

The Big Space Ball Game

by Richard Elam

It was an unusual setting for baseball. Instead of a blue sky, there was the darkness of space and the brilliance of stars overhead. The light of Earth flooded the scene, and surrounding the oversized diamond were the walls of Copernicus crater, over fifty miles across.

On the mound, Bill Cherry was pitching practice balls to his catcher, Ollie Taylor. Only underhand throwing was allowed in baseball on the Moon, for the ball was exceedingly fast in the light gravity and airlessness. Bill, in snug-fitting space gear, was standing farther than the regulation ninety feet from the plate. This was because of the pitcher's advantage over the batter in Lunar ball.

Bill wound up and threw. The ball shot like a bullet into Ollie's double-padded mitt.

"Thatta boy, Bill!" Ollie's voice came over Bill's space suit radio. "If you're this sharp when we meet the Comets this afternoon, we're bound to win our first championship!"

"That's enough practice, fellows!" Coach Lippert called, coming out of the dugout. "No use giving our best before the game!"

It was the *big* game for the team from Plato, which was tied with the league leaders in this last game of the season. Plato was the farthest colony on the Moon and was named for the big crater in which it was located. Copernicus colony, the baseball leader, had won the championship every year since the school league had been formed. As a prize, the champions were always given a free rocket trip to Earth.

The Plato Rocketeers were homesick for their mother planet. One of them, little Pete Irby, had never set foot there. He had been born on the Moon.

"It must be wonderful to go around without even a space suit on like they do on Earth!" Pete said wistfully to Bill.

"Don't worry, Pete," Bill said confidently. "I have a feeling that this is our year and that we're all going to Earth."

"I sure hope you're right," Pete replied, with great feeling. "I can't wait to see the great national parks and rivers and all the other wonderful things there!"

At game time the grandstand was filled and some people were standing. It was the largest crowd ever to see a ball game on the Moon. Much of the crowd was made up of hopeful parents from the Plato colony who had come seven hundred miles by rocket plane to see their boys play.

The champion Copernicus Comets ran out onto the field in big bouncing strides. For on the Moon a person was capable of jumping and running in great leaps because of the low gravity, only one-sixth of Earth's.

The Plato Rocketeers were the visiting team would bat first. When the outfielders had taken

their positions, they were tiny forms far out in the distance with nothing but gray wilderness behind them for a backstop. There were eleven men in Moon baseball because of this greater outfield range. Two extra fielders played behind the shortstop and second baseman and were called “short fielders.”

Bill noticed a wheel chair below the railing of the grandstand. His mother and dad had brought his crippled younger brother Skippy to see the game! Bill had known his parents were going to rocket over from Plato in time for the game, but they had not said Skippy would come along. Bill gave Skippy a wave and his little brother waved back.

The lead-off batter for the Rocketeers walked to the plate swinging a bat, padded to keep it from hitting the ball too hard and far. The Comets’ ace pitcher, Carl Cadman, hurled three fast strikes over almost before the batter had gotten a good foothold. Carl struck out the next batter as well and then forced little Pete Irby to loft a high infield fly for the third out.

“Let’s get ’em, Bill!” Ollie said excitedly as the Rocketeers took the field.

“We’ll sure try,” Bill promised his catcher.

Bill took the mound. With his space gloves he massaged rosin into the baseball. After getting the signal from Ollie, Bill swung his arm down and around. The batter swung sharply, driving the ball toward third. The baseman made a dive for the ball, but he missed it. His body seemed to glide in slow motion in the light gravity.

Bill walked the next batter, making two on and none out. Jack Brenna, the Comets’ heaviest hitter, was up. Bill got two strikes on him and then Jack took a better toehold. As Bill saw bat and ball connect solidly on the next pitch, his heart fell.

The ball arched like a comet across the dark sky. The left fielder took a dozen giant steps after the ball but then gave up. The ball seemed to be going for miles. It was a home run.

The Comets did not score anymore that inning, but the damage seemed to be already done. The champions were leading 3-0.

Bill was first up for the Rocketeers. As he went to the plate swinging a bat, his eye caught Skippy’s wheel chair, and he saw his game little brother waving encouragement. It made him want to try even harder to put his team out in front. Bill knew he would have to do it with his hitting, since he had failed as a pitcher.

But Bill got no closer to a hit than a long foul into the stands. Then he struck out. The two teammates following him also failed to get on base.

The game moved along with no more scoring for the next five innings. It was still 3-0.

In the last of the seventh inning the Plato Rocketeers had more trouble. The first Comet batter topped the ball slowly to Pete at shortstop, who tried too hard to make the play. The ball rolled between his legs and the runner went all the way to second.

Pete was so busy grumbling about his last error that he muffed the next play too. He jumped ten feet into the air trying to reach the high, bounding ball, but he misjudged it and it went on past. The

runner on second loped down to third in long strides. Bill called time in order to give Pete a chance to settle down.

