HAMMERIN' HANK AT WHEELER PARK

BY CHARLES PEDERSON

Saturday afternoon, one p.m., sweat dripping, no breeze. Typical July afternoon in Minnesota. The usual neighborhood kids were running around the park ball field, oblivious to the heat. Treece was up, waggling the bat above his head, waiting for just the right pitch to slam over the chain link fence in left field.

Our summer games were always the same. Forming the nucleus of players were Treece and his brother, Steve; Per Olaf, my oldest friend--I knew him since kindergarten; Hamey; Schirmer; and me. The other positions were filled by whoever else in the neighborhood was available. The ball field at Wheeler Park was usually unoccupied, and being central to North Kater Town, it's where we normally fought our pickup games.

Treece had put on his insane grin, the one that waited for the homerun pitch. Without much enthusiasm, I manned short stop. Treece's main desire was a fat pitch he could crank out, across Center Street, and into the yard of the house across the street. Per Olaf stood in left field, looking determined to stop anything coming his way. He hovered in the only shade on the field, provided by some of the tall elms along Center Street. He looked a little more optimistic than I felt, because on occasion, Treece actually did not hit it out, giving the fielder something to do.

Never having enough players for two full teams of nine players each, we had adapted the rules to our straitened circumstances. Each team absolutely needed two outfielders--left and center. A pitcher was helpful, but one of the opposing players could pitch to his own teammates if needed. With enough players, we filled shortstop, although it was not absolutely necessary. Providing a catcher was nice, but an opposing player could play the position. This, of course, was not ideal; if your team were in the field and the catcher belonged to the batting team, you could never quite trust him to get in the way of his teammate chugging toward home, arms flailing, head back, kicking up dust puffs. If the catcher were feeling ethical, he might take a throw from the field and put on a half-hearted tag. If he were not feeling generous, he might "accidentally" miss the throw, or the teammate crossing home might "accidentally" knock the ball from his glove.

A first baseman was unnecessary, because any fielded ball was thrown to the pitcher. If he caught the ball before the runner reached first, the runner was out. Naturally, with no umps for mediation, plenty of arguments erupted, some of them almost as hot as this afternoon. It was a matter of honor, even though the games meant nothing other than killing a couple of muggy hours

The key component of our games was the imaginary line extending from home plate, over the pitcher's mound and second base, across center field, and off into eternity. In our case, that line bisected the junction of Center Street, running along left field, and Wheeler Avenue, paralleling the right field fence. Any ball hit to the right--infield or outfield--was an automatic out.

Hamey sweated out in center, keeping up the chatter like always, even though no one, except maybe Per Olaf, could hear him. But even from the infield, I could see the thin dribble down Hame's shirtfront--the tell-tale stain that said he had a chaw of Copey in his cheek but still hadn't learned to spit it without some dripping down his chin. It's a tough skill for a twelve-year-old to learn.

In the white light of early afternoon, I squinted at home plate, smelling smoldering infield dust. During our first games in the spring, the grass had been green and smelled newly mown regardless of when the parks department guy had come through with the mower. Even at lunch time, you could hear robins and blackbirds and sparrows singing in the trees. Now, in July, a dry, papery smell shimmered in the air, the green having long ago faded to brown during our usual dry months, and any birds dumb enough not to be napping were probably down at the park taking a dip in the swimming pool.

Standing at short, I reached down to pluck at a sandburr in my sock--plenty of those around. Experience said it was best not to roll around in the playing field if you could avoid it. You sure didn't want to walk barefoot across it.

Schirmer, a friendly smile on his face--he used that face to good effect as he later became a beloved local politician--served up a big, fat melon. One more bat waggle, and Treece cracked the bat onto the ball. I turned my back on home plate to watch it fly. Although he shouted "I got it," Per Olaf could only watch as the ball left the park. Hame watched it go too, hands on hips, a mathematically perfect parabola, no doubt describable by a precise formula. For us kids, it was just a wonder, a work of art, rising, then descending in slow motion.

