundred average and eighteen more homers by the end of the forty-one season.

He was told that they would move him up to triple A that next season. He was okay with the plan. He'd spend a few weeks, maybe a couple of months, in the minors and maybe get a break and maybe go to the "Bigs". That's what he thought in October, 1941.

But then, the rest of the year was literally history. Joe DiMaggio hit in fifty-six straight games. Ted Williams hit four-oh-six. And Japan bombed Pearl Harbor.

The world changed.

He changed.

Just not right away.

Greeley shipped to Georgia, was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division in March of 1942 and deployed to England in 1943. He was one of the first Americans back into France during the Normandy invasion. He was a jumper. A paratrooper. Couldn't get more nerve than jumping out of a plane and into combat. Assigned to General McAuliffe, he endured the bitter cold of the Battle of the Bulge. That was where he got his first permanent war injury – frostbite. Though both feet were affected, his right foot hurt worst on most days. He tapped the shoe again.

"Ball two."

Two and oh. Curve ball, inside but low.

Greeley rolled the bat with the handle between his two hands and the top of the barrel head down. He made little circles by twirling it on the concrete walk. Bruiser, he thought, wouldn't take a pitch. Most leadoff hitters would but he wouldn't.

He doubted that his manager would give the take sign anyway. Why should he? Nobody would tell the leadoff hitter to walk except all of conventional baseball.

Greeley zeroed in on the pitcher, hoping to pick up a clue on his delivery. Then he snuck a peek at the kid. Boy, the kid was as cool as a gin and tonic.

Bruiser stuck the bat out and slowly and deliberately drew it back. He was ready. Gassoneau curled up into his wind.

“What do you think?” One of the men asked out loud.

“He’ll take a pitch. It’s the smart thing to do,” the other answered.

They both raised their binoculars.

Fastball, Greeley thought. Fastball inside part of the plate. He didn’t know why he thought that. He just did.

Gassoneau’s big leg came up and the ball that came out of his hand looked something like the flash of a match and a lightning strike. Trouble, Greeley thought with the split second he had to think anything at all before the fastball crossed the plate.

Gassoneau was good. He had every reason to hope for a call up to triple A too. He had the juice for it. Truth be told, he had a major league fastball, just a minor league game plan that needed some seasoning. Like that pitch.

Bruiser twisted and then unwound like a greyhound, getting the barrel of his bat down on the inside part of the plate just as the ball crossed the front edge of the white dish. He slashed a line drive that curved like a banana between the second and first basemen. It darted in fair territory before bouncing against the bullpen wall. The right fielder chased it too far and the ball scooted past him and rolled out into the outfield. Bruiser was already sliding into third by the time the throw left the hand of the cut-off man.

The kid opened with a triple when most players would have taken the walk. The kid had nerve. Greeley gently shook his head in admiration.

“Bad ball hitter?” The man in the brown suit said.

“Maybe,” the other answered as they both entered the triple in their scorecards. “But he’s not intimidated.”

Nerve, Greeley thought. He remembered what real nerve was. He remembered the parachute jumps. Old man McAuliffe. And Bastogne. That was nerve.

Stringbean was next. He was supposed to be another Marty Marion, the Cardinals’ shortstop, and maybe he was, he was a good enough shortstop, but all they needed out of his bat was a fly ball. Even a groundball deep in the second or shortstop hole would be good enough to get Armbruster home. The kid on third was faster than a cheetah.

Stringbean ambled to the plate with too heavy of a bat on his shoulder. Too tall and too skinny, the gangly shortstop liked a big bat. Greeley tried to tell him that the days were over for a thirty eight ounce stick but Stringbean wouldn’t listen. Just like Pitts wouldn’t listen. Pitts.

There was a difference between nerve and stupidity.

He didn’t want to think ill of the dead, but there it was. Was it stupidity or carelessness or did Pitts just go crazy? Whatever it was, it wasn’t nerve. He thought back a year and a half earlier. Was it only a year and a half ago? Good God.

