

LEO'S SHIFT

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Normally it's the spring I love. Like they say, everything comes alive again, is renewed. That's how it is at spring training. It doesn't matter that a great team of hitters could not offset a lack of pitching depth and poor defence; and we had finished third or fourth again. The spring is an equal opportunity season for baseball. Anyone can win it. Like they say, hope springs eternal.

But last year, I loved the fall. The nights were shorter, the days grew colder, the death of winter was in sight; but we were renewed in the fall. We made it to the World Series!

The team hadn't been there in 12 years and hadn't won in 81 years!

We played the Cardinals. They'd been there plenty. They'd even beaten us for the title. Their manager, Leo Sullivan, decided that the key to beating us was to shut down our big hitter, Paul Beamish. He was right.

Paul had had a career year: almost 50 homers, hit over .290 and drove in 130 odd runs. He was a lock to win the MVP award. And his numbers weren't cheap: he didn't hit that three-run home run in the ninth inning when we were already ahead by six runs. He had his big hit when the team really needed it.

He was so intense, so controlled, so competitive. Paul was the type of man who would smile slightly but never show his teeth. He'd shake your hand if you hit a home run but he'd never slap your back or high-five you. He batted left and pulled every pitch he hit. When they pitched him outside he'd extend his arms further and pull it, or just let it pass. If they pitched him inside he'd pull it so far foul that even the on-deck circle was no longer a safe place to kneel. Tony Jimenez, who hit fifth, right after Paul, sometimes carried his glove with him to the on-deck circle for protection.

Every now and then in Paul's career, a batting instructor had tried to get Paul to go with the pitch, hit to the other field. But Paul was as stubborn as he was intense. Pulling every pitch had always worked for him, and he refused to change his swing. It was his knack for pulling the ball that led to the great moment in the seventh game.

Old Leo Sullivan bragged and bragged to the press that he knew how to stop Paul. He was going to put a big shift on, something that never happened in the major leagues at this point: he would put the shortstop on the other side of second base, move the third baseman to the shortstop position, and

crowd all three outfielders between centre field and the right field foul line. Almost the whole left side of the diamond would be left open. "He'll be hitting at two extra fielders!" Leo bragged, spitting tobacco juice on all of the reporters' loafers. "He'll be lucky to hit .150 in the series. We'll pitch him inside and let him hit right into our strength." Leo talked and talked. He told how Paul had hit 41 of his homers to right field, and the other eight were to centre. That proved he was a dead pull hitter. "And this hitter is dead," Leo exclaimed, his fist in the air for emphasis. "Without him, we'll take 'em in four straight. They'll go home crying about bein' out-smarted. And they'll wonder why no one else thought of it before. Beamish is a big lad and I don't think he's got no sense. Most big guys don't. He couldn't change his swing. He couldn't hit to left field to save his life!" Leo talked about the shifts used on other great hitters like Williams and Mantle. "I ain't no rookie," he said. "I can figure out strategy good as anyone else. And my strategy's gonna sweep the Sox."

"Every time Beamish comes up, I'm gonna wave my cap at the fielders." Leo explained with a toothy grin and a smug glint in his eye. "That'll let 'em know the shift is on."

"Why wave your cap?" a reporter asked. "Your players all know that the shift is going on every time Paul steps up."

"Cause I'm not really wavin' my cap at them, am i?" Leo said with a laugh, and paused, expecting the reporters to grasp his meaning. They didn't. "I'm wavin' my cap at Beamish!" Leo bellowed when no one had smiled. "I'm sayin' 'goodbye Me Beamish, you're gonna go out, you're gonna go out!'"

Leo had a lot to say. Paul didn't. Reporters were all around the big man, asking him the same questions, over and over. Like "Are you going to adjust your swing?" and "How do you think you'll do against Leo's shift?"

"Nope," he answered the first.

"Can't catch a ball hit over the fence," he answered the second.

The series went the full seven games. We split the first six and Paul was largely responsible for our three wins. He was 6 for 22, with several walks, and three of his hits were homers. He drove in either the game-tying or game-winning run in each of our wins. Leo's shift did seem to help though. Every ball he hit, fair or foul, went to the right side of the diamond. Twice the shortstop took away hits on hard ground balls just to the right of second. In the regular season those would have been clean singles. And the centre fielder, playing in the gap between centre and right, caught a screaming line drive in the eighth inning of game five. The bases were loaded with two out and we wound up losing by a run. Normally, that hit would have won it, and we won game six the series would have been over; but it wasn't. It came down to the last game, at our park.

Game seven was a pitchers' duel. Our starter, Bill Moore, was throwing smoke and averaging better than a strikeout an inning. So was their ace, Tommy Wilkinson, but in a different way. He had a decent fastball and a slider that really snapped, but they both looked tougher after he threw his change-up. You couldn't see it coming; Wilkinson did nothing to tip it off. You'd think it was another fastball and you'd already be in your follow-through when you were watching the ball float across the plate.

We came up in the bottom of the seventh with the score tied 0-0. After two quick outs we got something going. A walk and a single put runners on first and second. Our fans finally had something

they could really cheer about. With Paul on deck, their shortstop threw high on a routine grounder and the first baseman's foot was pulled off the bag. The bases were loaded for Paul. Leo waved his hat. The shift went on.