When the ball hit Center Street, normal time resumed. The ball bounced high off the street, leaving an indentation in the heat-softened tar. The ball made for the rose bushes in front of a neat, tiny house. The ball seemed to know exactly what it was doing, always landing in those dang bushes. Per Olaf trotted to the opening in the middle of the left field fence, hoping to retrieve the ball before the old lady came out--again--to scold us for ruining her roses. Treece had already circled the bases and was gathering splinters in his rear by the time Per Olaf flung the ball to Hame, who had moved over to take the cutoff.

Right field being out of play, no one at first noticed the man walking along on Wheeler Avenue. As well, after playing a couple of hours, most of us were ready to go home for lunch or a quick swim down to Spring Lake Park--or as we called it, Mud Lake--a few blocks from our game. It had the only swimming pool in North Kater Town, sand bottom, only the occasional warm spot in the water where a toddler had stood moments before. But that's what chlorine was meant to take care of.

As I said, no one paid much attention to the fellow walking along right field. When I heard Hame call out to Per Olaf, I looked over my right shoulder to see the two in conference. Then I became aware that the entire ball field had fallen quiet, the afternoon pressing its hot palm down on everyone, muting all sounds. In fact, everyone's mouth seemed to be open, staring at right field. And no wonder, I could see now. The man strolling along was a black man, not an everyday sight in North Kater Town back then. He moved gracefully, not ambling, but not hurrying either. He had a dignity and sobriety about him, but he was watching our game with interest.

I noticed Hame pulling on Per Olaf's arm, gesturing toward the man, Per Olaf holding back. So Hame left and trotted solo toward the man, starting to talk to him.

"Psst, Schirmer," I hissed. Schirmer closed his jaw and looked at me from pitcher's mound. I mouthed the words "Who's that?" He mouthed something back, but I couldn't understand him, so I walked over: "What?"

"Hank Aaron."

I snorted contemptuously. First, black people did not casually stroll through North Kater Town. Second, major leaguers did not pass a field full of ball playing boys. Third, where were the reporters and fans who would watch every move of the man closing on Babe Ruth's home run record? But I seemed to be the only doubter.

Meanwhile, Hamey was leaning his arms on the right field fence. In a minute, Hame reached his mitt over, and the man removed a pen from his pocket and signed it. The afternoon lifted its hand, and suddenly everyone could move again, heading for the outfield, no one wanting to miss the chance to talk with the great man. I moved too, harboring silent doubts. True, he looked like Henry Aaron. I supposed he talked like Hank too, though I had only heard him once or twice on the radio, so that wasn't saying much. Still, just in case, I asked him to sign my glove too: "Henry Aaron."

"Hank" was just as friendly as you could wish. He was asking about our game, and Hame--assuming the mantle of spokesman--explained how it worked. Hank he said it reminded him of the ball games he played as a kid. "I wonder," he asked, "would you all mind if I played with you awhile? I have some time before I need to be somewhere, and it sure looks like it would be fun."

Hame said, "You betcha." And so it was decided. Hank would bat for a while, and we kids would rotate through the various positions.

You could tell he was taking it easy. He had learned our names, calling to each in turn as he gave us little lazy swats we could easily field. He put the ball exactly where he wanted it, every time, even when the pitch was nowhere near home plate.

For twenty minutes, that field was pure joy. Laughing kids, laughing adult, laughing game. I still doubted it was Hank, but what the heck. We capered around the grass, which looked greener, the game now a sip of cool water for boys and park alike in the swelter.

All too soon, Hank called out that he had to be going. "Aw no!" "C'mon, just a little longer!" Everyone was disappointed the time had gone so quickly.

"Tell you all what," said Hammerin' Hank. "I'll hit one more. Where do you want it?"

