

# CHAPTER 1

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## ON TOP OF THE WORLD?

“And pitching tonight with a record of fifty wins and no losses, number twenty-one—Jon Peters,” the public address announcer shouted as he completed introducing the starting lineups.

I stepped onto the field and jogged slowly toward the center of the diamond as the crowd went crazy. Playing baseball in Brenham, Texas—arguably the baseball capital of the state—meant during games my ears were always filled with the shouts and thunderous applause from fans in the stands. Today, however, the noise was deafening.

I reached the mound and let the spikes of my shoes sink into the surface of the hard mixture of clay, sand, and dirt. I turned around to face the catcher. He seemed small against the sea of people, all in green and white—the Brenham High School Cubs’ colors—to show their support. The regular stands were filled, of course. They always were. I was used to those crowds on game days.

But this was a throng; every space that could be filled with a chair and a warm body was. In anticipation of this record-breaking game, the city had set up extra chairs and bleachers, as well as extra makeshift concession stands, to accommodate the

curiosity seekers. One fan even brought in a forklift, parked it behind the right-field fence, and added a raised plywood “floor” on which he set fold-up chairs for the more adventurous and trusting fans to view the game from an “upper deck.”

People had even “saved” seats behind the home plate fence area. They’d snuck in hours beforehand with their folding lawn chairs and taped sheets of paper with their names on them.

I glanced toward the visiting team’s first-base dugout off to my left. The roof was covered with media and heavy-duty cameras all pointing in my direction. Reporters from ESPN, NBC, CBS, and ABC hung out on the sidelines.

The coach had told us to expect more than 3,000 people at this game. I didn’t care how many people were there, as long as one in particular was.

I looked again toward the bleachers to my right. And there she stood in the midst of the mass. *Jill*. The beautiful girl with the slender athletic body, olive complexion skin, and the bright blonde hair, accentuated by the two white bows set on either side of her head. The one who had been my girlfriend for the past three years. She was standing, clapping, and cheering me on with her wide, captivating smile I had fallen in love with.

I quickly glanced not far from her to find my parents in the middle bleachers behind home plate. Mom and Dad were on their feet, cheering. Even my brother had flown in especially to witness this game.

“You can do it, Jon!”

“Go, Jon, go!”

“Set the record straight, Jon!”

Like the sounds of popcorn exploding, I caught my name being tossed around from all over the grandstands.

All those fans, all the reporters, the hubbub and cheers. All of them—all of it—were there just for me.

Breathing in deeply, I took in the crowd, the noise, the scent of popcorn and hot dogs mixed with freshly-mowed grass. I felt queasy, as if I were going to throw up. But that, I knew, was normal pre-game jitters. After my first pitch, I would be totally in the zone.

*Focus, Jon, I told myself. You've done this a million times before. Don't think about all those people. Don't think about why they're here. Just focus on the game.*

We were playing A&M Consolidated High School. The Tigers had become a fierce district rival over the years. They were a good team, one we respected. One we were prepared at all costs to beat.

While my teammates and I were warming up on the field, we joked and commented that they looked as though they'd already been beaten. Perhaps it was the momentum of our team going into this game.

"They should have just stayed on the bus!" one teammate said and laughed.

"No way! We've got a record to break!" another teammate declared.

It was time to get laser-focused on the task at hand; I needed to set the record straight once and for all. No matter what had happened in the past, no matter what would happen in the future, I had to stay in this moment, keep my cool, and pitch the best game of my life.

The first batter stepped up to home plate, as the catcher, Craig Bolcerek, squatted into position, followed by the umpire who leaned in behind him. With a few practice swings, the batter took his stance and glared at me.

My arm felt good, strong. I looked at the ball nestled into my glove and then grabbed it with my right hand. The leather and the stitching on the ball felt comfortable in my grip, as though it were an extension of my body.

I glanced over at Coach Hathaway and remembered the words he'd said to me just moments before I headed to the mound: *"Tonight is an opportunity of a lifetime. Put whatever it is out of your mind and just go for it."* The simple reassurance that he was on my side and was rooting for me was exactly what I needed.

I was ready.

My eyes met the catcher's. His right hand dangled between his crouched legs and he signaled what pitch I was to throw.

*Number 1—Fastball.*

I nodded.

I rolled the ball around in my fingers, stepped back with my left foot just behind the center of the mound, pivoted my right foot in front of the pitching rubber, lifted my left knee toward my chest, took a stride with my left leg toward home plate, wound my arm back, and with my whole body's strength, threw a ball that sped upwards of eighty-five miles per hour toward my opponent.