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“Did the Germans really ask the old man to surrender?” Greeley asked, as he sat against a cold brick wall in the French town of Bastogne.

“That’s what I hear,” George Parsons replied as he sat against the same wall and cleaned his M1 Garand rifle with a green rag.

Greeley squinted in the Christmas Eve morning light. “How many Germans are there?” Artillery boomed in the distance.

Parsons took his hand off his rifle, did a funny little wave of his index finger, and said, “I think we’re surrounded.”

“Surrounded?” Greeley looked around. Parsons and Henry Pitts sat with him as they huddled against the crumbling brick wall for protection against the occasional sniper fire and mortar or artillery round. “No way out?”

“Yep,” Parsons said as he concentrated on his rifle.

“We got a chance?”

Parsons shrugged. “McAuliffe thinks so.”

“Wish I did,” Greeley said. He shifted his butt. “Wish I could feel my feet.” He nudged at a pile of ice, brick and rubble with the toe of his Corcoran parachute boot.

“Yep,” Parsons said as he stuffed the rag back into his M42 jump jacket pocket.

“Can’t feel a thing.”

“You will,” Parsons said with the equanimity of a Sphinx.

Greeley wondered what he meant. Parsons wasn’t a doctor. He had been an Ohio high school science teacher prior to the war. And just a couple of years before, Greeley had a teacher just like him.

The teacher flunked him that first semester. He had to really buckle down to pass by the end of the year.

In disgust and frustration, Greeley hit the toes of his foot with the butt of his rifle. “Nothing.”

Parsons glanced at him and turned back to watching the streets. “When’s the last time you took your boots off?”

“God knows.”

“Right,” Parsons said. “Well then, don’t take them off.” He drew one of his own feet closer to his body.

“You got frostbite, son. You take a boot off now and your foot will blow up like a balloon. You’ll never get your boot back on.”

“Frostbite? What the hell’s frostbite?” Greeley asked. “I’m a Southern boy.”

“Don’t worry about it, for now. Half the troop’s got frostbite.” Parsons re-gripped his rifle. He looked down at Greeley’s feet. “Just don’t take those off.”

They all fell silent for a moment.

“Gawd, I’m thirsty, mates,” Pitts said suddenly, and licked his lips.

Greeley turned towards him. Pitts wasn’t Airborne. He was a stray Brit that they had picked up somewhere in the forests. He was a paratrooper too – from some British outfit. He didn’t know Pitts very well.

“Got water in your canteen, right?” Parsons asked as he touched his own metal flask with the tip of his bayonet.

Greeley felt his. He had a couple of swallows left and he wanted to save them. He had no idea when he would get fresh water again. Pinned down, they hadn’t moved in almost twenty four hours. Not even for a drink.

“Yeah, mate, but I could do me with a spot of beer.” Pitts had a strange roll to his eyes.

“Criminy. We all could,” Greeley barked.

Greeley hated that kind of talk. Wanting something you couldn’t have and then talking about it as if you could. As if all you had to do was cross the street.

“There’s beer right over there,” Pitts pointed at a café that was situated not quite catty corner to them in a little square.

Greeley followed Pitts’ extended arm and squinted. “You know this?” He asked. “You know this for sure?”

“Well,” Pitts started to say.

“Because there’s nothing like a war to keep the beer flowing.” Greeley almost spit the words out.

“You can make fun of me, mate, but there’s beer over there. I know it.”

Pitts stared across the square at the pub and rubbed his mouth with the arm of his jump jacket.

“Don’t even think it, Pitts,” Parsons whispered.

Greeley was surprised at the intensity of both Parsons and Pitts. At first, he didn't think Pitts was serious but Parsons did. And Pitts never even glanced at Parsons.

"There's beer there. Stout. English stout, I'll bet." Pitts sighed.

"You know," Pitts said, as he turned to persuade them, "lots of these Germans spent time in England before the war." He raised his eyebrows to emphasize the connection, as if there was one.

Pitts, then Greeley, then Parsons stared at the pub.

