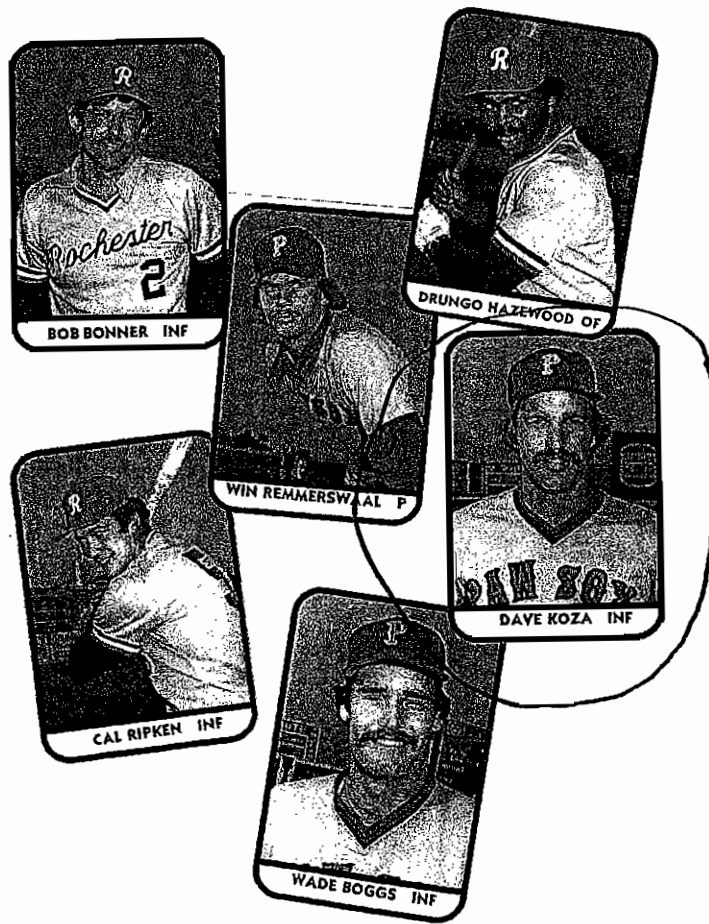


Dave Koza, Professional Baseball Player  
Robert S, Griffin, compiler

On April 18th, 1981, the Pawtucket Red Sox, a farm team of the Boston Red Sox, played the Rochester Red Wings. It turned out to be the longest game ever played in baseball history. Dave Koza played first base for Pawtucket in that game. What follows are excerpts from the book *Bottom of the 33rd* by Dan Barry (HarperCollins, 2011) that pertain to him.



His name is Dave Koza, and baseball has been his life's mission since the age of eleven, when some merchants in his Wyoming hometown of Torrington chipped in a total of \$175 to send him to a baseball camp in Oklahoma. You can't glimpse his constant worry by looking at him now, a broad-shouldered Marlboro Man in cleats, with a full mustache and a nose that looks like it's been broken a time or two, every part of him aware of being watched by his adoring wife of two months, the lovely Ann, who will stay in this frigid, godforsaken ballpark as long as he does. No, you can't see by looking at him as he stands so at ease with bat in hand, but Dave Koza is trying to suppress his ever-present worries—worries that intensify with each passing game—that he will not make it to the major leagues. He senses that first phantom tug at the back of his uniform, pulling him off the field, away from the game.

As it is, the Boston Red Sox are crowded with first basemen: Carl Yastrzemski, the heart of the Red Sox and a lock for the Hall of Fame; Tony Perez, another veteran and a likely Hall of Famer; Joe Rudi, a former All Star and World Series hero; Dave Stapleton, Koza's former teammate, a good friend. The team's executives are not looking at their roster of twenty-five players and thinking to themselves: We need a *fifth* first baseman, just in case—a fifth first baseman who is a good but not great fielder and who hits for power but not for average.

Dave Koza knows this. All he can do, then, is take his extra swings in the batting cage, try to solve his problem with those vexing curveballs, field more grounders, and practice his footwork around first base; his career depends upon the mastery of these little things. Then, back in Wyoming, he will spend the off-season keeping fit when he's not working construction, squeezing a rubber ball in front of the television, strengthening his wrists, quietly determined to silence all those in Torrington who keep asking when he'll make it to the major leagues. Torrington doesn't understand Single-A, or Double-A, or Triple-A, or injuries, or fickle front offices, or standing in line behind aging stars who can still perform. It only understands the Yankees, the Red Sox, the major leagues. . . .

Ann Koza, the newlywed wife of the Pawtucket first baseman, who has given over a good part of herself to the major-league dreams of her husband, Dave. That dream is their child, sharing their small apartment on Pond Street, not a quarter mile from McCoy Stadium, and buckled into their car as they drive the 1,900 miles back to his hometown of Torrington, Wyoming, at the end of every season. Some 770 miles on Interstate 90, followed by nearly 900 more on Interstate 80, in a silver Oldsmobile Toronado packed with their luggage and that dream, a precious thing growing more fragile by the day. They make the trip every September, because every September the small clutch of Pawtucket players summoned to Boston once again does not include Dave. On these days-long drives home, Dave's brooding silence and wounded expansiveness combine to pose a single plaintive question: Why, Ann? Why?

Ann doesn't know the answer. But she has faith in her husband, and she tells him so. She accompanies him to Torrington, a place many hundreds of miles removed from her childhood home in Pennsylvania coal country, and works in a sugar beet factory, sharpening the knives that slice the beets. Then, at the start of each season, she returns with him to Pawtucket, a place even more foreign than Torrington, and takes whatever job she can find—including a stint in one of the last Pawtucket mills, where she developed a thick callus on her pinkie from the repetitive task of removing the thread that bound big sheets of lace. She is twenty-three, with large, expressive eyes, long blond hair, and a lack of pretense that draws others to her. She roller skates to the ballpark; she drinks beer; she knows what it's like to work in a mill. And she is devoted to her Dave. In letters she writes to his family back in Torrington, and in words she whispers to him at night, Ann Koza reassures: It will be all right. ♦ • •

Dave Koza (11), quarterback for the Whites, is about to kick a 30-yard field goal and score the last three points for his team. . . .

August 30, 1971

The 27-0 score was helped along when Dave Koza intercepted a pass and ran it back for the first touchdown. . . .

September 6, 1971

The ball apparently just can't keep up with speedster Dave Koza, who led his team to victory over the Bulldogs. A 6-1 senior, Koza gunned in 19 points for the Blazers in their 11th victory. . . .

February 28, 1972

Triple winner was Dave Koza, shown above with his discus throw of 148 feet 5 inches for 1st place. He also took first in the triple jump (39 ft. 10 in.) and the long jump (20 ft.). . . .

May 11, 1972

The history of Torrington, Wyoming, turns brittle by the year in the narrow basement of its newspaper, the *Torrington Telegram*. There, stacked against the wall, near some dusty coffee cups and a winter glove missing its right-hand mate, reside bound copies of the newspaper; the years captured within are printed on their spines. The newspapers, browning and drying like late-autumn leaves, reach back a century to tell the bit-by-bit transformation of a nowhere place of a railroad way station, eighty-four miles north of Cheyenne, into a proud and vital agricultural center, with sugar beets, corn, winter wheat, cattle, and fifty-eight hundred residents. By Wyoming standards, a city.

Open any volume from the early 1970s, release that first whiff of the paper-crumbling past, and journey back to the time-frozen stock shows and 4-H competitions, the summer headlines (“First Snake Bite Happens Monday”) and great Thanksgiving deals down at Gibson Discount, where Cat Stevens’s *Tea for the Tillerman* album can be had for just \$3.97. A woman named Julia is writing her gentle “Scoopin ’n’ Snoopin” gossip column (“Hello Folks! Have I ever got a ‘goodie’ for you this time . . .”), and the Hill Top Kar-Vu Drive-In Theatre is doing its best to keep citizens apprised of cultural trends by featuring such fare as *The Young Graduates* (“The ‘Hot Pants’ Generation is Loose”).

And with every turn of a yellowing page, it seems, another story is trumpeting the athletic exploits of the hometown hero, Dave Koza. Here he is, leading the high school football team to an undefeated season as its quarterback, defensive back, and kicker. Here he is, photographed falling backward after scoring 2 of his 21 points in another basketball victory. Here he is, on graduation day, receiving the football award, the basketball award, and the track award. Koza, Koza, Koza, and the only reason he isn’t receiving an award for baseball—his best sport—is that the high schools don’t play baseball. Blame it on the late spring, or maybe the lack of local interest.

This posed a problem for the family. When Dave Koza was ten years old, his father—an affable retired navy veteran, fond of his drink—moved the family from Florida to his home state of Wyoming. They settled in

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Torrington, where young Dave struggled to understand a community that did not offer organized baseball to adolescent boys. He did not shy from informing his parents that he wanted to go back to Florida—back to baseball.

His understanding father, Gene, found a vacant lot beside the Safeway grocery store, planted four poles, unrolled some chicken wire, and laid out a regulation-size Little League field. With that, organized baseball for young boys came to Torrington, allowing Dave to demonstrate his almost preternatural skills for people other than his parents and brothers. One night, while taking in the previews before a show down at the Wyoming movie theater, his parents saw an advertisement for the Chandler Baseball Camp and thought: Dave. After learning that a session at the camp would cost \$175—\$175 that they did not have—the Kozas asked for help from several merchants in town, many of whom were appreciative of Gene Koza's efforts to start a local Little League program.

Soon, Dave Koza, all of eleven, was traveling eight hundred miles to Chandler, Oklahoma, to a place that so many other boys would only know through the small advertisements that occasionally appeared in the back of *Baseball Digest*:

BASEBALL CAMP

FOR BOYS 8 THRU 18

Three Weeks Intensive Training.

See Our Brochure Before Deciding.

Write, TOM BELCHER, Baseball Camp, Chandler, Okla.

This was a military-style baseball camp; no swimming pool, no tennis courts, no air-conditioning to counter the oppressive Oklahoma heat. For eleven hours a day, these Pee Wees and Midgets, Preps and Minors ran baseball drills; practiced bunts, slides, and hitting the cutoff; played baseball games—and then drilled some more. Before lights out in the stuffy cabins at ten, they gathered in the mess hall to watch film footage of nothing but baseball; black-and-white clips from a World Series one night, an instructional film on fielding the next.