*Strike!*

With two more strikes, the first batter was out. And after striking out two more batters, our team ran off the field in time to the chants and cheers of our fans.

*One inning down*, I thought, feeling pleased, but trying to appear cool and collected.

Inning after inning passed. With each strikeout, the crowd's frenzy seemed to grow. Being superstitious, though, as most ball players are, I hesitated to get too excited about winning this game, instead choosing to focus on one strikeout at a time.

Our team was good at offense as well, we could hit, so we easily drove in run after run with our bats. As the game progressed, the question became not who was going to win, but by how many runs.

Three to zero . . .

Five to zero . . .

Seven to zero . . .

This thrill ride had entertained the audience for years, with me as the pitcher, the main performer. I'd played many roles over time—a clown, a juggler, a trainer, and a magician. But on this night, I assumed the role of ringmaster, and it soon became apparent that the Tigers, who had been invited to this once-in-a-lifetime circus event, were being tamed by the Cubs.

I knew we were going to win this game. We had to. But a surprise seemed to be waiting for us. As our team's number of runs grew, A&M Consolidated's stayed the same: zero. Was it possible that this game would also be a no-hitter?

Now leading eight to zero, and moving into the bottom of the fifth inning, the excited tension hung thickly in the air.

Texas high school baseball had a ten-run rule that stated if either team leads the other by ten runs after five innings, the game is over. We wouldn't have to play to seven innings (the normal number for high school games).

The Tigers took their positions on the field, as our batting line-up got ready to take a swing at ending this game.

If the fat lady was not singing earlier in the night, as the saying goes, she was definitely humming and warming up her vocal cords in the background now. After a few hits and scoring a run, the scoreboard read nine to nothing with only one out. The game-ending run was at second base. My friend James, one of the best hitters on our team, and with whom I'd played baseball since we were eight years old, was at the plate. And how fitting it was that I stood at the on-deck circle with a front-row view of the potential final score. One hit was all we needed to score one game-ending run.

"End this thing right now!" I shouted as James stepped into his stance.

The crowd went wild with anticipation.

The pitch came at him, and with a solid swing, he missed. Strike one.

Another pitch. Another strike.

With a final swing and miss, James struck out. And I was up.

I didn't think the crowd could get any louder, but it seemed to echo off the bleachers and concession building and roar.

As I moved out of the on-deck circle with my bat, James crossed my path on his way back to the dugout. He smiled, not the least bit annoyed that he didn't win the game for us. "It's yours, Pete," he said, calling me by my nickname—*Pete*, short for Peters. "Go for it."

I stepped up to home plate. The game was now in my hands. I could end it with a hit and win the game. Or I could strike out and push us into another inning.

I didn't want to leave a man on base—especially when he was so close to making it home. Dietrich Burks stood just on

the other side of second base, ready to zip to third and home as soon as I gave him the opportunity.

I took my time prepping and getting into my stance. I eyed the pitcher, blocking out all the racket and focusing on him and me and the baseball.

I knew the drill. He and the catcher were working out how to defeat me, how to get me to strike out. Back and forth they silently communicated until, finally, the pitcher agreed and wound up.

As his right hand released the pitch and the ball traveled straight into the strike zone, I swung with all my might.

I felt my bat connect to the ball before I heard its ear-splitting *smack!*

The ball quickly changed direction and whooshed between the first and second basemen and on its way into right field. I dropped the bat and took off running to first base. Before I made it, I turned my head back toward home plate to watch my teammate easily score.

Ten runs to zero. Game over.

My teammates charged toward me like a pack of wild dogs. Jumping and howling and grabbing at me for a hug. The media too rushed onto the field like a herd of bulls. The flash of cameras lit up the sky. I was pulled and prodded and yanked and hugged. So many people surrounded me, I felt smothered.

The crowd stood in amazement, clapping their hands, stomping their feet, and roaring.

It was the greatest moment of my life. I was now the United States' national record holder for the most consecutive wins by a high school pitcher: fifty-one wins and zero losses. In the coming days I would be on every major national news station. My photo would land on the cover of *Sports Illustrated*. I would be written about in *People* magazine, *The New York Times*, and even international publications. I would appear on *The Today Show* and *Good Morning America*. I was headed to play college ball and then on to the big leagues.

To the crowd and the media, to my friends and family, I had everything going for me. I was on top of the world and I had

everything anybody would want: promising future, beautiful girlfriend, popularity, and growing fame. To them, I could write my own ticket in life.

What they didn't know was that less than twenty-four hours before, I'd swallowed an entire bottle of Tylenol, hoping to commit suicide. What they didn't know was that, although I hadn't succeeded at physically dying, I was dead inside.