"Hogwash," Parsons mumbled. "Keep your head, mate."

"English stout. Cool, not cold like you Yanks like. Good, thick froth."

Greeley sighed.

"I'd get two pints right away and tell the bartender to keep them coming," Pitts said.

Parsons turned away from the pub and gazed down the bomb scarred square in the other direction.

Greeley watched as Parsons looked down the other way. But Pitts just stared at the café.

"I can taste it," Pitts said.

Both Greeley and Parsons turned back towards him. Pitts seemed to believe what he was saying. Maybe he could taste it.

"Don't," Parsons warned.

Pitts' stuck his tongue into the corner of his mouth and then licked.

"Two pints. And maybe two more after that, Yank. I'll show you boys how to drink."

"Don't."

"You'll see." Pitts lifted his rifle, shot off a couple of rounds, and then ran as fast as he could for the restaurant. Two seconds later, which was maybe thirty five feet, a German sniper shot him dead.

'Crack!' went the shot. 'Drump' went the body. Pitts threw out his arms in a spasm and then dropped like an empty burlap sack.

Comically, horrifically, Pitts looked like he was sitting up. Dead.

With a cry, Greeley shot in the direction of the sniper and then stood up to get Pitts before Parsons grabbed his arm and dragged him back down. A bullet slammed into the wall behind them.

"Don't," Parsons growled, "be stupid."

Greeley looked into Parsons' cold, black steel eyes.

"We move when the regiment moves," Parsons said. "We don't do anything stupid." His eyes turned into dark glass globes. "We might not get out alive but we don't help them by being stupid. Okay?"

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Greeley remembered nodding his head, yes. But he remembered feeling helpless, and enraged. He bit the inside of his lip.

"Ball two."

Greeley heard the umpire, looked at the batter, looked at the pitcher, and was confused. The feelings of rage and some of the helplessness drained from him. There was a lump inside his mouth from where he had bit himself. He glanced back at the scoreboard. Two balls and two strikes. No outs.

He realized that he must have blanked out after Stringbean stepped to the plate.

"Strike three. You're out!" The umpire called with his thumb extended over his shoulder.

Armbruster stood on third and watched as Stringbean walked back to the dugout and Mattingly came to the plate.

Greeley eyed the scoreboard. One out. He rolled his shoulders, trying to loosen up a little, and thought, maybe.

Mattingly was probably their best hitter, Greeley reflected. He could handle the fastball and the curve. If he had a weakness, it was high and away, like most kids, but Greeley wouldn't bet on it. He was a good hitter.

Two strikes later, Gassoneau threw a fastball high and away and Mattingly chased it. He hit a soft liner to first.

Greeley dropped his head. Mattingly was still young. Maybe he needed to learn to lay off the high, hard ones.

Both of the men in the stands wrote something in their notebooks.

Two out.

Well, now, we need a hit to get him home, Greeley thought as he watched Joe Long stand in at the plate. Long was a good cleanup hitter which meant he was a good RBI man. Sure would be a good time, Greeley almost said aloud. Give us a gift, Mattingly.

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"Sure makes for a good Christmas, don't it?" Greeley said to Parsons as another barrage of German mortars slammed the buildings just down the street from their position.

Parsons gave him half a smile which was a half more than he had seen in the past week. "At least we've got the ice and cold. And,"

'Bowww', they both covered their heads as a shell exploded twenty yards behind them.

"And, the Germans keep sending us presents," Parsons continued.

"When is it our turn to give back?" Greeley hunkered down.

Parsons sucked in a bushel of air. "When the old man says it's time."

The waiting drove him crazy.

But, looking over at Pitts, he knew getting up could kill him.

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"Hey, you, you better get up." Young, a reserve infielder pushed on Greeley.

"Huh?"

"Walked him. You'll be up after Gorman." Young nodded towards the plate as Mattingly strolled down to first.