Its founder, Bo Belcher, an irrepressible public relations director for the Oklahoma State Fair, opened the baseball camp in 1958, on rural land that used to be the city dump. By the late 1960s, his son Tom was running the camp, and everyone knew that Tom Belcher had been with the New York Mets—"a stocky right-hander," the camp's brochure said, who had starred as an All-American in high school and college before signing a bonus contract with the Mets right there at the camp. The brochure featured a photograph of Belcher in a Mets uniform, along with these words: "Tom was with the Mets for a short time in 1963."

That Tom Belcher never appeared in a major-league game now seems beside the point. He played an underwhelming three years in the minor leagues, spent "a short time" with the Mets at their spring training camp in 1963, and, eventually, returned to run his father's camp, where he taught these true boys of summer the fundamentals of the game, showed them the benefits of dedication, regaled them with Casey Stengel anecdotes, and loomed before them as the personification of the Possible. When Tom Belcher died in 2006, several years after waning demand forced him to close his baseball paradise, legions of former campers mourned.

But when the camp was in its glory, back in the mid- and late 1960s, a Wyoming boy named Koza thrived. Thanks to a godfather's beneficence, he returned to the camp when he was twelve, then accepted Tom Belcher's offer to work as a camp counselor for a few more summers. He cleaned the cabins, raked the fields, and played baseball, baseball, and more baseball, often while wearing a used wool uniform so itchy and stifling that it must have been intended as preparation for greater things; a toughening up for the leagues to come. When his camp sessions ended, he would return to Torrington to star as a pitcher and outfielder in the Babe Ruth and American Legion games, before football season arrived to offer him another field on which to excel.

By his senior year in high school, Koza had become the official Local Hero, of whom much was expected. He was working in the stockyard directly across from the high school football field, running calves

into the chute, clipping their young horns, then powdering the wounds to stem the bleeding. But everyone knew that Dave Koza wasn't long for Torrington.

"He was our All-Everything," says Paul "Cactus" Covello Jr., Koza's classmate and friend. "Groomed from the git-go to play baseball."

Cactus had enviable connections; his family owned a prominent car dealership. So he and Koza would loop the town, "dragging Main," in Cactus's gorgeous car, a 1967 Impala convertible, blue with a white top. They'd prowl Main Street, turn left after the Trail Hotel, hug the railroad tracks, turn into the lot at the Ten Pin Tropics bowling alley—where carhops waited to serve you—and linger a while. Then they'd retrace their path and do it all over again, night after night, with an occasional diversion to the Hill Top drive-in just to shake things up. Cactus was proud to hang around with Koza, in part because everyone in town knew that he'd be famous one day. Not that Koza would ever say that, or even think it. He was just one of the guys, though first among them: big and strong, quick as a cat, and exuding the air of one not to be trifled with.

The Dave Koza baseball odyssey that began with all those day-long trips to the Chandler Baseball Camp continued after high school graduation, when he decided to attend Eastern Oklahoma State College—mostly because the baseball coach at the two-year school was also an instructor at Chandler. He played and pitched well, but if fifty people came to one of his Mountaineers games, thirty of them were scouts following his more talented teammate, Tito Landrum, who would later appear in two World Series. Then, after the end of spring semester, it was on to Colorado Springs, where Koza played semiprofessional ball in exchange for a construction job and a place to live.

In the late spring of 1974, after a night game in Colorado Springs, Koza was invited by a scout to a Denny's Restaurant, a familiar setting for minor-league deals of modest order. The scout, Danny Doyle, had played briefly in the major leagues—13 games in 1943 as a weak-hitting catcher for the war-depleted Red Sox—before gaining some renown within the organization as a gifted scout. He had signed the Red Sox



pitching star Jim Lonborg, and would one day sign an even greater star, Roger Clemens, but right now he was locked on Dave Koza. Sign now for \$15,000, he said.

Koza was a nineteen-year-old boy. He asked if Doyle would come back to Torrington to meet his parents. But the scout said he was too busy, and needed an answer by midnight, yes or no. After telephoning his parents, the young man reached for the proffered pen and signed his baseball life away to the Boston Red Sox.

"I went home, packed my stuff, and went to Elmira," Koza will later say.

Rookie ball in Elmira, New York, along the Empire State's southern tier, led to Single-A ball in Winter Haven, Florida, which led to Double-A ball in Bristol, Connecticut, which led to Triple-A ball here in Pawtucket, which led to this moment. Seven years of chasing baseballs for a living—a fourth of his lifetime—culminates now in this pop fly at the pitcher's mound. Dave Koza drifts to his right, looking up, ready to catch a ball he believes is his.

Mine, he thinks. Mine.

Koza and Boggs do not see each other, their heads tilted so far back that Boggs's cap tumbles to the ground. Even as they collide at the mound, even as their upraised arms become entwined, their gloved and bare hands seeming to form two birds, brown and pink, about to take flight, the two men only have eyes for that falling ball.

It plops into Boggs's jostled glove, pops out, and plops for good into Koza's lobster claw of a first baseman's glove. The batter is out. Koza

pirouettes to keep the Rochester runner honest at first, then turns back to face Boggs. The teammates speak for a fleeting moment. What do they say? Maybe "That was mine," or "One out," or, simply, "Are you okay?" Neither will remember.

Koza taps Boggs on the chest with the ball. A tender gesture: We're in this together.

Koza turns to remind the outfielders of the number of outs, raising two fingers in the top of the 6th inning, no matter that the scoreboard immediately behind them brightly trumpets the same information. Infielders are taught to do this in childhood as a way to keep everyone alert, on the fairly good chance that one of the Little League outfielders has been daydreaming again about that girl he likes in the fifth grade. One finger raised for one out, two fingers for two outs, and a closed fist for no outs—or, rather, *still* no outs. . . .

With one out in the bottom of the 11th inning, Dave Koza—the hero of that boy sitting on the third-base side, Danny Card, who is cold but resolved to honor that pact with his father to stay until the end—wants, again, to finish this game with a single swing, maybe with a shot that clears the army advertisement in right field that urges everyone to be all that they can be. Strange to think of it this way, but Koza tries to hit home runs for a living. At this point in his career, some of what he exhibits at the plate is muscle memory, but much of it remains his mind instructing his body. Smoothing the batter's box dirt with his cleats. Planting himself perpendicular to the plate. Taking a slight step back in the box if the pitcher throws hard—and Rochester's Jeff Schneider does. Trying not to be obvious in any adjustments; the catcher might spot the overcompensation and call for a pitch accordingly. Resting his wide-barreled bat on his right shoulder, then raising it up as the pitcher prepares to throw. Keeping the grip on the handle loose, trying to hold the bat with the fingertips, left pinkie resting on the knob. Keeping the hands in and the bat close to the chest. Telling himself to throw the head of the bat out toward the ball. Remembering what Ted Williams always says. Ted Williams, the greatest pure hitter who ever lived, wandering foulmouthed and single-minded through spring training in Winter Haven, perhaps taking comfort once again in seeing no one his equal among the latest crop of mewling man-children.

Williams: Hips ahead of hands; hips ahead of hands. • • •

In the bottom of the 18th, Dave Koza approaches the plate for the eighth time in this game. He has 3 hits in 7 at bats so far, and do you know who knows this minor but encouraging statistic better than the official scorer, up there in the drafty press box? Do you know who knows this better than Koza himself? A young woman sitting and faintly shivering in the lonely stands on the third-base side, despite the blanket in her lap, her long blond hair parted in the middle, her large eyes conveying not so much a naïve wonder as an openness to what comes next: his new wife, Ann Koza. And do you know what she is thinking? Of course you do.

*Come on, Dave. End this.*

Strange how we wind up where we do. All it takes sometimes is a chance encounter, something seen in a pair of eyes, an openness to change. Two years ago, Ann was dating a nice guy in her isolated hometown in northeastern Pennsylvania. And now here she is, at twenty-three, married to the strapping first baseman for the Pawtucket Red Sox, imagining a major-league life, experiencing every game with him, every pitch, celebrating when he celebrates but not despairing when he despairs; she does that alone. And tonight, she freezes as he freezes.

Ann grew up in Tunkhannock, a small working-class town about thirty miles northwest of Wilkes-Barre. Her mother worked as a nurse at a state mental hospital, her father—well, her father worked when he worked, giving piano lessons, doing odd jobs, often on the barter system. They raised Ann to be independent and tough. A good swimmer in high school, she was also a gifted baseball player with no interest in girls' softball. She tried out for the boys' varsity team and was taken seriously by the coach, who told her that she was good enough to make the team, but there were rules against girls playing on a boys' team. She became the manager instead.

After high school, during a spring vacation in 1979, she and her boyfriend stopped in Winter Haven to visit a friend of his, Burke Suter, a pitcher in the Red Sox organization. He introduced them to his handsome roommate, Dave Koza, and that was that. When Ann returned to Pennsylvania, she conducted some International League research, saw that Pawtucket would soon be playing in Syracuse—just 130 miles from Tunkhannock!—and called up Suter to ask for tickets. Koza answered the telephone.

Ann got a speeding ticket on her rush to Syracuse.

Around a minor-league team's schedule, a long-distance romance developed. Ann would drive to Dave's games in Rochester and Syracuse, and, occasionally, all the way to Pawtucket, staying with Dave and his PawSox roommates in the double-wide they rented in a trailer park, beside the old Narragansett Park racetrack, that was owned by an old mob associate (Welcome to Rhode Island!). When the season ended, and the Boston Red Sox had again not included Dave in their September call-ups, Dave asked Ann whether she would join him on his trip back to Torrington, Wyoming.

Yes.

Dave and Ann loaded up his black Chevy Blazer and took the first of their many cross-country rides together, shedding the cheek-by-jowl crowdedness of gritty Pawtucket and the confining hills of Tunkhannock for a flat terrain on the other side of the country, where Dave Koza walked about like a shy giant (*Oh, Dave's back! Dave's back in town!*). They moved in with Dave's friend Cactus, who was now

working at his family's car dealership and living in a house in a desirable part of town "up on the hill." Dave always brought back a huge bag of Red Man chewing tobacco for his buddies, courtesy of the Pawtucket Red Sox clubhouse. A Torrington celebrity, he rarely had to pay for a beer.