The crowd was cheering so loud as Paul approached the plate that I was afraid that he might lose his concentration. I've never heard so much noise from our fans. But I remembered what Paul was like and that he probably wasn't aware that fans were even in the park, though the chant of "Paul, Paul, Paul!" was so loud that the steps of the dugout shook under my feet. Our manager, George Buchanan, actually put a hand on the top step of the dugout as though the noise and vibration may cause him to lose his balance.

Paul stepped to the plate and dug in. He really dug in. his rear foot pushed out a two-inch hole at the back of the box, his toes touching the line that was closest to the plate. His front foot barely broke the dirt, as it and the rest of his body coiled, ready to unleash their might and throw all their momentum at the pitch. Wilkinson threw a slider that took a vicious hook to the inside part of the plate. Paul turned on it, extending his arms and ripping the bat around. Paul had pulled it 55 degrees foul, through the Cardinals on-deck circle, and into the dugout. Tony Jimenez winced, and Leo Sullivan had to jump quickly to get out of the way of the line drive foul. If it was possible, the fans screamed louder.

Paul dug in again. Wilkinson threw another slider that started then broke even further inside. Paul didn't bite. Ball one.

As Paul stepped out I was overwhelmed by the nervous energy in the park. The loud cheer after the umpire signalled ball one had changed to chatter and intermittent clapping. Now it picked up again, a crescendo of desperate fans screaming to see Paul make heroes of them all.

He picked up some dirt, rubbing some on his hands and some on the bat handle. He stood motionless for a moment, then glanced back at the dugout. I was standing next to George Buchanan. He was rigid as ever from the tension, but he suddenly stood up straighter.

"What is it Mr. Buchanan?" I asked.

"Paul knows something, my boy."

"How do you know?"

"He's never looked in the dugout during an at-bat before. Not ever."

He was right. Paul was too intense, he'd never risk taking his concentration from anything but the ball, the bat and the strike zone.

Paul dug in again. It seemed he accentuated the hole for his back foot. He set his stance and watched Wilkinson start his pitching motion. Just as Wilkinson brought his arm over the top, Paul moved. He slid his back foot from its hole to the back line of the box. He moved his front foot to the line closest to the plate so that his hips faced left field. Empty left field. The crowd started to grow quiet. Anyone watching stopped talking or clapping. The whole Cardinal team went limp, and their eyes became wide. They say a dozen reporters swallowed their cigarettes.

The pitch was a change-up, down the middle. Wilkinson figured Paul would pull it a mile foul. But Paul hadn't stepped into it yet. He'd only shifted his stance and kept the weight on his back foot. I saw the

catcher reach forward. He was wishing he could catch that thing at 59 feet. Paul almost waited too long. He practically hit it out of the catcher's glove.

It was a line drive down the left field line. The baseball world sucked in its breath. There wasn't a peep from anyone in the park. The left field line umpire was right on the spot. He didn't intend to be, but it was hit right at him, and like everyone else, he was too surprised to move. It landed in front of him and bounced off his shin. His right shin. The right shin of his right foot that was in foul territory as he stood straddling the line. He limply raised his arm and signalled foul. It had only been by inches.

There was no great roar of disapproval for the call. No one had moved. The only ballplayer in motion was Paul as he returned to the plate after running to first. Even the Cardinals left fielder had remained motionless, as had our runners.

I looked into the Cardinals dugout. Leo Sullivan was on the front step as always, but the poor man was shaking. He hadn't even watched the flight of the ball, he was still looking at the batters' box where Paul's feet had adjusted for the opposite field swing. He was sweating noticeably. I thought sweat was showing on his uniform at first, but then I realized that a huge wet stain was originating from the front of his pants. It was not sweat.

Wilkinson had the ball back. They should have called time out, but they were not thinking clearly. While Paul took a warmup swing, Wilkinson seemed to get the competitive glare back in his eyes. You knew he was ready to bust him on the inside part of the plate with a hard slider.

Paul stepped in. His rear foot went nowhere near the hole, it stayed at the line furthest from the plate and his front foot took the opposite position. His shoulders and hips were aimed at left field. Empty left field.

Wilkinson's composure fell apart again. He hadn't expected that Paul would try it again, not so deliberately. His eyes looked like the eyes of a puppy being scolded. Someone should have called timeout but didn't. his pitch was in the dirt. Ball two. Wilkinson set himself again. Paul had not moved. But now he smiled. He pointed his bat at left field and smiled! The pitch was slower than his change-up and bounced three feet in front of the plate. Ball three. Once again Wilkinson had the ball and was prepared to pitch. Now Paul grinned, his teeth displayed for Wilkinson to see. The pitch as behind him and Paul walked, scoring a run.

Tony Jimenez grounded out.

They didn't seriously threaten. A two out single in the eighth was their only runner after that.

We won the World Series.

Leo Sullivan wouldn't talk to reporters after the game or all winter. Now at spring training they can't shut him up. He says he wouldn't give interviews because he was working on a new strategy that will ensure they go to the World series again.

I watched Paul take batting practice today. He hit a dozen or so out, all to right field. He didn't hit anything left of centre.

A reporter and George Buchanan stood nearby talking about the new season.

“Will Paul change his swing again like he did last year in the series?”

“He didn’t change his swing,” Mr. Buchanan corrected him. “He changed his stance.”

Another reporter leaning on the cage asked Paul between swings if he was going to be able to top the excitement of last year. Paul didn’t acknowledge him in any way until his swings were through. Walking from the cage he glanced at the reporter and smiled just a little.

“Nope.”