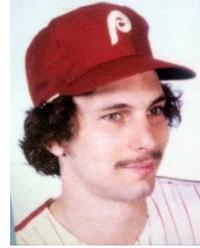


Chapter 1: How to Kill a Rally

Good pitching will always stop good hitting and vice-versa. Casey Stengel



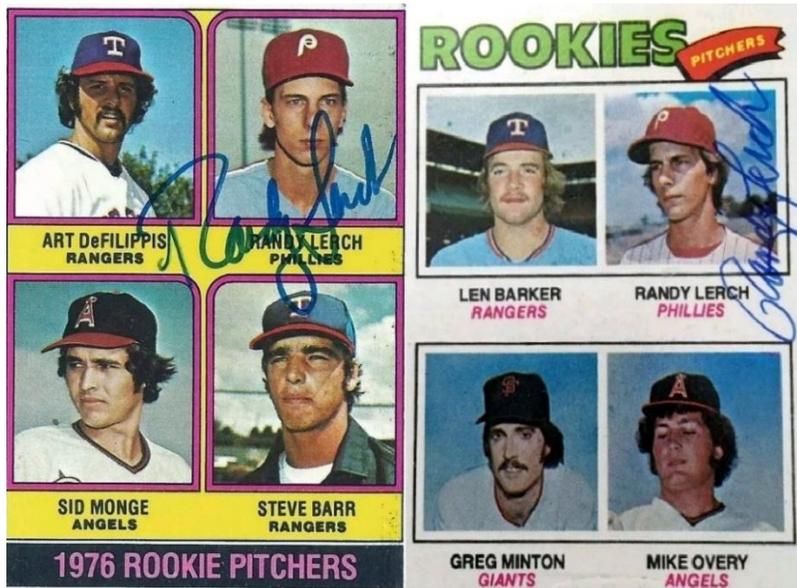
Some say that the most challenging task in all major league sports is hitting a baseball thrown by a major league pitcher. A pitcher might say the hardest thing to do is to throw a fastball past a major league hitter. I had the good fortune of being decent at both. I loved to hit! I really did not want to be a pitcher, but because I was left-handed and could throw the ball 95 miles per hour, that is where they kept playing me. Still, I did a fair amount of pinch-hitting in both the majors and minors.

I was always ahead of the age curve in the minor leagues, ranging from two to four years younger than the average. In 1975 and 1976, the Phillies called me up in September to gain experience and learn from the veterans. At ages 18 and 19, I spent one year each in Rookie-A and Full-A leagues. At age 20 I made Double-A, and Triple-A at age 21. I was on the fast track to becoming a noticeably young rookie in MLB. In fact, I made the Phillies 25-man roster in 1977 at age 22.

WELCOME TO THE BIG LEAGUES, ROOKIE

My rookie season, I came out of the blocks at full speed. After starting out with four wins and two losses, I got my first start against the Dodgers during a nine-game home stand. Their great lineup included Dusty Baker, Steve Garvey, Reggie Smith, Ron Cey, and Rick Monday. Every hitter in that lineup was a tough out. The Dodgers were off to a great start that year and I would have to pitch a great game if I was going to beat them. I did just that and beat them for my fifth win. To top it off, it was against Tommy John!

The team headed for Houston where I got my first start in the Astrodome. What a great atmosphere! *WOW!* I am going to pitch in the Astrodome! Some people call it the “8th Wonder of the World!”



Rookie Cards (Topps® Used by permission)

When the team bus pulled up and I saw it for the first time, I was in awe. I had only seen pictures of it and it was nothing like I imagined. It looked like a Flying Saucer from an old sci-fi movie, or in my day, the spaceship on the TV show *Lost in Space*. On the day I started I was terribly nervous as usual, but that was a good thing for me. I found that I needed those nerves to help me compete, though I hated that feeling. I cannot remember the Houston pitcher that I was pitching against that night, but the Astros had a great pitching staff: names like Nolan Ryan, JR Richard, Joe Niekro, and Joaquin Andujar.