Dave got a job working construction with friends, who teased him about his fear of scaffolding, while Ann worked at the Holly Sugar Factory when she wasn't on call as a respiratory therapist at Community Hospital. Cactus gave Dave a good deal on a silver Oldsmobile Toronado, a two-door coupe that looked especially fine with Ann riding shotgun. They all went hunting for pheasant and then for elk, camping out in snow-packed mountains, far from Pawtucket, where the very idea of elk was so foreign that Joe Morgan's nickname for Dave was "Elkman."

Then, right after Christmas, Dave got back into baseball shape. Not that he was ever out of it; he kept fit. But come the New Year, he'd get the itch, and want to start throwing to someone. So he'd pack up his glove, his bat, and a few baseballs, and drive across a piece of the Torrington tundra to the old Willi gymnasium, where, on so many boyhood nights, he led his high school basketball team to victory. Now, alone, with no cheering crowds, he'd run up and down the stairs a few times, swing his bat at a series of phantom pitches, then induce Ann to throw him ground balls and line drives and pop flies. If Ann wasn't around, he'd get Cactus to do it. And if Cactus wasn't around, Dave would throw a ball against the wall, *whop, whop, whop*, again and again, like Steve McQueen in *The Great Escape*, imagining himself someplace else.

Every once in a while, Dave, Ann, Cactus, and a couple of others would head down Main Street to drink beer and shoot pool at the Broncho Bar, beneath the indifferent gaze of the mounted elk, whose glassy eyes had watched Cactus and Dave come through the door so many times over the years. Cactus never forgot the night that some knucklehead started giving Dave a hard time, riding him, looking to settle some perceived slight. The two men squared off beside the pool table, the aggressor made his first move, and—bam—Dave laid him

out with a cat-quick left to the jaw. Then, typical Dave: He went to follow up, but saw the man was out cold, and left it at that. No second punch; no blood thirst.

Cactus knew better than to ask Dave how it was going, "it" being the man's major-league struggle, and Ann knew all there was to know, except the answer to why. But neither of them could protect Dave from the hounding inquiries of good friends and passing acquaintances. To his credit, Dave never got angry, no matter how many times he heard how he'd be the first person from Wyoming to play in the major leagues (not true, actually, but he would have been among the very, very few). He'd gently explain how hard it is to reach the big leagues, how he still has hopes of making it, and yes, yes, he's met Carl Yastrzemski—and even Ted Williams. Many years later, Cactus will look back on those nights at the Broncho and realize that, for Dave, Torrington was not always the land of escape that it seemed to be. Ignorance about the business of baseball was greater, expectations higher, Cactus will say. "The pressure must have been phenomenal."

A few months ago, Dave and Ann took a short road trip, driving his hot Toronado across the state of Wyoming, 460 miles, through Wheatland, and Douglas, and Cody, all because he said that she simply had to see Yellowstone National Park. Once there, Dave pulled up to a scenic overlook called Inspiration Point, with its breathtaking view of the canyon and the rushing Yellowstone River below. He walked Ann to a suitably romantic spot, reached for the ring he had in his pocket, the one he had bought from Cactus's uncle, a jeweler, and—a station wagon pulled up and disgorged a bunch of mood-ruining kids. Dave and Ann got back in the car and drove around until he found another spot, cleared his throat, and—a troop of Girl Scouts marched into view. Finally, he took Ann to Old Faithful, determined to present the ring to her when the geyser erupted. He waited, and he waited—it was getting a little awkward—and then . . .

Yes.

On February 5, 1981, Ann Creeden, of Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania, and David Koza, of Torrington, Wyoming, were married in the chapel

at St. Joseph's Children's Home, a former orphanage in Torrington now used as a facility to help poor and emotionally damaged children. The Koza family held a reception at the golf course and country club. Then the newlyweds aimed the Toronado east and drove the 1,650 miles to Tunkhannock, where the Creeden family held another wedding reception at a little bar called the Inn Between. After that, it was 1,150 miles south, to Winter Haven. Not because that is where Dave and Ann first met, but because it was spring training, and time to try again.

And here Dave is now, at the plate, trying again. And here is his new wife, Ann, wrapped in a blanket in the stands but very much beside him in the batter's box. She doesn't just want him to end the game. She wants him to be the one everyone talks about the next day. The One.

*Come on, Dave. End it.*

Koza hits a ground ball that the second baseman, Tom Eaton, boots for an error. Then Wade Boggs slaps another grounder back to the pitcher for a quick double play. And what all this amounts to, all the practice and the heartache and the touching aspirations of two newlyweds, is just the 19th inning. . . .

Now Dave Koza: a lot of power, a bit of a free swinger, not too difficult to fool. But somewhere in the stands, where maybe fifty people now sit, a young blond woman roots against Luebber, thinking, *Come on, Dave.*

Koza tries to muscle one out. Instead, he launches a short, sky-scraping pop fly out toward right field, for what Luebber is already calculating as an easy out. . . .

It is the bottom of the 29th, her husband is leading off, and she prays again:

*Come on, Dave. Get the hit. THE hit.*

This is Koza's twelfth at bat of the night—three games' worth. He has a double and three singles so far, but he is not thinking about the uptick in his batting average right now. He is thinking about getting on base, starting something, getting the hell out of here. Unlike Boggs Koza does not obsessively calculate his batting average, though Boggs might say that he wouldn't, either, if he put up numbers as low as Koza's (.239 in 1979, .235 in 1980). This is a touchy subject for Koza. Three years ago, at the beginning of the season in Pawtucket, he was sitting in front of his locker, lost in his depressing thoughts, trying to process the difficult news that he had been sent back down to Double-A in Bristol.

Just then, a voice spoke to him: Hey, kid, whattaya hitting?

The kid from Torrington, Wyoming, bound for Bristol, looked up and saw *the* Kid, Ted Williams, with that handsome box of a head, that once splintery body filled out with the weight of retirement, and those eyes, those piercing, 20/10 eyes. The greatest hitter who ever lived was working for the Red Sox organization as a hitting instructor, lecturing on the applied sciences to anyone worthy or talented enough, and now he was staring at Koza with those eyes that were said to see all. And the depressed kid from Torrington mumbled: What?

I said, whattaya hitting?

I don't even know.

Williams exploded. He screamed for maybe a minute, maybe an hour, who knows how long, because Koza can hear the man still, yelling that you should fucking know your fucking batting average at all fucking times. Then the god continued on through the clubhouse, having reduced this poor baseball mortal to tears. Yes, it was true: Ted Williams had made Dave Koza cry. But what do you do with this anecdote? Do you tell your children someday about the fleeting but intense emo-

tional moment when one of the most famous Americans of the twentieth century made you weep? Do you learn from it? Do you vow from now on to know what your batting average is at all times, as well as you know your own date of birth?

No. Better to say: It is this at bat that counts. This moment, now.

Koza swings at Umbarger's first pitch and sends a ground ball skipping toward Rochester's shortstop, Bobby Bonner, arguably the best defensive player on the field, possessed of a baseball awareness you cannot teach. Occasionally someone on the bench will ask Rochester manager Doc Edwards why the hell Bonner's playing out of position, behind second base, or in shallow left center field? Doc will just say that Bonner must sense something the rest of us do not, something based on complex variables: the pitch about to be thrown, the stance of the batter, the shift in the wind. Don't worry about Bobby Bonner.

Bobby Bonner waits, his body crouched in what he describes to kids as his sitting-on-the-toilet position. But in keeping with the impish nature of this night, Dave Koza's ground ball takes a sneaky, screw-you hop, then rattles around Bonner's hands like a thing come to life.

"Bonner bobbles it, fires to first, in time," says the radio announcer, Bob Drew. "And Koza's out of there, six to three." Then Drew's radio-booth partner, Pete Torrez, adds: "Bob, that was a good play by Bobby that time."

At 4:07 a.m., at the end of the 32nd inning, the game was stopped. There were nineteen fans in the stands. It was resumed on June 23rd, the next time the Red Wings were in town.



No outs and the bases are loaded, a baseball term that suggests imminent explosion. All this awaits the next batter, Dave Koza. Since the early-morning suspension of this game sixty-five days ago, Koza has known that when play resumed, he would be Pawtucket's fourth batter up. He has visualized this at bat on an endless loop in hotel rooms along the International League circuit and in his own bedroom just down the street from McCoy, his new wife snuggled by his side, the two of them talking so much about it that they finally agreed to stop talking about it altogether. He has dreamed of it, really, ever since his father strung up some chicken wire to transform a plot of Wyoming nothingness into a Little League ball field; dreamed of the pitch, his game-winning hit, and the world's joyous reaction. Now he carries the Louisville Slugger that the awed batboy placed in the bat-rack slot reserved for Koza, and he wears the blue helmet stained with the sweat of his teammate Mike Ongarato, a hat that lately seems to be granting him good luck at the plate. Moments ago, Ongarato urged him to wear this helmet once more, saying something that makes sense only in a baseball dugout: The helmet's got a lot of hits in it.

Across the field, Doc Edwards hitches his uniform belt and ambles out to remove the baseball from the grasp of a dejected Steve Grilli, who, in eleven quick pitches, has allowed all three batters he has faced to reach base. This will be Grilli's last season in professional baseball; he will not return to the major leagues—although twenty years from

now, his little son, Jason, always itching to play catch, will follow his father onto the fields of the major leagues.

A new pitcher, a right-hander named Cliff Speck, approaches from the visiting team's bullpen, a barren stretch beside a large roll of green tarp, on the first-base side. Like Grilli, the six-foot-four Speck only joined the Red Wings a few weeks ago, after his promotion from Double-A, and so does not share the depth of emotional investment that his teammates have in this game. Still, for all the disproportionate hysteria surrounding what is really nothing more than another minor-league game in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, he enjoys when everything is on the line and up to him. Besides, he has no time to get nervous. It's either do it or don't.

