

DESTINY'S CALL

The midnight hour was fast approaching on the night of Sept. 10, 1993, when I plopped myself into my customary spot on the Ottawa Lynx's team bus. It was idling in a desolate parking lot adjacent to a rundown minor league stadium in Rochester, New York, and I thought I might also soon be idling into oblivion.

Another minor league season was ending and for all I cared, it could have been my last. The endless bus rides, the grind of the long season and the cutthroat nature of minor league clubhouses had worn me down.

I had been playing centerfield for the Triple-A Lynx and our season had just ended with a 9-3 playoff loss to the Rochester Red Wings. I was preparing to pass the boredom of another overnight bus ride by joining a group of my teammates in the card game that convened regularly at the back of the bus.

With everyone left to their own devices on the back roads and interstates of the International League, most players retreated to solitary things. While some watched the movies that were played on TV monitors, many escaped the tedium of a long bus ride by sleeping through it.

But I had never been much for solitude. I was born deaf after my mother was exposed to rubella while she was pregnant with me, and being born deaf is practically a lifetime sentence of solitude. I cannot listen to music, and in the darkness of a rundown bus I can't see well enough to read lips, so I cannot even conduct a simple conversation. It's one of the only times I feel different than everyone else.

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Poker offered camaraderie and the cards could do my talking. I almost always joined in. It eased the monotony of the road and helped pass the time, but what I really liked about the games was the give-and-take with teammates. I always found the good-natured competition brought me closer to the other guys, and made me feel like I was in the company of comrades rather than riding among strangers commuting on a city bus. It also made me feel like I was no different from my teammates, and at that point in time, there was nothing more important to me.

After eight years in the minors, I had long since figured out that the games on the bus were almost as important as the ones on the field when it came to creating a bond with my teammates. The guys I played cards with always had a better understanding and acceptance of me. That's what I liked most about it.

On this night, the bus was just minutes from pulling away from the darkened stadium and rolling onto the eastbound lanes of Interstate-90 for what figured to be a subdued 275-mile journey back to Ottawa. There, we would clean out our lockers and then go our separate ways. Everyone was ready for the season to be over.

But as I swept up the cards from a folding tray table and took a look at my hand, the team's trainer boarded the bus, poked his head into the game, and dealt me a wild card.

"Curtis Pride," the voice said, "Mike Quade wants to see you in his office."

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Quade was the team's manager, and right away, everyone within earshot knew what this might mean. I knew, too. The Lynx's season was over, but their parent club, the Montreal Expos, was in the thick of a pennant race and figured to be in need of reinforcements. The call to Quade's office might be "The Call" that every minor league player lives for, the one I had spent my entire life up to that point dreaming about.

Still, I had my own interpretation of the message: Surely it was just another of the practical jokes that were so common among minor league teammates. Sometimes the mischief was good-natured, sometimes not. Once, while I was playing Single-A ball, my roommate chased me out of our motel room with a knife, threatening to kill me because I had refused to give the place up for him and a local groupie.

There were plenty of reasons to believe this was a prank. For as long as I had been playing baseball, people had tried to tell me that I didn't have what it took to make it to the big leagues, that I had too many obstacles to overcome, and that I needed to manage my expectations and dreams. A deaf player couldn't possibly communicate well enough in the outfield. He would be uncoachable and would create communication problems inside the clubhouse. A deaf player, I was told, didn't have what it took and I was wasting everyone's time.

Those stereotypes cut into my confidence, even if I knew deep down that they weren't true. The whole thing about getting a jump off the crack of the bat is overrated. In a packed stadium, with the crowd roaring, none of the outfielders can hear it. If you study physics and sound, you know that sound travels slowly, so the ball actually leaves the bat and is in flight before the crack of the bat can be heard by anyone.

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In truth, I always felt I had an advantage over outfielders that can hear, but I was the only one who believed that. Because I watch only for the ball to leave the bat and don't listen for the sound of it, I actually get a better jump on fly balls. In that regard, I think my deafness worked in my favor. But when the old-school baseball people talk about the crack of the bat, they aren't applying physics to it, and the theory gets repeated so often that it becomes the gospel.

No matter how well I performed, it wasn't uncommon for people to laugh at me behind my back. When I talked about my dreams of a big league career, I was told, time and again, that the bigger I dreamt, the bigger my disappointment would be, and that merely playing the game in the minor leagues ought to be enough for me.

Once, I was pelted with hot dogs by fans that were upset because I did not respond to their taunting. Another time, when I did respond, fans mocked my deafness, pretending they could not hear me. Sometimes it seemed like whatever I did was wrong.

Then there were the people that treated me like they were doing me a favor by allowing me to be a part of mainstream society.