The day before the Astros game that I was going to pitch, an accomplished veteran pitcher (not Tug) on our team called me to his room. He told me that I would never be a successful major league pitcher unless I took pills like the ones that were in his hand. He gave me some and I took one the night before I pitched in “the Dome.” I looked up to successful veterans, so I thought that is what I needed to do to be just as good as him. *This decision changed my career and my life forever!*

HOUSTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM

Walking to the Houston mound that day, I remember that the place looked huge and almost overwhelming. I had never been inside an indoor baseball

stadium before and I do not know how many existed. The Houston fans called it “Caesar’s Palace” in honor of César Cedeño, the super-star center fielder who made many spectacular, game-saving catches there.

I remember that I did not have my usual overwhelming nervousness because of the Greenie that I took. I loved that new feeling because it made me feel like a mountain man. I felt so overwhelmingly powerful that I did not need to pitch anymore, just throw it as hard as I could down the middle, and that would over-power them. Little did I know that the feeling of invincibility offset my natural ability.

I started that game feeling great. Unfortunately, I gave up a home run and had to endure the festivities. The Astros had a homerun celebration that no opponent ever enjoyed. While a big bull snorted, steers would storm across the big scoreboard with cowboys trying to rope them. Meanwhile, “Deep in the Heart of Texas” played loudly over the PA system. I am not sure how long this took, but it felt like something between five minutes and forever.



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We finally got back to baseball. I threw one more pitch and “POW,” another homerun! I was not feeling too good about baseball at that moment. Back to baseball, one more pitch, and “BAM!” Three pitches! Three homeruns! Three Rodeos! Three rounds of Deep in the Heart of Texas! Now my record was five and three. Yogi Berra has a quote for a time like this: “You wouldn’t have won if we’d beaten you.”

As bad as this day was, it was worse than I knew. THIS GAME WAS AT THE BEGINNING OF A SITUATION THAT WAS GOING TO CHANGE THE REST OF MY CAREER. I HAD JUST MADE THE WORST DECISION OF MY LIFE!

After the game that night, I was terribly upset at my performance, but mostly upset because I had taken the drug. I was still so wired from the effects of the Greenie I took that I just laid in my hotel room and stared at the ceiling. That did not stop me from taking my Greenie again before my next start because I liked that feeling of invincibility- and no nerves! This time I learned what they called “drinking your Greenie down.” I went to the bar at a nightclub and got so drunk and tired that I could sleep. Sometimes I stayed there until closing time, 2 or 3 in the morning.

Addiction became my worst enemy. As it turns out, the Dodger win was the last start of my eleven-year career that I pitched without greenies. The Houston game began a run of ten no decisions in a row. That time of my career was one of the most torturous of my career and life. My emotions throughout this stretch were all over the place. If I pitched well enough to win, it seemed we would not score any runs. Then, if I pitched badly, we would score enough runs that I, at least, did not get the loss. I did not get another decision until early July, when I beat the Cardinals for my sixth win.

EVERYBODY DOES IT, RIGHT?

That new habit continued for the remainder of my career. For every start during the remainder of my career, the “standard procedure” was:

1. Take your Greenie before the game.
2. Get drunk after the game.
3. After a good game you went out and celebrated by getting drunk.
4. After a bad game, you went out and drowned your sorrows.

Note: The stimulant properties of amphetamines can mask the intoxication from alcohol. Conversely, the depressant effects of alcohol can blunt the stimulant effects of amphetamine. As a result, when [alcohol and amphetamines] are consumed in combination, users can end up using dangerous, toxic levels of both.¹

Looking back, I realize that the drugs and alcohol were distorting my decisions terribly. This was one of the reasons, among others, that I kept taking them.

¹ Web: <https://drugabuse.com/library/concurrent-alcohol-and-amphetamine-abuse/>

I ended up the season with a 10 and 6 rookie record. We won the National League East and went to the playoffs. I was able to experience what it felt like to be a part of a major league winning team. I remember watching championship series on television when I was a boy: seeing the players run out on the field to celebrate after the last out of the game. Experiencing the champagne parties inside the clubhouse was the pinnacle of fun. We were celebrating with the players who were with you, battling the rest of the league since spring training.

Excerpted from *God in the Bullpen: The Randy Lerch Story*, 2019, Randy Lerch with Harold A. Lerch, Sr.

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