While Speck warms up, a thought occurs to Roarke, Pawtucket's third-base coach and acting manager. He motions for Koza to meet him halfway between third and home. With arms folded across his chest, the veteran coach asks the young player: Have you ever laid down a squeeze bunt? In other words, do you have the confidence and bat skill to participate in one of baseball's most daring and difficult plays by dropping a surprise bunt at the precise moment that Barrett comes charging home from third? If you miss the ball, Barrett is a sure out. If you pop the ball up, both you and Barrett are out. So, the question is, young man: Have you ever laid down a squeeze bunt?

The young man's stunned expression seems to suggest that one of the two people in this conversation has suddenly gone mad. Never mind, Roarke says. Go get 'em.

Koza steps into the batter's box to begin his brief maintenance routine of mind and space, smoothing out the dirt with his left cleat, working a chunk of Dubble Bubble chewing gum hard enough to tighten the definition of his jaw. His chest pounds as his subconscious processes all the hitting advice he has received over the years, from his father on Torrington grass to Ted Williams in the Pawtucket clubhouse. Ted Williams, who made him cry once. But Koza is clear-eyed now. Keep the bat close to your body, he is thinking. Hold the handle light, on the fingertips. Protect the plate, but don't get suckered. Drive the ball into the outfield. Drive the ball.

Up in the stands, Bob Brex, wired with a microphone to the nation, fears a ground-out double play. He wishes for a sacrifice fly. He speaks for all of Pawtucket as he commands Koza from afar: Get it in the air! Get it in the air!

Before Koza even knows it, the count is 1 and 1.

"This is the most attention that the city of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, has had since a number of years back, when, believe it or not, the camel at the local zoo here got drunk," says Tom Marr, a radio announcer who normally handles Baltimore Orioles games. "That's true. It is true. And they got a lot of national attention because the camel trampled the watchman and had to be shot. Here's the next pitch. It's out of the strike zone, two-and-one count.

"Well, it happened. It actually happened. The camel went berserk, they had to shoot the camel, and animal lovers from all over the country sent nasty letters to the mayor of Pawtucket. Bases loaded.

"Here's the pitch to the next batter. It's fouled off again, two balls and two strikes the count."

With two strikes on him, Koza fouls off another pitch; in baseball parlance, he stays alive. Somewhere to his left, waiting to bat next, is Wade Boggs, so gifted a hitter that he will surely drive in the winning run if given the chance. And directly behind Koza, as always, is his wife, Ann, sitting in one of the choice seats reserved for the wives and girlfriends of the players. Every pitch seems to rob her of breath as she prays for Dave to hit a home run—a grand slam!—only to pull back, out of fear that she might be asking too much of God. A hit. That's all. A hit to win the game.

Speck is a statue, his very stillness a form of intimidation. He cradles the precious ball in his right hand, out of Koza's view, and peers from under the bill of his red Rochester cap in the direction of home plate. Koza steps out of the batter's box to compose himself. Two strikes. He engages again in an at bat's subtle formalities, equal parts courtesy, anxiety and focus. He smooths the dirt. He takes a practice swing. He steps back in and taps his raised left cleat with the barrel of the bat held in his left hand. He taps the plate with the bat's nose at precisely the same time that he adjusts his blue helmet with his right hand. Finally, he points his bat

at the pitcher in a manner that lacks any hint of threat; that says, almost politely, Ready when you are. Behind him, the crouching catcher, Floyd Rayford, waves his mitt down, down, down, reminding Speck to keep the ball low.

Koza catches sight of the ball just as it unscrews from Speck's grasp: a curve. A knee-buckler, spinning with the promise of evasion, heading directly for Koza. At this moment he is forced to confront his demon, the curveball, which, more than anything else, has kept him from playing in the major leagues. Undermining his years of hard work, making him look foolish, derailing his plans. He cannot escape it, the curve. Speck, meanwhile, bent at the waist and with his face recalibrating from the exertion, is happy with this low, away, and nearly unhittable pitch. He is thinking: "No way."

Koza's waist snaps, his upper body follows, his powerful arms extend. His bat of ash transforms into an extension of himself, all his hopes and fears carried in its barrel. He's chasing a pitch just as he has chased a major-league career, hoping to make contact with the elusive. He reaches out and, almost apologetically, connects. His discarded bat twirls to the ground, as time slows again in Pawtucket.

The softly hit ball flutters past the runner on third base, Marty Barrett, who stutters in place as he tries to discern its destination and meaning. It floats in a tease over the head of the helpless third baseman, Cal Ripken Jr., whose storied major-league career has yet to begin, and descends well in front of the defeated left fielder, Keith Smith, whose brief major-league career has already passed. Then, having served its purpose, the ball falls to deliver a good-night kiss to the grass.

Barrett scores, confirming the victory with a foot touch of home plate, his right hand raised to create what will become the game's iconic image. The Pawtucket Red Sox win, 3-2. After 33 innings, this game is blessedly, mercifully, over. ■ ■ ■

Surely, Boston's front office will take notice that Dave Koza can hit in the clutch. And if there's no room on the Red Sox roster, every team in the country will know who Koza is by morning, when his name and photograph will adorn the nation's sports pages, and he and Cal Ripken Jr. will appear, live, on *Good Morning America*, his triumph shared between news of President Reagan's plan for the lagging economy and a review of *Cannonball Run*, a new movie starring Burt Reynolds, Farrah Fawcett, and Dom DeLuise. In a moment of pure, absurd Americana, Koza and Ripken will stand in McCoy's left field while the show's host, the urbane actor John Forsythe, who in his youth worked as a public-address announcer for the Brooklyn Dodgers, sits in a studio in New York City, directing his somewhat misinformed questions to a small television screen.

FORSYTHE (*polished*): Now you, Dave, you tied the ball game, didn't you, in the 32nd inning. And then you won it last night. How'd you do that?

KOZA (*nervous*): Well, we led off the inning. Marty Barrett led it off, he got hit by a pitch. Then Chico Walker came up—(*a pause to swallow*)—had a base hit up the middle. Doc Edwards, their manager, came out and decided to walk Russ Larabee. Well, there it was, bases loaded, no one out, and I'm up at the plate. I just—I just wouldn't want to be anywhere else right then.

FORSYTHE (*joking*): You made sure you touched first base, though, didn't you?

KOZA (*earnest*): Yes, I did. . . .

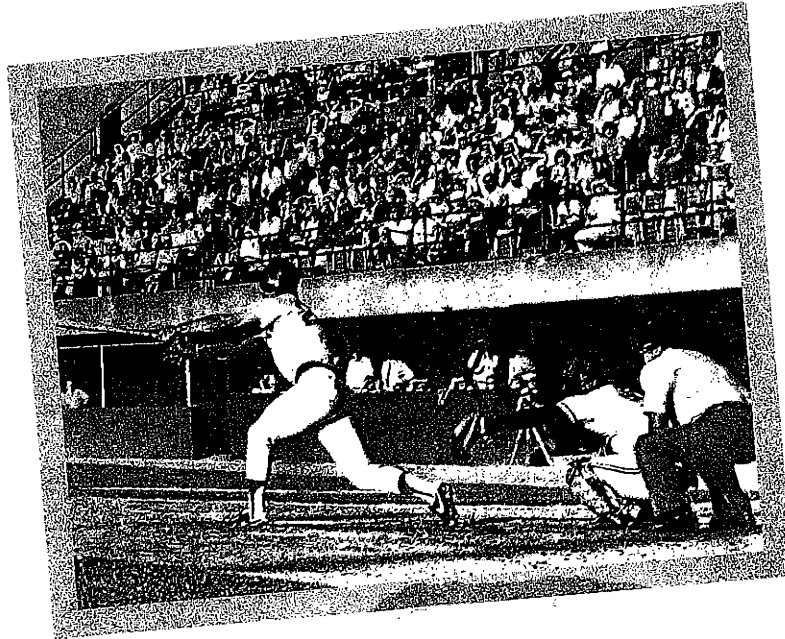
FORSYTHE (*concluding*): Well, you've created history, fellas. It was a great ball game. And congratulations to you all, winners and losers.

KOZA AND RIPKEN (*relieved*): Thank you.

FORSYTHE (*moving on*): We'll find out how to take advantage of the hot weather to change your eating habits and get yourself in better shape. After this . . .

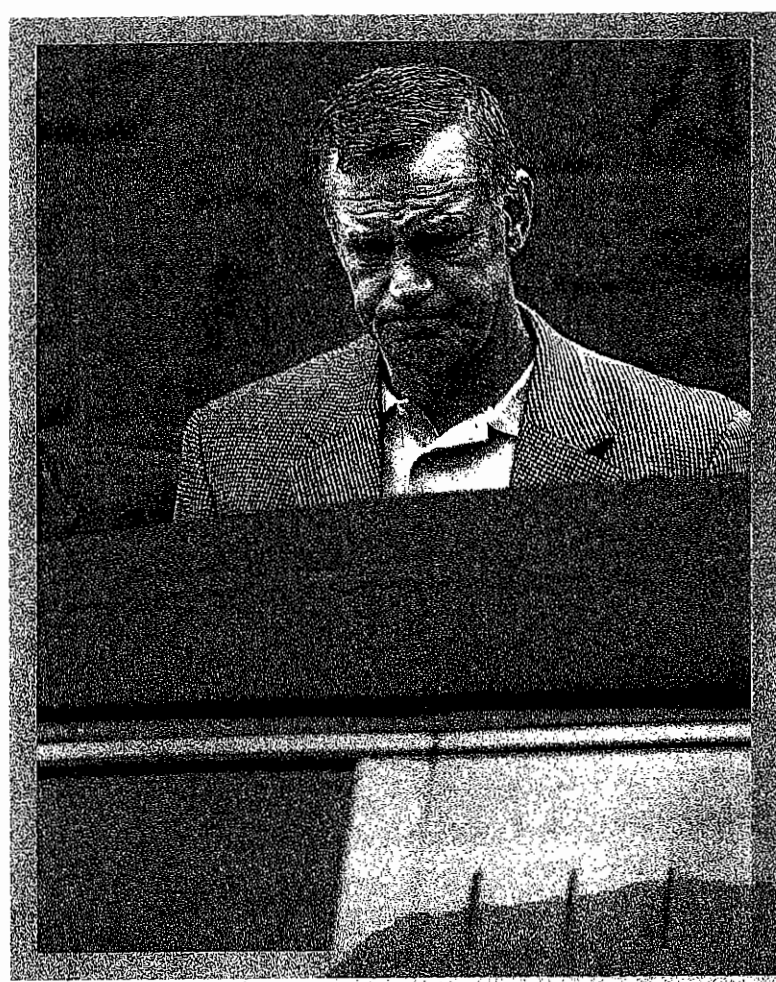
That will be tomorrow's glory. Tonight, the hero, still wearing his Pawtucket Red Sox uniform and cap, stands just outside the home team clubhouse, in front of a sign on the pale yellow wall that reads, NO ADMITTANCE, TEAM PERSONNEL AND CLUBHOUSE PASSES ONLY. He has blue eyes, shaggy brown-blond hair, and a full mustache that suggests he knows the wide-open spaces. Behind him stands a Pawtucket police officer, his distended belly testing the fabric of his light blue uniform shirt, his smiling face a beam of admiration and envy. And embracing the hero, his new wife, in crisp white shirt and dungarees, her blond hair lustrous and long down her back. He gently rocks her back and forth, as though preparing them both for their next springing step.