But I wanted the same thing everyone playing in the minors wanted: to play in the big leagues. And I wanted it to be on merit.

So I held my cards close to the vest and braced myself for the punch line. But the messenger just nodded his head. No joke. That's when I realized this was real.

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I had begun the year at Double-A Harrisburg before being promoted to Triple-A Ottawa, and had been playing the best baseball of my life. I was hitting .302 for the Lynx, so I knew there was a chance I might actually be getting called up to Montreal. Deep inside, I was thinking this might be my time, that I might walk into an office and receive the ultimate validation that my deafness was no handicap at all. I already knew that, but still, I wanted this badly. I wanted to be the first deaf player to reach the big leagues in the modern era, mostly for myself, my parents and everyone who had helped me out along the way. But there was also part of me that wanted it so I could prove wrong the people who had given me a hard time and tried to stop me. My parents sent me out into the world believing I could accomplish anything, but there were times when it was the people who told me I would never amount to anything that kept me going.

I didn't want to get my hopes up, but our season was over, so what else could it be?

Everyone else wondered the same thing. Forty-eight eyes belonging to 24 teammates focused on me as I walked off the bus. When those teammates began serenading me with a chorus of ooohs and aaahs, I grew more anxious.

I have always believed my memory is sharper because of my deafness, and I remember every step I took between that bus and Quade's office.

The revival that would phase out aging, dilapidated stadiums in favor of modern, retro-style minor league ballparks was just beginning and had not yet made its way to Rochester, so I made my way through a decrepit clubhouse that was as dingy as it was deserted. Beneath the exposed plumbing and duct work,

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which was held together in places with gray tape, the moldy floors were still littered with damp towels and crumpled paper cups.

When I reached a darkened corner of the tiny clubhouse, I spotted the thirty-six-year-old Quade sitting behind a barren desk in a dim office no bigger than a broom closet, where he was finishing up a call on a clunky, black rotary telephone.

My stomach was turning, and I was eager to learn my fate, so as I stood in a rickety doorway that was encased with layer upon layer of chipped paint, I observed Quade's half of the conversation by reading his lips. Being able to read lips and having excellent vision would be great attributes for a spy, but I make it a point not to eavesdrop on people. But this was too important, and I couldn't stop myself from reading Quade's lips.

"Yeah," I could make out Quade saying, "I'll tell him. Okay, I'll make sure he knows. Okay."

The more Quade talked, the more I allowed myself to believe this might be my moment, the one I had dreamed about ever since I began playing T-ball at the age of six on the baseball fields of suburban Washington, D.C.

Quade put down the receiver, looked across his desk, and calmly uttered eight simple words most people doubted I would ever hear: "Congratulations, you're going up to the big leagues."

And, of course, I didn't hear them. But I felt them, and I can still see his lips forming the words. "You're going *up* to the big leagues." Quade knew something, all right, because as soon as the words left his lips, my spirit soared. I was on a high. There are feelings one can only get on a baseball field – squaring a ball up on the sweet spot, running down a fly ball on the

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warning track when everyone in the stadium is sure it's a gapper, and sliding into second or third base, then popping up quickly, spotting a errant throw and taking an extra base. Those were the moments I played for, and they were always better than the paychecks and the adulation combined.

But this moment topped them all and I was standing in a ramshackle office when it happened. Quade was right. I was on the way up.

Although I had always told myself that I would remain the same no matter where my baseball career took me, the world around me was about to change overnight.

“That office was awful,” Quade told me years later. “It felt like I was telling somebody in a small cluttered closet that he was going to paradise.”

Delivering the news that a player was going to the big leagues was the best part of a Triple-A manager's job, and Quade had done it dozens of times before. While managing in the Expos system, he had already given the word to players such as Larry Walker, Rondell White, and Delino DeShields. But he believed I was different.

Quade told me that he liked the fact that I had a confidence in my ability that never allowed him to think that I had any doubts. That was not coincidental to the fact that Quade had shown me so much faith. The more trust a manager shows a player, the easier it is to deliver.

I always felt like I had two opposite forces driving me, the believers and the non-believers. Half would lift me up and the other half would drive me down, as if there were equal parts of me riding on both ends of a teeter-totter. The back-and-forth,

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up-and-down nature of my career was exhausting. It was only after I figured out how to balance the good with the bad, effectively riding in the middle of the seesaw that I found success.

Quade told me that a minor league manager can never be sure how a player will react to the very news that he had waited his whole life to hear. Some of the players he sent to the majors broke down and cried like babies, right in front of him, right in his office, without shame. Others sat in the kind of stunned disbelief that suggested somewhere, deep down inside, they thought themselves unworthy.