Greeley looked up at the scoreboard in time to see the three and oh count before they changed the balls and strikes back to zeroes for Gorman. He picked up his helmet, added a couple of more bats to his hands and swung them in the on-deck circle.

"Ball one."

They were being careful with Gorman, too.

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"Keep your head down," Parsons thumped the back of his helmet just as a bullet ricocheted off the street behind them. It had gone right over their heads. "Meant for one of us," he said to Greeley.

Greeley shrunk and gulped. "They're getting closer."

Parsons shook his head. "They're not getting closer. They haven't moved a muscle. It's just your head playing tricks on you. Stay still. Take what they give you."

"Take what they give me?" Greeley practically hugged and pushed against the broken brick wall in front of him. "When do we break out and give it back to them?"

"When the old man says."

"When's that?"

Parsons shrugged.

"We got to get out of here." Greeley gripped his M1 as another mortar exploded nearby. He nearly choked the hell out of his rifle.

"And end up like Pitts, over there?" Parsons swished his arm at the dead body.

"We got to do something."

"We will." Parsons balanced himself with his rifle. "And we are doing something. Stay still. Stay alert. Stay alive."

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"Ball four, take your base."

Greeley looked up at Gorman, who was trotting down to first. Mattingly hustled down to second. Bruiser clapped his hands and called in from third, "Come on, Grease, bust this game wide open." Greeley tossed his extra bats towards the dugout and entered the batters' box. "You can do it."

We will do something, Greeley thought. He looked at Bruiser and then over at Innsley, his third base coach, for the signs. He watched a variety of arm and hand signals and saw the one he expected. 'Swing away.' Of course, what else?

Scraping the dirt with his spikes, Greeley dug in at the plate and locked his eyes on the ball in Gassoneau's hand. Gassoneau rolled the ball between his fingers, behind his back, trying to get a grip while he looked into the catcher for a sign. He got it. Gassoneau nodded.

Greeley thought he saw a trace of a smile. 'Good, that's fine with me. He'll start with a curve. Just need to keep my hands back. Can't get too far in front.'

Greeley waved the bat just before Gassoneau went into a wind.

Bruiser feinted a break from third.

Greeley saw the Gassoneau lift his arm and release the ball just past his shoulder.

It screamed across the plate.

"Strike one."

The crowd applauded.

"He brought the gas," the pencil licker said.

Waiting on a curve, Greeley froze and never got the bat moving forward. The ball zipped past him across the plate, letter high.

Bruiser hustled back to third.

Greeley's jaw tightened. He blew out a breath, whew. He hit his cleats with his bat, felt the pain in his toes, which was oddly reassuring, and then dug in again. Waving his bat in small circles, he was determined to be ready for the next pitch.

Bruiser stepped off third and called in to the plate, "Let's go, Greasy."

Getting the sign from Bixby, Gassoneau went into the stretch and tried to nibble the inside corner of the plate with another fast ball.

"Ball one."

Not liking the call, Gassoneau glared at the umpire and held his glove out for the return throw from Bixby.

Bixby tossed it back.

After the exchange of signs, Gassoneau took a full stretch and threw a low breaking curve. Greeley started forward but kept his bat back and his wrists locked.

"Ball. Ball two." The umpire added to the count on the clicker in his hand. "Two and one."

The shortstop lifted his arm with two fingers up and turned to the outfield. "Two out," he reminded all of the fielders.

Greeley still had the swing away sign.

Gassoneau got his signs and threw again.

Whack! Greeley lined a foul just in front of the third base boxes.

"That's it. Straighten it out." Some leather lung yelled from the seats.

Greeley looked over his shoulder at the voice, wondering who would cheer for him in a Mudhens' stadium. He knocked the dirt off his cleats again and stepped back into the box.

He waited.

Gassoneau curled up and threw a curve inside.

"Ball. Ball three. Three and two."

Greeley looked down at third. He saw Bruiser bouncing on his toes and watched Innsley give the swing away.

“He’s got to come to you,” Bruiser shouted.