The ballplayer kisses his wife, and pulls her closer with a hand snug in a batting glove.



Koza connects.

THIRTY YEARS LATER



Dave Koza at Ben Mondor's funeral,  
October 2010.

Dave Koza stores his baseball memories in plastic bins that he tucks away in the spare bedroom of his small home in Pawtucket, less than three miles from McCoy Stadium. Pry open the lid to any one of these tubs and his boyish past is released: the intermingled hints of Skoal, Ben-Gay, and fresh-cut grass; the hand-clap echoes of hits, the swing-and-miss grunts, the last calls at My Brother's Pub. He keeps them all here, the bits and pieces of his baseball years, jumbled together, measured less by the passage of days than by the statistics of the seasons, the singular moments: 1976 (.281 batting average); 1979 (27 home runs); 1981 (the longest game).

In the thirty years since Koza ended a 33-inning baseball marathon with a soft, dreamy single over Cal Ripken's head, the story of this sporting event has proven susceptible to the truth-altering charms of myth and memory. There is no malicious intent in the retold tales, no evidence of self-promoting embellishment. But the improbable nature of that Holy Saturday night and Easter Sunday morning seems to have encouraged narrative embroidery, as though the participants and witnesses of baseball's longest game remain hypnotized by the flames dancing and writhing from the burning bats in the dugout barrels. Some will remember that a cold mist fell, that temperatures dropped below freezing, and that a car hit a transformer on a Pawtucket street, knocking out power to the stadium lights right before the game's scheduled start; none of this is true. Some accounts will say that twenty-seven fans were present at the end of the 32nd inning;



Ben Mondor, the owner, swore by nineteen. Some will say that Harold Cooper, the president of the International League, did not pick up the telephone that night because he was at a wedding, or was driving home to Ohio from Indianapolis; Cooper said he was at home that night, asleep, when Pawtucket called with news of a runaway game. Some will insist that Luis Aponte, the pitcher whose unhappy wife turned him away at their apartment door, slept on the trainer's table; he insisted he returned home and slept cozily beside his wife. The Pawtucket pitcher Bruce Hurst, future major-league hero, genetically incapable of telling an untruth, often recalls how he struck out Ripken on a 3-2 curve at four o'clock in the morning. In his major-league career, Hurst struck out Ripken seven times in 45 at bats—but he did *not* strike Ripken out in the longest game. This is a reflection not on the decent, straight-up Bruce Hurst, but of the late-hour exhaustion that infused the night with certain enchantment.

Dave Koza often encounters these exaggerations. People will approach him at, say, Chelo's restaurant on Newport Avenue, or maybe at the Ground Round restaurant, next to where the old Howard Johnson motor inn used to be, and ask: Aren't you the guy who hit the home run to win the longest game? "No, no," he always answers, in a gee-whiz sort of way. "It was just a little base hit to left."

But these plastic bins of his, sitting in an extra room of his house, contain no embellishments or misunderstandings about the past. They hold only facts: baseball ephemera and personal scraps that, when assembled in rough chronology, tell part of the story of one man's heroic journey.

Plaques and photographs and Florida State League yearbooks. Some minor-league baseball cards. A couple of Association of Professional Ball Players of America identification cards. A photograph of Pawtucket first baseman Dave Koza standing beside Boston first baseman Carl Yastrzemski. A letter that Koza wrote to his parents in Wyoming, on Boston Red Sox Baseball Club stationery, back in 1979: *Baseball is still trying to treat me good. I've been hitting the ball better. 16 HRs, 45 RBIs out of about 45 hits! My average is .223. Darn that ave. anyway. . . .*

A copy of Koza's 1981 contract: *Club hereby employs Player to render, and Player agrees to render, skilled services as a professional baseball player for Club . . . For the performance of all of the skilled services as aforesaid by Player and for Player's promises herein contained, Club will pay Player, therefore, at the rate of \$2,400 per month . . .*

Here are some videocassettes, labeled in pen along their black spines. One reads, "Dave Baseball"; another, "Dave—Ball—1981." A third reads, "*Star Trek and Good Morning America*," as if to confirm the oddity of that long-ago interview with John Forsythe, the two of them, Ripken and Koza, standing in McCoy's left field, talking by remote to an actor who once starred for Alfred Hitchcock:

*"Hello, fellas!"*

*"Hello."*

*"'Lo."*

Here is a yellowed letter from the United States Senate:

*June 25, 1981*

*Dear Dave:*

*I might have known that it would take a Wyoming boy to end the longest game in the history of baseball. Congratulations!*

*. . . I hope things go well for you this season and throughout a long and distinguished career. If they would just settle this disheartening strike, maybe you could make your major-league debut yet this year.*

*Congratulations and best wishes,*

*Malcolm Wallop*

*· United States Senator*

And here is a note that Ann Koza sent to his parents. She was always so diligent that way—the president, treasurer, and secretary of her own private Dave Koza Fan Club:

July 10, 1981

*Hello Everybody!!! . . .*

*Things are still coming in from that big game for Dave. He won a travel bag from the Gillette "This Week in Baseball" show. Fan mail is still coming by the heaps. He got a letter from his first-grade teacher in Florida. . . .*

*Dave got another home run last night. Number 13. His average is now .280, give or take a point. Hopefully the strike will end and his chances of being sent up at the end of the season are looking mighty good. . . .*

It never happened.

During the 1981 season, the Boston Red Sox summoned six players from Pawtucket. Dave Koza, the hero of the longest game in baseball history, was not among them. He finished the year with 18 home runs and a .268 batting average, learned that he would not be among the so-called September call-ups, again, and turned to Ann, again, to pose the question that she had no hope of answering: Why?

Then, as always, he filled the aching silence with an "Oh well," or a "Maybe it's not meant to be," and Ann just wanted to yell at him to say something, do something, let Boston know how you feel! "But I couldn't," she recalled, many years later, tears trickling down from her large eyes. "I didn't want to make him feel bad. And I would just feel—so bad."

Once more, they took that long 1,900-mile drive back to Wyoming, where some of the excitement and importance of the longest game got lost in transit between Pennsylvania and Colorado. People had heard about the game, of course, and were impressed by the letter Dave had received from a United States senator, but down at the Broncho Bar, a few still rudely asked why he hadn't made it yet—as though reaching the major leagues was merely a matter of promotion based on seniority. Cactus, his good buddy from Torrington, often changed the subject. Dave, meanwhile, returned to working construction, turned twenty-seven years old, got his head straight, and prepared for another spring

by throwing a ball against the town gymnasium's concrete wall, *whop, whop, whop*.

For Koza, the 1982 season mirrored his 1981 season, save for the absence of any heroics worthy of national celebration. Of course, there was the time that Cactus and his wife surprised Dave by showing up at McCoy one night. Cactus arrived just as Dave was swinging a bat in the on-deck circle, and started calling out a nickname from the old days that only Dave would know.

"Hey, Hutch! Hutcher!"

The all-business mask dropped from Koza's face, the bat from his hands. He ran over and greeted his pal in the stands, who knew him when. "And then he hit a home run for us," Cactus later recalled.

They heard about this remarkable moment back in Torrington, but no one in Pawtucket, or Boston, particularly cared. Koza hit the same number of home runs (18), hit for nearly the same average (.259), and hit up against the same spirit-crushing disappointment. Ojeda, Hurst, and Gedman were up with Boston for good now, it seemed, and Wade Boggs had made the most of his long-awaited chance, hitting .349 to end any doubt that he belonged in the major leagues. Marty Barrett spent some time with the Boston Red Sox, as did Julio Valdez, and Roger LaFrancois—but not Koza. His exclusion from the list of September call-ups surprised several of his colleagues in Pawtucket, from the dugout to the front office. The Elkman, they agreed, at least had earned a sip of coffee.

By the end of 1982, with the Pawtucket Red Sox some 14 games out of first place, and winter approaching for the uninvited, Koza could no longer keep to himself a question that had nagged at him for the better part of six years. He had wearied of dreaming the same teasing dream, over and over, only to wake up to his Pawtucket reality. One evening in Syracuse, while shagging some fly balls during batting practice, Koza saw Joe Morgan standing alone, fungo bat in hand, and decided that now was as good a time as any to ask.

"What do you think, Joe?"

In many ways, these two men were east-west opposites. Morgan had that sideways Irish wit, and seemed to enjoy savoring the etymological

taste of every one of the many words to pour from his mouth; Koza seemed to wait an extra beat before speaking a single earnest word. Morgan externalized his anger; Koza kept his in, mostly. Morgan liked to bet on horses; Koza liked to shoot elk. Still, they had spent much of the last six years together, sharing in the daily dramas at McCoy, traveling from Tidewater to Toledo and back again, staying in the same damn hotels, eating at the same damn restaurants. They understood each other.

Morgan, a dreamer himself, did not relish this part of his job. You couldn't very well go around telling most of your minor-league ballplayers that they'd never make the major leagues; if you did that, you wouldn't be able to field a team. Still, Morgan never wanted to be complicit in another man's delusions. He knew that baseball players often need to hear someone else articulate the thoughts they harbor but cannot bring themselves to say aloud. And if a young man, who in baseball terms may not be so young anymore, asked Morgan straight out—Hey, Joe, I won't hold nothing against you, but do you think I'll ever play in the big leagues?—he felt morally required to provide either encouragement or release. To say yes or no.