I reacted with awe, so Mike did most of the talking. “You belong in the Major leagues,” he told me. He said he sensed a quality in me that he couldn’t quite put his finger on, something he’d never seen before in any other player. The good players always had good instincts, but Quade told me mine were exceptional and I did things he couldn’t quite figure out. I was flattered and it meant a lot to me because I had always believed my instincts were my greatest asset. I really felt like Mike understood me and I was going to miss playing for him.

The instincts he was talking about are a gift. I’m fortunate in that I was blessed with really good senses. My vision is excellent, and I have really keen senses of smell and touch. I have always had a great sense of anticipation and those things have given me a really good feel for the game.

Triple-A managers double as third base coaches, and one of Quade’s jobs in that capacity was to make sure a base runner didn’t get picked off second base. When a runner takes his lead off second, he watches the pitcher and the play in front of him, making it impossible to see if the second baseman or shortstop are creeping in behind him on a pick-off play. When that

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happens for hearing players, the base coach will simply yell the word “back” to alert the runner. For me, Mike developed a hand signal that he would quickly flash from the third base coaching box if he saw a middle infielder sneaking in.

But many times, that wasn’t even necessary. “I don’t know how you did it,” Quade once told me, shaking his head in disbelief, “but you were always a step ahead of my arm.”

I had my ways. One of them was watching the ground for the opposing player’s shadow. If I saw the shadow creeping in, I could quickly scramble back to second base as if I had eyes in the back of my head.

On a city street, I notice reflections in windows because I want to know what’s going on around me. I want to make sure no one is sneaking up on me. I had to develop other senses because I lost one. I always have to pay attention, just to have a conversation, so I am trained to pay attention at all times and that focus helps me.

During some of my bleakest times, when teammates, fans or coaches cast doubts in me, one thing kept me going. Deep down, I knew something nobody else knew: not only was my deafness no disadvantage, it was actually a blessing. My hearing impairment gave me an advantage over most everyone else because it forced me to use senses that players who can hear take for granted.

I noticed everything. I mean everything. In addition to watching for shadows, I would pick up the reflections in shiny batting helmets or other players’ sunglasses. If someone wore jewelry, and a lot of players did, I would notice the glint of the gold or a diamond reflecting off the sun or the stadium lights. And because I was deaf, I could not multi-task. When a coach

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gave me instructions, I listened intently. When I studied what the scouts were saying about opposing pitchers, those reports had my full attention; I was unable to be distracted by music, television or empty chatter.

Those are the instincts that Quade couldn't put his finger on. Back in his tiny office in Rochester, he reached his arm out to me, shook my hand, and told me to get back on the bus and ride back to Ottawa with the team. The Expos had a 1:00 p.m. game at home the next day against the Cincinnati Reds and they wanted me to be in uniform and ready to play, if needed. After the Lynx team bus arrived back in Ottawa, I was to pack all my clothes and other belongings and drive my own car the remaining two hours to Montreal.

When I got back on the bus, I didn't say a word, but the rest of the Lynx players caught the vibe I was sending. It was obvious because of the wide smile that was spread across my face: the Lynx's season was over, but mine was just beginning.

News that a teammate's dream was coming true is not always met with universal approval in minor league baseball. Less than one in ten (only about eight percent) of drafted players ever make it to the major leagues, and resentment, jealousy, and the creeping realization that the cost of a teammate's dream coming true might be the death of one's own, can have a way of tempering excitement.

But I sensed no such animosity on the Lynx team bus that night. By relying on the development of homegrown talent, the small market Expos had cultivated an esprit de corps that pulsed through the organization and we were an extremely close bunch. When word spread that I had gotten "The Call," I could tell that my teammates were genuinely happy for me.

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Whenever I joined a new team, the first challenge for me was fitting in with teammates. It wasn't the biggest hurdle for me to clear but it was always the first, and it was a huge relief to make friends.

I walked down the center aisle of the bus, passing through a gauntlet of high-fives, and retook my place in the card game. Only now, my hands were trembling so badly, that I could scarcely make out the cards I held.

My excitement was rivaled only by my fear of the unknown. The bus rides were usually long, especially after a big loss, but this one flew by. The adrenaline coursing through my body prevented me from sleeping, so, as the bus rolled on through the night, I stayed awake, imagining what the next day would be like.

When I tried to sleep, I grew more restless. My mind kept wandering. I looked out the window but I didn't see the dark and desolate countryside. Instead, I saw my own reflection in the window. But I didn't see the 23-year-old who was about to make his big league debut. Instead, I saw the six-year-old version of myself standing at home plate with a large, oversized hearing aid strapped to my chest, petrified as I played organized baseball for the first time on a dilapidated Little League field near my childhood home in the suburbs of Washington D.C.