

TIPPETS



THIS ONE FORGOT TO REFUSE THE CLOUSER

Life After Pitching

A Reflection On Baseball and Fly Fishing BY JOE DAHUT

A TWO-SEAM FASTBALL with the bases loaded must be as precise as a bow-and-arrow cast on a tiny creek, surrounded by trees and bushes. A curveball that time-travels (from twelve to six) possesses the same delicacy as my trico, floating daintily over a brown trout on the Gunpowder. The wings of that trico, now drooping in soggy disappointment, remind me of the familiarity of missed shots, and the immediacy of a second chance. I rattle it in powder-floatant like a maraca, and the wings suddenly perk up at the musical splash of another rise downstream.

An aggressive slide into second base to break up a double-play is the unnamed, chunky nymph I floated for nine consecutive hours on the Deschutes, its tungsten nose like a disco ball rolling through moss and grass and rocks right into the strike zone of a redband (along with an occasional whitefish). Its biot legs were contorted and crippled, missing one on the left side. I have since enshrined that nymph to the left side of my fly box, my own Hall of Fame.

The high fastball that raises the eyebrows of a hitter on an 0-2 pitch is the streamer that would raise the eyebrows of a rainbow, if trout had eyebrows. That same streamer, with the traffic-cone-orange beak, made every fish in the river uncomfortable, except one. Through the thick veil of an August rain, I remember watching the orange head of the fly vanish into the gullet of my personal best trout. I am hesitant to lend this pattern to friends for fear of them losing it on a rock or a log.

The distinctive echo of a maple bat blaring upon impact with an unsuspecting ball is the neon backing on my backup reel, unloading noisily, two runs away from disappearing completely. I didn't think the inhabitants of the creek would be as big as they

were, considering the size of the water. It turns out, pleasant surprises sometimes come to us in broken tippets and lost flies.

The hard slider that dives away from a swing is the striper refusal of a clouser at the boat, the flaring of gills and the bulging of eyes. Swear words. Slight tantrums. After the hit of adrenaline fades, we settle in and make another cast. We breathe deep and find another fish more willing to participate. There will be another at bat.

The pinch hitter in the bottom of the ninth is the fly I always forget I had. When everything in the box is labeled useless, I tie on the only fly that isn't wet, holding the baitfish pattern—a zonker-strip monster—up to the sun before casting it to the corner of the pond. The water explodes, and, in typical walk-off fashion, I call it a day after the snook is released and the pattern goes back in the box, now first on my depth chart.

A middle infielder moving like merengue, all hips and knees and feet, dancing in harmony toward the ball, a poetic orchestration of well-trained body parts, the music of the game. The path to finding fish almost never moves in a straight line. We must sometimes crawl along trees that have fallen over deep creeks, or salsa across the slippery rocks that put themselves in inconvenient places.

The trout tracks down a mayfly like an outfielder to a fly ball. The white gums of a rainbow contrast against the creek bottom, just as a well-worn glove flashes against Bermuda grass a second before making the out. One goal, one prey.

There is constant reminder that you are up against one thing. It's only you and the batter. You and the ball. It's only you and the fish. You and the fly. As alone as you want to be.

JOE DAHUT was a college pitcher at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. He considers life an eternal pursuit for the perfect fish, the perfect pitch, and a finished poem.