Now comes the Elkman, Dave Koza, seeking a way out of baseball limbo. Big, strong, mature. A calming influence in the dugout, and someone who always had his teammates' backs. (Who can forget that time a batter for the Toledo Mud Hens charged the mound, intent on harming the Pawtucket pitcher Mike Smithson, and Koza came out of nowhere and leveled the guy with a crushing tackle?) Good with the glove. Strong arm. Lots of power. And no question: He had put up some decent numbers over the years in Triple-A, the penultimate level of baseball, an extraordinarily difficult game to play well.

But Dave Koza fell just short. He did not dominate. He lacked consistency. And Joe Morgan gently, firmly, told him so.

There it was. All those hot summers spent at that boys' baseball camp in Oklahoma, raking the field, wearing itchy woolen uniforms all those dozens of games played in college and in the semiprofessional summer leagues; all those hundreds of games with Elmira, Wintehaven, Bristol, and, of course, Pawtucket. The endless fielding drills

learning the proper footwork for covering first base; knowing where to stand as the cutoff man for a throw from the outfield; how to execute a 3-6-3 double play. The endless batting practice: Dave, you're dropping your shoulder; Dave, you've got your shoulder too high; Dave, hips ahead of hands. The many injuries, including the time he wore a batting glove for several days to control the swelling and hide the discoloration on a bruised hand he wanted to keep secret. All the little things, the little things. How about the time in Rochester, when he got hit in the head by a fastball that cracked his helmet and left him flat in the dirt, stunned, looking up and seeing the concerned faces of Sammy Bowen and Joe Morgan. The next night in Syracuse, in his first at bat: home run.

All of this, nearly two decades' worth, dedicated to one pursuit: to become a major-league baseball player—even if just for one at bat that might not last a minute.

His manager's words stayed with him on the trip back to Pawtucket, as he cleaned out his locker at season's end, and on the long ride with Ann, back to Wyoming for another winter. Whatever arguments he privately laid out before the Court of Baseball Fairness—Think of what I could learn just by being in a major-league clubhouse, talking baseball with major-league guys—were immediately shot down by the Morgan deposition, which might as well have been taken under oath. You lack consistency.

Dave Koza turned twenty-eight. Ann Koza became pregnant. And from a gymnasium in Torrington came the lonely echoes of a ball bouncing against the wall. *Whop. Whop. Whop.*

The Pawtucket Red Sox began the 1983 season with a new manager and a new first baseman. After nine years in Pawtucket, with nothing more to prove, Joe Morgan moved on to become a scout in the Boston Red Sox organization. Ben Mondor, the owner of the PawSox, who once offered Morgan the world if he promised to stay, understood: Joe wanted his shot, too. And after four years as the team's starting first baseman, Dave Koza was relegated to a secondary role as a late-inning defensive replacement, designated hitter, and bench warmer. The new manager

who marginalized Koza had spent thirteen years in the minors, mostly as a first baseman, and had never played in the major leagues, while the player who replaced Koza at first was, like him, an inconsistent power hitter who would also never rise above Triple-A.

When the season finally ended, Koza had 14 home runs, 44 runs batted in, and a lingering case of the baseball player maybes. *Maybe I'm misreading the situation. Maybe another team will see what Boston clearly does not. Maybe the opinion of Joe Morgan, God love him, is not shared in Boston.* He called Boston and made an appointment with Ed Kenney, a Red Sox vice president who, for many years, had been the organization's director of player development. Soon Koza was taking the forty-five-mile drive to Fenway Park, a drive he had always imagined would be made under happier circumstances. His meeting with Kenney lasted ten minutes, if that. Their conversation was matter-of-fact, all business.

Koza: Mr. Kenney, I've come up here to find out where I stand.

Kenney: Well, Dave, you're a free agent now, and no other team has expressed any interest in you.

Koza: Does that mean that the Red Sox aren't interested in me, either?

Kenney: No, we're not.

Although the two men were sitting in an office in Boston, the moment drew Koza spiritually closer to all those brown-brick textile mills that defined his landscape in Pawtucket. A century and a half ago, an anonymous New England mill manager bluntly explained: When my machinery breaks down, I replace it; so too with my workers. And what was minor-league baseball, really, but pleasant millwork conducted outdoors? In exchange for setting aside your education and the development of marketable skills, you receive clubhouse pampering, fan adulation, and the faint chance of major-league ascension—but only as long as you stay healthy, put up numbers, and do not age. Ed Kenney had effectively informed Dave Koza, just short of twenty-nine years old, that he was a worn piece of machinery, no longer of use to the company. That most of us would love to play professional baseball—would gladly trade places with Dave Koza for the chance to hit even one home run before a cheering hometown crowd, in Paw-

tucket, or Bristol, or Elmira—only complicates the moment’s essential cruelty.

The fired mill worker thanked the busy mill manager for his time, and returned to brown-brick Pawtucket. A few days later, his wife gave birth to their first child, Rebecca. His prolonged boyhood was over.

The Koza family headed west again, first to Tunkhannock, to see Ann’s relatives, and then on to Torrington, where they moved in with Dave’s parents for the winter. All they knew of their future was that it now included this precious baby girl. Dave, though, struggled with the uncertainty. He had always been a baseball player pursuing a big-league dream, and now, suddenly, he was not. Like so many professional athletes before him, his career had ended abruptly, against his will, and he could no longer count on a grassy buffer to separate him from the real world. His mother even gave him a lunch pail with a thermos, as if to say: It’s time to go to work.

Ann Koza could not bear to see her husband suffer. She sent Dave’s résumé to every major-league ball club, save for Boston, to alert them to the availability of Dave Koza, power-hitting first baseman, and the man who drove in the winning run in the longest game in baseball history. Several teams wrote back, saying that of course they knew who Dave Koza was, but, unfortunately, there were no suitable openings at this time. Without his knowledge, Ann also wrote a letter from the non-existent Dave Koza Fan Club to the Boston Red Sox (going so far as to have a friend mail it from Rhode Island, so that the envelope would not have the telltale postage mark of Torrington, Wyoming). The letter all but begged Boston not to give up on Koza. No player gave more of himself.

The Dave Koza Fan Club did not receive a response. The regret, the pain—the grief, really, over the death of a career—began to strain the relationship between Dave and Ann. For so long she had lived and died with her husband’s every at bat. Now she began to wonder whether Dave’s failure to reach the major leagues was her fault. Maybe if they hadn’t gotten married. Maybe if they hadn’t started a family. . . .

After a vague offer for Dave to become a player-coach in the Dominican Republic fell through, the Kozas returned to Pawtucket to



figure out what to do next. Dave understood that his primary role in life was to be a father—and Becky gave him such joy—but, as he will put it, he was still wearing his career around his neck, like a gold medallion that said, Look at me. He could still walk into any bar in Pawtucket, be recognized, and enjoy a drink or two on the house. But he soon wearied of being asked about how he had almost, almost made it to the big leagues; in effect, he was being celebrated for his failure. He stopped going to games at McCoy Stadium.

In 1984, a prominent local contractor, who had been a longtime booster of the PawSox, the kind of supporter who sponsored the annual Tenth Player Award, hired Koza as the manager and bartender of the Mill River Tavern, a restaurant in an old five-and-dime store in downtown Pawtucket that had been converted into a pleasant but unnervingly quiet warren of small shops. Koza had absolutely no experience in the food-service industry, but the job came with a salary and health benefits—plus tips. After more than a decade of worrying about curveballs and bat speed, he now focused on providing cups of soup and halves of sandwiches to the lunch crowd, then grappling with how to attract a dinner crowd to an emptied city core. He started taking a drink or two toward the end of his day to unwind and think.

You could say that Dave Koza had been drinking ever since he was a fifteen-year-old high school sophomore, and two older women—high school juniors—took him down to the canal, one of the preferred Torrington places for underage drinking, to sample some Boone's Farm apple wine. He did what most first-time drinkers do when this sickly sweet liquor passes their lips: He got dizzy drunk and puked. But a connection had been made. Here it was, courage in a bottle.

His career as a professional baseball player did not exactly discourage drinking. If anything, the postgame beer or two was part of the time-honored ritual. The clubbies stocked beer for the ballplayers the same way they stocked chewing tobacco and bubble gum. Then, after you left the clubhouse, you'd go down to My Brother's Pub to drink some more and relive the game just played, all the while commiserating over Boston's failure to appreciate what you had to offer. Christ, Morgan's fast to pull a pitcher in trouble. Jesus, did you see how far Sammy

hit that ball tonight? Hell, we're all just insurance, in case Yaz pulls a hammy, or Eckersley goes on the DL.

Four for four? Let's drink.

Oh for four? Let's drink.

Koza always thought that he would never be as alcohol-dependent as his dad—a good, good guy, beloved by many, but it was no secret in small-town Torrington how, every once in a while, Dave would have to collect his dad down at the American Legion hall. But now, even with a child of his own, Koza felt handcuffed by the stuff that real life was throwing at him. In his misery, he felt entitled. After all, he was Pawtucket's own tragic hero, winner of the longest game in baseball history, and a guy who came within a bottle cap's width of making it to the major leagues.

Dave, that guy down the bar wants to buy you a drink. What'll it be?

In 1986, the year that several of his former teammates—Boggs and Barrett, Hurst and Gedman, and Ojeda—made it to the World Series, a new boss took over the restaurant and said he couldn't offer to pay Koza the same salary. While looking for employment, he never seriously considered uprooting the family and moving to Torrington. Beyond the lack of any jobs out there, he knew the arc that the collective conversation with his hometown would take.

Geez, you didn't make it.

Nope.

In 1987, Koza joined the Teamsters union and found a local job with the Yellow Freight System trucking company. He began working the dock at one of the company's terminals, driving a forklift, loading and unloading pallets of goods. Some of his new colleagues recognized him and began recalling this game-winning hit, or that game-saving catch, and wasn't he the guy who won the longest game in baseball history? Koza enjoyed the distinction that his baseball heroics had granted him, but he will later say that he was not particularly gracious to his colleagues. He still felt as though he rightfully belonged someplace else—holding a baseball glove in the clubhouse of the pennant-winning Boston Red Sox, for example, and not wearing work gloves on some loading dock. But on the loading dock he stayed, putting in his time; it was the only way to get promoted one day to driver.