It was like we all had one brain (usually we had about one brain between us): "Hit one out of the park!"
He smiled, held the bat a little firmer, kicked his toe into the dust in the batter's box, and looked at the pitcher. Me. I said, "I'll give you a nice fat melon ball. Ready?" And I wound up like a big-league pitcher, looked to hold an imaginary runner at first, and let fly. Hank waited forever, and I thought he was going to let it pass. But just as the catcher was reaching out to catch the ball, Hank said something that sounded like "Perfect." He stepped forward with his leading foot and whipped the bat so fast I couldn't see it. I remember hearing the crack of the ash wood, I remember turning my back on home to try to see where the ball went, I remember Per Olaf and Hame--both back in the outfield again--watching the ball too. Flying up and up, and out, another work of mathematical genius. Unlike Treece's shot, this one kept going, completely clearing both rose bushes and house. Hame took off after it. I saw the ball hit the street beyond the house and bounce. Hame would never get to it.

I ran to my Schwinn one-speed, all red fenders and white hand grips, righted it, and pushed off, leaping onto the seat. I stood up to pedal, gathering speed leaving the park, just glimpsing the ball bouncing again, this time off a house roof. I tore after that ball, passing Per Olaf, who was chasing the ball. Passing Hame, who had a longer head start. Keeping my eye on that ball. I dodged garbage cans, I juddered up and down curbs, I wove between parked cars, never losing sight.

I believe that ball knew what it was doing. It bounced off a patio, leaped over a fence, rolled between flower beds, dodged car tires. I could almost hear it laughing, exhilarated. But I bore down, standing and pedaling through the heat rising from the tar. My entire world became that ball. It headed for the entry to Spring Lake Park. No longer bouncing but still rolling and jumping as it hit a small stone or crack in the street.

Sweat filled my eyes, but I was catching up. The ball looked back, saw I nearly had it, and began a leisurely roll into the parking lot. I passed the ball and hit my coaster break, skidding my rear tire and leaving a thirty-foot black mark behind. I turned my bike in front of the ball, which was as tired as I was, gently coming to a rest, lightly kissing my front tire.

I picked up the ball. Something on its trip had put a thin mark across its face that looked exactly like a smile. But I had no time for that. I had to get that ball back to home plate. I climbed back on my bike and returned toward Wheeler Park. I saw down about a block that someone was limping toward me, hand on his aching side--Hame. I waved at him, and he wearily stopped, hands on knees. I braked to a stop again, got off my bike, and pegged that ball to my cutoff man. Hamey picked up the ball on one hop, wheeled and fired it back down the street. Just then, I saw Per Olaf another block down the way, and he picked up Hame's throw, spun and hurled it toward Schirmer, at the corner of Center Street and Wheeler Avenue. I was riding back toward the park by then and could see Schirmer's throw to Treece in center field, who relayed it toward home, where Hank stood, clapping his hands and laughing. He caught the ball barehanded and stepped on the plate.

I was coasting, catching my breath, bumping over the brown outfield grass and sand burrs. Hank watched us straggle back to the playing field. We gathered around him once more to say good-bye. "Boys, I had the best time today. Thanks for a great game!" He shook all our hands. Then he took his pen again and wrote something on the baseball before tossing it to me. "I appreciate it," he said, then resumed his interrupted walk, out of the ball park, turning right onto Center Street, and out of sight.

The ball said, "In gratitude for a perfect home-run pitch. Hank Aaron."

I still don't know if that was really Henry Aaron or just someone who looked a lot like him or who just happened to have the same name. I suppose I could have had the ball or my glove examined to see if the signatures there matched any known examples of his writing. But if I had, where would be the magic in that?

Charles Pederson is a freelance writer and editor. In college, he studied German, international politics, and linguistics. Pederson pursued German literary studies in graduate school but gave it up after a year, not wanting to end up being qualified only to produce blockbusters with titles such as *The Symbolic Role of Water in Postneorealistic Fiction of the Latter Romantic Period by Authors Whose Names Begin with T.* Naturally, he became a book editor, working in nonfiction children's literature. Pederson's own nonfiction for children has appeared through Abdo books, Pearson AGS Globe (a textbook publisher), and Kent Publishing. Several of his German-to-English fiction translations have appeared in *AGS World Literature.* Pederson spent a considerable amount of time in Austria and consequently admires the Austrian writer and poet H. C. Artmann, even though Artmann, before he died, never did answer any of Pederson's fan letters.