“We’ll never win this game!” Pete groaned. “Why don’t you fellows say I’m not any good—like you’re thinking!”

“Stop talking like that!” Bill told him over his suit radio. “You’re thinking too much about going to Earth, Pete. You’re trying *too* hard!”

“I’ll try to do better,” Pete promised.

The next batter drove a high fly to center, sending the runner in from third and making the score 4-0. Bill walked the player following, but then he was lucky enough to strike out the hard-hitting Jack Brenna.

The next Comet drove a hard liner to Pete. Pete scrambled for the ball, but once again he muffed it and it went on into the outfield. The shortfielder recovered it quickly but threw wide to third, sending the runner into the plate with the Comets’ fifth run.

When Bill looked at Pete, the little fellow had thrown his big fielder’s glove into the air and was beginning to walk broken-heartedly off the diamond.

“Pete!” Bill heard Coach Lippert call sharply over his suit radio as he ran onto the field. “Get back to your position, son! I don’t like a quitter on my team.”

Players and coach huddled in the infield. They looked like a gathering of teddy bears in the space suits. Bill could see tears of bitterness inside Pete’s plastic helmet.

“Fellows,” the coach said, “what did we come seven hundred miles across the Moon to do?”

“To play ball,” someone answered, “—and win.”

“All right, then. What do you say we start doing it? Pete, I’m going to send you to left field where you used to play. Dan, in left field, will take your place at shortstop.”

The Rocketeers retired the side without further scoring. Then as though to prove that the pep talk had helped, the team came up with three big runs of their own!

Pitching with all his skill, Bill was able to set down the Comets in order. It was now the top half of the ninth inning, the last chance for Plato to win the game. They were still behind 5-3, and the two-run lead seemed as big as the Milky Way to Bill.

Dan started it off by walloping a double down the right field line. Pete followed with a single that bounced high over the right shortfielder’s head. The fielder behind him took the ball and threw quickly to his catcher to keep Dan from scoring off third. But then the Rocketeers’ luck seemed to have run out as the next two players struck out.

“It’s all up to you, Bill,” the coach told his pitcher as Bill selected his favorite bat.

“I’ll be swinging, coach,” Bill said determinedly.

He looked toward the stands as he walked to the plate. Skippy was waving encouragement again.

“This one is for you, Skippy,” Bill murmured, stepping up to the plate.

Carl tried to make him swing on two bad pitches.

“Careful,” Bill warned himself. “There are two outs—only one more left to us in the whole game!”

The next ball was just the one Bill wanted. He swung with all his might. He saw the ball rise and lose itself in the white dust of starlight overhead. And then he was off!

Loping past second, he saw the left fielder still bounding like a rabbit after the ball. The coach slowed him up on third base.

“Take it easy, Bill,” he said with a happy grin. “That ball is on the dark side of the Moon by now!”

Bill could see the Plato rooters waving their arms wildly in glee, and his radio picked up their loud cheers. As he crossed the plate with the leading run, he waved to Skippy who was almost out of his wheel chair in his excitement over his big brother’s tingling homer.

The score: Plato 6, Copernicus 5. The game was far from over, though. The Comets still had their last turn at bat.

Bill got the first player to raise a high infield pop-up. In the Moon’s light gravity it seemed as if the ball would never come down. But it finally did, and Dan took it for the first out.

Bill walked the next Comet, to put one on and with one out. The following batter forced the runner at second, making it two out and giving Bill a much more confident feeling.

But then up to the plate walked Jack Brenna!

Bill swallowed hard and began to sweat inside his space suit. He failed to get the ball over the plate on the first two pitches. Jack swung on the next pitch and sent a hard foul ball behind third base.

“Must be careful,” Bill thought. “A homer with the man on base will win the game for the Comets.”

Bill came though with a fast ball. Jack met it squarely and as the ball towered high over the infield, Jack felt all quivery and weak. He turned his head regretfully and saw the ball rising high and far against the midnight black of space. He saw little Pete Irby galloping away from the diamond as fast as he could go.

“Get it, Pete!” Bill pleaded under his breath. “Please get it!”

Everybody in the stands was on his feet. This was the play that would decide the game—and the championship.

Pete finally made a last second leap that brought him twenty feet off the ground. Bill could hardly see ball and glove meet. But they did meet and Pete had done the impossible!

They had won!

The Rocketeers whirled the coach and Bill easily up on their shoulders, because of the light Lunar weight. Then they began parading happily around the diamond to celebrate their very first championship. When Pete had made the long trip in from the outfield, he too was carried around on his teammates' shoulders.

“That was a swell catch, Pete!” Bill called out to the little fellow. “You sure saved the day for us!”

“You know what, Bill?” Pete said, grinning. “If I’d missed that ball I would have kept on running—yep, right into space! I was determined to make that trip to Earth one way or another!”

Source:

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