And there was Koza, four years later, on the dock in the early spring of 1991, wearing work gloves and loading boxes onto a delivery truck bound for McCoy Stadium. And in those boxes were stacks and stacks of sixteen-ounce plastic cups, each one commemorating the tenth anniversary of the game that he had won.

McCoy Stadium

Home of Baseball's Longest Game

Pawtucket 3, Rochester 2

33 Innings, April 18–19, June 23, 1981

Koza got promoted to part-time driver just as his drinking intensified. He could guide a forty-five-foot truck through impossibly tight spaces, but he could not navigate everyday life without that liquid courage: vodka and beer, mostly. He and Ann were living with their young children—Becky, Samantha, and Christopher, whom everyone called Topher—in a large home on a double lot in Pawtucket, where Dave's alcoholism took up most of the space. He tried to control his drinking during the week by working the evening and overnight shifts, but he still seemed to measure every moment by the glass. The trip to Kmart, for example: a three-beer ride. Ann asked him to stop, then begged him to stop, but her pleas only made him more upset, which meant that he had all the more justification for a drink.

If you ask an old baseball player to name his worst year, he will often oblige with seasons that ultimately lowered his batting average, raised his earned run average, or fell far short of his usual capability; he might even cite an injury, or some crazy front-office decision, as the reason. But if you ask Dave Koza to name his worst year, it is 1994, a full eleven years after he stopped playing baseball.

In March of that year, when Koza's father came east to visit his son, daughter-in-law, and three grandchildren, he was proudly carrying a bronze coin inscribed with the words "To Thine Own Self Be True." It signified that Gene Koza, the gregarious alcoholic so often found at the American Legion, had achieved three months of sobriety by surrender-

ing to the philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous. One morning during his stay, Gene asked his son to find an A.A. meeting in the area, and Dave obliged, driving him to a church basement in Central Falls. As the father got out of the Ford pickup to make the noontime meeting, he asked his son to join him. Dave declined, in part because he had laced the coffee he was drinking with vodka. So he sat in his truck in the late winter cold, sipping his drink, and wanting, really wanting, to stop. But he could not.

Two months later, Gene Koza died of a heart attack in his bed in Torrington; he was sixty-nine. While home for the wake and funeral, Dave happened to open the top dresser drawer that nightly received his father's tossed fistful of loose change. He spotted the bronze A.A. coin, slipped it into his pocket, and kept drinking.

And three months after that, Ann told Dave that she had taken all that she could, and was leaving him. At first he thought she was testing him, the way a base runner might feign a steal to test a pitcher's pickoff move. But here he was, disbelieving and needing a drink, helping Ann load up a U-Haul truck and watching, with tears in his eyes, as she left him, taking their three children with her to her Pennsylvania hometown of Tunkhannock. He carried those wrenching images, of crying, uncomprehending children, back into his spacious, empty house, and closed the door. For the next several months, he drank, kept the shades lowered, drank, felt sorry for himself, drank, left for work, came home, and drank. Somewhere in this house, among his accumulation of baseball detritus, was that videotape of his triumphant *Good Morning America* appearance so long ago.

FORSYTHE: Dave, I understand your wife hung on until the bitter end.

KOZA: Yes, she did. I came out of the locker room the night we left off in the 32nd inning. I came outside. The sun started to come up, and I said, "You gotta be kidding me."

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How short, now, the longest game seems. How ephemeral. On a night and early morning set aside for prayer, reflection, and everlasting joy, a baseball game insisted on the suspension of ordinary time. It gathered together a few dozen hopefuls in a poorly lit coliseum and refused them release for more than eight hours, providing them little comfort from the harsh elements beyond the heat generated by the burning of wood. It forced those watching the game to contemplate cosmic issues that transcend the successive crises of balls and strikes. The interdependence we all share. The inadequacy of statistics to measure one's worth. The existence of God. The dominion of nature over humankind, reflected by the howl of the night's wind, *whoosh*, rising to muffle the profane howl of the Rochester center fielder.

Then, as if in jest, the game freed its captives to an Easter dawn's chorus of birds, only to summon them again, two months later, to complete the unfinished business of an unimportant ball game—a final point about the illusion of time. After 1 inning that lasted just eighteen minutes, the longest game released its participants for good, like a mother nudging her large brood into the world and wondering: What's to become of them?

What about the central player, McCoy Stadium itself, the weary concrete hulk that could never seem to shake the mucky cap-and-overall specters of its Depression-era birth? Today it is a renovated and remodeled pleasure of a minor-league ballpark, with ten thousand seats, an expanded concourse, a million-dollar JumboTron in center field—and, in the labyrinthine corridor beneath the stands, a shrine to that godsend for Pawtucket, the Longest Game. Among the holy relics on display is the home plate that received the touch of Marty Barrett's cleat as he jogged home, smiling with the knowledge that Dave Koza's soft line drive had found grass.

In 1977, the year that Ben Mondor assumed ownership of the Pawtucket Red Sox, the team had a paid attendance of a paltry 111,000, and the conditions at McCoy were so unappealing that the PawSox "couldn't draw maggots, let alone flies," as one sportswriter put it. Mondor, being Mondor, promptly framed the article. For the next thirty-three years, he, Mike Tamburro, and Lou Schwechheimer stayed together, execut-

ing their mission to provide working-class families with an affordable place to see the future stars of the Boston Red Sox. They saw the rewards of their labor in a rising popularity that consistently placed the PawSox among the top half dozen minor-league franchises in the country (in 2010, for example, the PawSox had a paid attendance of more than 600,000 for the seventh consecutive year). And Mondor, being Mondor, took pains every year to send a copy of that maggots-and-flies article to the offending author, as a polite but persistent way of saying screw you.

On a Sunday in early October 2010, Ben Mondor, eighty-five, died at his waterfront home in Warwick Neck, Rhode Island, his beloved wife, Madeleine, by his side. Several days earlier, in his bedroom on the second floor, he had gazed out the window at the gray-blue waters of Narragansett Bay, fully aware that he was terminally ill. After a few moments, he had shrugged his shoulders and said, with no regret: "I've had a good life."

The morning of his funeral Mass, a dozen uniformed police officers—several from Pawtucket, a few from a smattering of other departments—gathered outside the funeral home in Warwick, waiting to form an honor guard, while those closest to him said their last good-byes. When it was time, Madeleine, along with Tamburro and Schwechheimer, emerged into the cool autumn morning, slightly ahead of the casket. One of the police officers, tears blurring his eyes, suddenly rushed over to hug Madeleine. This was Deputy Chief Michael Kinch of the Cumberland Police Department.

Hood.

After Hood composed himself, the officer leading the honor guard called out the commands of attention. Hood fell back into line and joined the other officers in saluting the casket of the man who had saved baseball for Pawtucket—a man who had been the private benefactor of so many people that McCoy's front office was still fielding stories of his generosity weeks after his death. Then Hood got into his black-and-white Ford Crown Victoria and joined the police escort that guided the funeral cortege the several miles to Providence, to the stone steps of the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul, where hundreds waited in the pews. Here was the governor of the state, Donald Carcieri; there,

the former manager of the Pawtucket Red Sox, Joe Morgan. Here, Sam Bowen, and beside him, Dave Koza.

And what of the longest night's other elder statesmen? The two managers, who, through one degree of separation, linked the least known of the night's ballplayers to Hall of Fame teammates of theirs, Mickey Mantle and Whitey Ford, Hank Aaron and Warren Spahn? Rochester's Doc Edwards went on to manage the Cleveland Indians for a couple of years, and at the close of 2010 he was *still* in professional baseball, completing his fifty-third year in the game as the manager of the San Angelo Colts, in Texas's independent United League. As for Pawtucket's Joe Morgan, he was savoring his stature as Walpole Joe, New England icon, available for games of golf and the dispensing of baseball wisdom. After leveling with Dave Koza and leaving Pawtucket at the end of 1982, he became a Boston Red Sox scout and coach who seemed destined to retire without ever managing at the major-league level. Then, suddenly, in the middle of the 1988 season, he was reluctantly appointed the "interim" manager of the Red Sox by front-office suits who seemed impervious to the charms of his many minor-league anecdotes. Those suits never counted on what came to be known as "Morgan's Miracle." The Red Sox went on to win 19 of their next 20 games, catapulting a lackluster team to the front of the pack to win the American League East title. Soon, all of New England spoke in nonsensical Morgan-speak—"Six, two and even," and "See you in St. Paul"—and the Red Sox had no choice but to quickly name as its full-time manager a guy from Walpole who could tell you a thing or two about plowing snow on the turnpike, or how Win Remmerswaal—remember Win Remmerswaal?—would go AWOL for days at a time. Morgan's penchant for acting on hunches baffled and even irritated people at times, but he led the Red Sox to another American League East title, in 1990, before he was unceremoniously fired, in 1991. A few days later, a hundred people, along with the Walpole High School marching band, gathered on the front lawn of Joe Morgan's home, just to say thanks.

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Finally, there are the others, scattered across the country, down to Latin America, and across to the Netherlands, many of them gone back to where they came from, many of them thankful for the salvation from obscurity that an endless night in Pawtucket has granted them. A poster commemorating the longest game hangs in South Bend, Indiana, in the home of Joel Finch, the former Pawtucket Red Sox pitcher, now a corporate account executive with a trucking company; in Tryon, Georgia, in the office of Dan Logan, the former Rochester Red Wings first baseman, now an insurance manager with the Georgia Farm Bureau; in Syracuse, New York, in Steve Grilli's Change of Pace. On the televisions at the Change of Pace and other bars, and on the televisions in their living rooms and recreation rooms and hotel rooms, they watched their fellow Longest Game alums move on to even greater glory, in the 1983 World Series, in the 1986 World Series, in various All Star games.