“Make him pitch,” Innsley said, as he clapped his hands and gave Greeley his signs. Swing away. Greeley watched and waited for Gassoneau as Gassoneau walked behind the mound and rubbed the baseball.

Gassoneau walked back on top of the mound.

Greeley tensed up, expecting a fastball. He couldn’t afford to lay back. He squeezed the life out of the bat handle. He needed to do something. Make something happen, and then remembered Bruiser’s grip – tight but light. He held up his hand.

“Time!” The umpire called out.

Gassoneau scowled, stepped off the rubber and waited.

Greeley tapped the dirt off his spikes, adjusted the sleeves of his uniform, tugged on his cap and stepped back into the box. He squeezed the bat and then loosened up a little. He nodded at the umpire. He watched the pitcher.

Gassoneau looked in, got his sign and went into his wind.

Fastball, Greeley thought. Maybe. What he needed was some nerve. Nerve. Just do something. Make something happen.

The pitch came in as big and as fat as a softball, but three times faster. At the last split second, it broke down and in. Greeley’s heart sunk with it. There was no way, he thought, that he could hit it but he swung anyway. He had to. His brain was too far ahead to stop. He knew he was stupid for trying to just do something. He knew this lesson. Parsons told him. Not nerve, but stupidity.

It was a nasty pitch.

He dropped his hands, curled his wrists as best as he could and caught a piece of the ball and fouled it straight down. It crushed the big toe of his right foot.

“Oh, man,” Greeley hopped on his left foot and then fell to the ground and grabbed his right foot.

“You all right?” The umpire asked.

Greeley just looked at him with water in his eyes.

Bixby lifted his catcher’s mask and stood nearby and watched him.

Greeley’s manager came out of the dugout and walked towards him. Bent over him, he asked, “Are you okay? Take off your shoe. Let’s look at it.”

Greeley sat on the ground. He remembered what Parsons told him about taking off his boots – he’d never get them back on. So he rubbed at the toe of his shoe, gritted his teeth, and then grunted, “I’m alright. Just give me a second.”

It hurt so bad he could see stars.

Bixby gave him another look, saw the water and the slight, slight puffing around Greeley’s eyes, and then walked out to the mound. Greeley sat on the ground and followed him with his eyes. Gassoneau took a couple of steps towards Bixby. Bixby said something and Gassoneau smiled just before hid his face with his glove.

Greeley saw it all.

He remembered the sniper. The one who shot Pitts in the back. He wondered if the sniper smiled.

Using his bat as a crutch, Greeley got up and lifted his feet up and down a few times. He walked in a small circle and stopped. “I’m okay, coach,” he said to his manager. He nodded at the umpire. Bixby walked in from the mound and crouched behind the plate.

Greeley stood to the side as he waited for his manager to reach the dugout. He closed his eyes.

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“Yo, there! Greeley!” Private Lansing called out as he crawled around a wall just to their right. Safe from enemy fire, Lansing quit crawling, sat up and acknowledged Parsons. “Pops said we’re to wait for some help on those snipers.” He paused and then said, “Got it? We got help coming. Just stay in the game.” Tired and wrung out, Greeley mouthed the words, ‘stay in the game’ as if he had been drugged.

Parsons just nodded.

"Where's Pitts?" Lansing asked.

Greeley used his head to point towards the Brit.

Lansing frowned and then said, "Gee, that's tough." He spit some brick dust out of his mouth. "Would like to get the guy that got him."

Greeley gripped his gun, looked over the brick wall and searched for the shooter. "Yeah."

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"Ready?" The umpire asked Greeley.

Greeley took a deep breath and said, "Yeah."

He stepped into the box. He shook his head trying to dispel the memory of Lansing and Pitts and Parsons. He looked around the infield. Bruiser at third. Mattingly on second and Gorman on first. He settled his feet. His right foot still ached. The pain tightened his muscles.

He gripped the bat as hard as he could.

He remembered Gassoneau smiling about his foot.

He squeezed the wood pulp out of it.

He grimaced as Gassoneau checked for his signs.