That skinny kid who played third base for Rochester that night? The one who banged his helmet to the ground after grounding out in the 6th inning? Cal Ripken Jr.? The bronze plaque from his induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame, in 2007, reads:

ARRIVED AT THE BALLPARK EVERY DAY WITH A BURNING DESIRE TO PERFORM AT HIS HIGHEST LEVEL. DEDICATION AND WORK ETHIC RESULTED IN A RECORD 2,632 CONSECUTIVE GAMES PLAYED FROM MAY 30, 1982 THROUGH SEPTEMBER 19, 1998, EARNING HIM THE TITLE OF BASEBALL'S "IRON MAN." IN 21 SEASONS, COLLECTED 3,184 HITS AND 431 HOME RUNS, AND WAS NAMED TO 19 CONSECUTIVE ALL-STAR TEAMS. WON ROOKIE OF THE YEAR HONORS, TWO MVPs, AND TWO GOLD GLOVE AWARDS. HIS ORIOLES WON THE 1983 WORLD SERIES AND HE HIT .336 LIFETIME IN 28 POSTSEASON GAMES.

And that ambitious bundle of superstition who played third base for Pawtucket that night? The one who used the third-base bag as a pillow in the late innings, while his little daughter slept under a desk in the owner's office? Wade Boggs? The plaque from his induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame, in 2005, reads:



A DISCIPLINED HITTER WHOSE COMMANDING KNOWLEDGE OF THE STRIKE ZONE MADE HIM ONE OF BASEBALL'S TOUGHEST OUTS. ONLY 20TH CENTURY PLAYER WITH SEVEN STRAIGHT 200-HIT SEASONS. REACHED BASE SAFELY IN 80 PERCENT OF GAMES PLAYED. BEGAN CAREER WITH 10 CONSECUTIVE SEASONS HITTING ABOVE .300. A FIVE-TIME BATTING CHAMPION WHO ALSO LED THE LEAGUE IN ON-BASE PERCENTAGE AND INTENTIONAL WALKS SIX TIMES EACH. A 12-TIME ALL-STAR, HIT .328 WITH 3,010 HITS AND 1,412 WALKS. MEMBER OF THE 1996 WORLD SERIES CHAMPION YANKEES AND WON TWO GOLD GLOVES. LEGENDARY FOR HIS SUPERSTITIONS.

Strange how life works out. A couple of years ago, Wade Boggs, of all people, wound up in Torrington, Wyoming, of all places, for a two-shot goose-hunt tournament that helps to promote economic development in Goshen County. And, of all people, one of his hosts in town was Paul Covello Jr., also known as Cactus. Boggs could not have been nicer to the people of Torrington and Goshen County. After going goose hunting down by the North Platte River, he attended the afternoon luncheon and the evening awards banquet, posed for photographs, autographed baseballs, and passed on some encouraging advice to a local ballplayer who was struggling a bit in the minor leagues. When young boys and girls approached him with their baseball caps on backward, Boggs would gently instruct them on the proper way to wear one; it's all about discipline. After the dinner, the gang headed through the snow drifts to Cactus's house for a cocktail hour that lasted until three in the morning. Over a few Miller Lites, Boggs and Cactus got to talking about their mutual acquaintance. Boggs said that Dave Koza just had the bad luck to be playing first base at a time when that position was clogged at the top with superstars—namely, Carl Yastrzemski and Tony Perez. He remembered how Dave caught everything and anything that he threw from third base, how Dave helped younger players in the clubhouse feel as though they belonged—how, when Dave drove in the winning run in the longest game, the batter on deck was yours truly, Wade Boggs.

Then the Hall of Famer asked: So, Cactus. You ever hear from Koza?

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Dave Koza knows the many statistics of his career, but none better than this: He got sober on Monday, January 9, 1995.

On the Thursday before, he was whining and complaining about his life during a talk with his brother, Rick, out west, when Rick suddenly said: I think you've got a problem with booze. The words coming over the telephone nearly knocked Dave down. Though stunned, he was also relieved. If he wasn't fooling anyone with his impersonation of a sober person, he could finally be honest with himself. He reached for the Yellow Pages and looked up Alcoholics Anonymous.

That Friday, he attended an A.A. meeting in East Providence, half hoping to hear tips on how to drink responsibly.

That Saturday, he drank. He had always been a big weekend boozer and, well, it was Saturday.

That Sunday, he attended another A.A. meeting, this one at Jenks Junior High School, directly across Division Street from McCoy Stadium. There, at the meeting, a coffeemaker named Dave T. and a firefighter named Billy M. decided to take him under their wing. Billy's firehouse was a baseball toss away from the entrance to McCoy, and he had often seen Dave play. The two men told Dave not to drink, so he returned home and finished up what liquor he still had in the house.

And that Monday, the morning of January 9, the two men threw Dave in the back of Billy's twenty-year-old Oldsmobile and drove him to a meeting in the Salvation Army's Freedom Hall building on Pitman Street in Providence. He had his father's coin in his pocket. He hasn't had a drink since.

Koza traded the large house in Pawtucket for a small house in Pawtucket, and began focusing on doing his very best with every day, the way he once did with every at bat. As the days turned to weeks and then to years, the cheers he heard came not from thousands gathered at McCoy but from a few gathered in a church basement or some rented hall. They also came from Ann and the children, in long-distance conversations between Pawtucket and Tunkhannock, where she remarried, and then between Pawtucket and Las Vegas, where she relocated. When Dave reached his twelfth year of sobriety, Ann happened to be in Rhode

Island, and she decided to surprise him by showing up at the small celebration that would be part of his A.A. group's next meeting. She hid in a back room, and when the time came, she emerged with his twelfth anniversary cake, bringing him—and then her—to tears.

It was hard at first. For a while, Dave resented the fact that Ann had gotten remarried, but time and discussions with his A.A. support group have made him realize that Ann didn't leave him; rather, he—through his drinking—pushed her out of his life. Now Ann and Dave talk a few times a week. And when Dave comes to visit his kids, he often stays in a spare bedroom in Ann's house, where, tucked away somewhere, she has her own box of baseball memories, including a quilt that she and a few other PawSox wives started long ago to commemorate the longest game, but never finished. She can't get rid of the thing, she says, because that game, that time, remains a part of her. Who knows? Maybe someday she'll finish the quilt.

If ten years after that game found Dave Koza working the loading docks and drinking heavily, twenty years after found him working on his seventh year of sobriety, making truck deliveries all over Rhode Island (including, on occasion, to McCoy Stadium, to drop off more of those souvenir cups)—and trying to be a good father to his three children. In August of that year, 2001, he drove from Pawtucket to Tunkhannock in his silver Taurus, and spent the Friday night with Ann and the family. Then, early the next morning, he and the three children—Becky, seventeen, Sami, thirteen, and Topher, twelve—drove the nearly three hours to Cooperstown. Sami was getting more and more serious about competing with the boys in baseball, and Topher, a Little League outfielder, had recently written a school paper about Jackie Robinson. But there was another reason for making the trip.

When they reached the Hall of Fame, they found an endless line snaking down Main Street. Koza noticed a members-only entrance to the side, and somehow summoned the nerve to approach the employee at the door and say that he thought he was kind of, sort of, in the Hall of Fame, but wasn't sure. I played in the longest game, he explained. I had the game-winning hit.

Within minutes he and his children were handed complimen-

tary tickets and welcomed inside. And there, on the second floor of the Baseball Hall of Fame, this family from Rhode Island, by way of Pennsylvania and Wyoming, came upon a glass display dedicated to the Longest Game in Professional Baseball History. It included a scoreboard stretching for 33 innings; a photograph of several Pawtucket Red Sox players congratulating one another; the Louisville Slugger bat that was used to drive in the game-winning single; and a large portrait of the hero who swung it: Dave Koza, former ballplayer, truck driver, recovering alcoholic—dad.

Today, ten years after that family trip to Cooperstown, and thirty years after the longest game, Dave Koza no longer drives a truck for a living. Two decades of playing baseball, followed by two more decades of climbing in and out of his truck, loading and unloading, took their toll. After he required the replacement of one hip and both knees, his doctors told him the time had come to retire. He hits his A.A. meetings, attends several PawSox games a year, and gets out to Las Vegas as often as possible to see his three grown children and the couple of grandchildren who have come along.

But the man from Wyoming always comes home—to Pawtucket. Every once in a while, he agrees to speak at a gathering of baseball enthusiasts, answering their questions. What was it like to play for Joe Morgan? What was it like to play with Marty Barrett? Bruce Hurst? Rich Gedman? Wade Boggs? Then, of course, this question:

Why didn't you make it to the major leagues?

Not consistent enough, he will say.

And if you search Dave Koza's home for celebratory mementoes of his baseball past, you will not find much. In the bedroom, across from a display of the Serenity Prayer ("God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change . . ."), one of Norman Rockwell's baseball illustrations hangs on the wall. Near the bathroom, a framed copy of the Longest Game poster. And down in the basement, slightly askew, a small magnet bought in a Cooperstown souvenir shop.

"National Baseball Hall of Fame," it says. "DAVE."

The magnet is the smallest token of a trip that has come to stand out

in the family narrative. The children will remember how their father drew Topher's attention to an exhibit about the African American baseball experience; how he pointed Sami to a display devoted to Dorothy Kamenshek and the other women who played in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League; and how much he downplayed the Longest Game exhibit.

After lingering a long, long while in the corridors of a game's past, the Koza family left Cooperstown and began the journey back to Tunkhannock. Dave steered his sedan south onto Route 28 and then turned onto Interstate 88, hugging the Susquehanna River all the way. It was a pure August evening and baseball was breaking out all over. In New York, the first-place Yankees had just beaten the Anaheim Angels, thanks to an 8th-inning home run by Tino Martinez, while in Boston, the second-place Red Sox were planning to start their ageless knuckleball pitcher, Tim Wakefield, against the Texas Rangers. In Toronto, the gray-haired third baseman for the Baltimore Orioles was sitting out his team's loss to the Blue Jays; with two months to go before his retirement, though, no one would begrudge a day off to Cal Ripken Jr. In Chicago, the redheaded hitting coach for the weak Tampa Bay Devil Rays was also close to calling it quits; it seemed that what had made him Wade Boggs was not transferable.

And in a car moving west through the undulating hills of central New York, the talk was of baseball and nothing but baseball, until the children of Dave and Ann sleepily surrendered to the rhythms of the rutted road.