He choked at the neck of his stick. The thirty three ounces of wood felt the honest threat to turn it into sawdust.

Greeley thought about the sniper and how he wanted a shot at him. He moved the fingers on his bat.

Gassoneau looked in.

Greeley used that second to he imagine the ball hit out of the park. Over the fans, over the railings, over the billboards and onto the street below. He'd go for the grand slam. He'd slap that smile right back in Gassoneau's face.

Gassoneau looked in again, but just a split second too long.

Greeley didn't like it. He held up his hand and the umpire called time. Greeley stepped back.

Greeley didn't like Gassoneau taking too long. Gave him too much power. Too much control. Like the sniper.

Just stay alive.

He frowned. The words had just popped in his head.

Distracted, he rubbed his right thigh only because he didn't want to try to reach his toes. Relax, he told himself.

What else did Parsons say? 'Stay in the game.' That's what he said, right? Don't be stupid. Stay alive. He had been too anxious. He almost lost it like Pitts.

He blew out a breath and stepped back into the box.

The umpire called, "Play ball."

Gassoneau got his sign.

Greeley remembered Armbruster's grip. Tight. But light. Tight but light. Tight but light, he kept repeating in his head.

"Mash it, Greaser," Bruiser called.

Greeley didn't hear him.

Gassoneau wound up and threw.

The ball streaked like a gossamer beam of light.

'Now', Greeley's brain said as his arms had already moved forward and his wrists were already breaking.

His eyes tracked the ball. It dipped inside. His wrists almost anticipated it perfectly.

The timing was right. Everything was right. Everything but. But the angle was wrong.

He had to adjust. Adjust. Adjust.

He fouled it off again. Between his feet.

The two men in the stands looked at each other. One of them added a symbol inside an entry for Greeley.

Gassoneau shook his head ever so slightly.

Bixby took a ball from the ump and tossed it back to Gassoneau.

Greeley took a deep breath and bobbed his head a couple of times. He stepped into the box. Tight but light.

Gassoneau wound and threw.

Same thing. Inside and low. Greeley fouled it again between his feet.

They all turned, Greeley, the umpire, the catcher, and watched the ball bounce off the screen. The umpire handed another ball to the catcher.

They did it three more times. Gassoneau jammed the hard cutter inside and low and Greeley fouled them off three more times.

Greeley stayed in the box. He thought about Gassoneau. He was no fool. He had good stuff. He could bust them inside all day. Or not.

Greeley flexed his toes and bounced. It still hurt. Good. The pain would keep him awake. Relax. Stay still. Stay alive. Stay in the game.

He took a deep breath.

Gassoneau wheeled and dealed. It shrieked high. Greeley could see it as big as the moon. It looked great. It looked wonderful. It was big enough to bring to the beach. His shoulders twisted and his hips shifted forward. But his arms held back.

Something. Was not. Right.

His forward progress commanded his arms to follow through. But.

The ball was too high, too outside.

The command from the core shouted go, but the rest of his body said – No!

His arms moved forward but too slow. He stopped.

Good or bad, on a three and two count, he held up.

The ball popped, exploded, into the catcher's mitt.

It seemed like everybody in the stadium could hear the pop.

Greeley felt the blood drain from him. Part of him wished he would have swung but his body told him that there was something wrong, told him to just stay alive. Stay in the game. He turned his head, saw the ball in Bixby's glove and then looked out at Gassoneau.

Gassoneau stared back at the plate.

"Ball four!"

The crowd booed. "Get your glasses, ump!"

Greeley didn't smile. He just tossed his bat to the dugout and walked to first. Bruiser scored from third.

Both men scratched little symbols in their notebooks under Greeley.

"Guts," the pencil licker said.

"Yeah," was the reply.

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The Freighters won the game one to nothing. Greeley had two hits. And a walk and an RBI.

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Greeley caught up with Parsons late in the season, the next year, while playing against the Cincinatti Reds at Crosley Field in Ohio. He got the chance to thank the teacher.