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The Truth or Something Like It

I MET JOE NUXHALL a few weeks after my fifteenth birthday. His hands were gnarled, and he spoke as though his mouth was half full of marbles, but he was sharp and funny as hell. I was only a few months younger than he was when he made his Major League debut.

At just 15, Joe Nuxhall climbed on the hill at Crosley Field in the top of the ninth against the would-be World Champion St. Louis Cardinals. Manager Bill McKechnie called on Nuxhall with the Cincinnati Reds on the short end of a 13-0 deficit. Nuxhall's debut was essentially mop-up duty at Niagara Falls.

Still, the Ol' Lefthander managed to retire two of the first three batters he faced before all hell broke loose. Nuxhall never finished that half-inning; he never found a third out. In fact following his debut, it would take him eight years to get back to the Major Leagues.

When I met Nuxhall, he was half of the radio broadcast team for the Cincinnati Reds. I shook his hand and asked him to sign a baseball card my uncle gave me years before. The card was a 1963 Topps. On the front, Nuxhall was framed in mid wind-up, his arms stretched high over his head, his throwing hand hidden inside a chocolate-brown mitt. The back of the card was jammed with stats. When I first received the card, I wondered if the 67.50 ERA listed for 1944 — his rookie campaign — was a misprint.

I was enamored with that statistic. The pitchers I knew of in the bigs had ERAs in the 3s; the really good ones were in the 2s or below. For a long time, I was sure my Nuxhall card was simply a misprint. No pitcher, anywhere, at any time could possibly, I thought, have had a 67.50 earned run average.

But Joe Nuxhall did.

67.50 was no misprint.

Nuxhall was a legend. He was a good pitcher — great, even — a Cincinnati Reds Hall-of-Famer who won 135 games in his 16-season big league career. His lifetime ERA — 3.90 — was a far cry from the ultra-inflated number of 1944.

While he was signing my card, I asked him what it was like to face the St. Louis Cardinals at age 15.

He stopped his Sharpie mid-signature and stared at me. The room we were in — a large, partitioned conference room at the downtown Westin on Fountain Square — seemed to go silent. A wide smile cracked across his face, and all the air came back into the room. He adjusted the thick, wire-framed, aviator-style glasses that perched themselves on the bridge of his nose and leaned back in his chair.

"You know," he said, "I was so goddamned nervous when I got the call, I tripped and fell on the way out of the dugout."

He leaned forward, his elbows on the white, cotton tablecloth. His

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eyes grew clearer, even more focused. He seemed to stare not at me but through me.

"I was used to throwing to good hitters, even some really good ones," he added. "But," he continued, "there's a difference between a good hitter and a Major League hitter. I got two of three, then gave up a walk."

He shook his head and smiled.

"I was there, up in the hill, and I look over and see Stan Musial in the on-deck circle. Next thing I know, he's up at the plate."

He leaned back again in his chair and stretched his hands over his head in nearly the same way he had in the photo on my baseball card.

"Then," he chuckled, "they scored some runs. Lotsa runs."

His smile was so real, so sincere, I'd have believed anything and everything he said.

"It wasn't that bad," I replied. "Only five."

Even to this day, I'm not sure why I said what I did. I'm not sure what I was thinking. At the time, when I heard those words tumble out of my mouth I could hardly believe I'd said them. I thought Joe Nuxhall might punch me in the face.

But he didn't punch me in the face.

Joe Nuxhall was too much of a class act for that sort of thing. In fact, what he did left me as awestruck as anything has since that time.

Joe Nuxhall leaned toward me, his hands flat, fingers spread, and said, "Son, they could've scored as many runs on me that day as they wanted."

He handed my card back to me, his signature split in two segments, and nodded to the person behind me.

As I stepped away, Nuxhall spoke again.

"Hey kid," he said. "Thanks for that."

I smiled and nodded, puzzled as to why in the world Joe Nuxhall would thank me for reminding him of his horrendous Major League debut.

As I got older, I think I grew to understand why Joe Nuxhall might've thanked me. Now, I'm almost sure of it. He thanked me because I gave him a chance to be honest when it would have been so easy to be dishonest.

I wouldn't have been honest as Nuxhall.

I couldn't have been; I care too much about what other people think of me. More accurately, I care far too much about what I think other people think of me.

Which often puts me in quite a bind relative to the truth.

It shouldn't, but it does.

Now that I have kids, I'm more conscious (or at least I try to be) of my issues with truth. But old habits die hard, and it's still far too easy for a lie

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to slide off my tongue. Most of them are harmless—nearly all of them are, really.

At least that's what I tell myself.

The truth, of course, is that none of them are harmless; all of them are lies, and all of them are aimed at deception. All of them evoke pain and erode trust. All of them—every single one of them—are destructive, cancerous, corrosive.

Which is exactly the opposite of what I tell myself.

I wonder what Joe Nuxhall told himself. I wonder how it could have been so different from what I tell myself. I wonder if Joe Nuxhall ever considered anything but that truthful, face-up story about his big league debut. I wonder if Joe Nuxhall ever offered any excuses, ever messed around with the size or shape or structure of things.

I'm sure he did.

Or at least I'm sure that he considered it.

But I think he figured everyone knew the truth already. And even if they didn't, he did, so what difference did it really make? What happened, happened, and Nuxhall's honesty may just have freed some space for other things, things not destructive, corrosive, and cancerous. Nuxhall's honesty helped him get back to even. And eventually, he got ahead.

I want to free some space. I want to get back to even. I dream about getting ahead.

Lies are heavy, clumsy, and awkward. Lies are unruly; they're contradictions. Lies are a misguided effort to reconfigure the space-time continuum. They're an attempt to overwrite history, to highjack experience, to gaslight and usurp. Lies are an essential impossibility, yet I try to execute them day after day after day. Some days, I even manage to convince myself I've successfully executed them. Of course, that's a lie, too.

I'm not really sure when or why I started lying. I know it had something to do with power. Control, too. My lies offered me a mechanism for getting what I wanted, what I thought I needed. They gave me agency, and as inauthentic as that agency was, it sure as hell felt good, so the lies grew.

I think I finally understand why it was so easy for Joe Nuxhall to be honest. Being honest is really the only possible—the only sustainable—outcome.

It took Joe Nuxhall eight years to get back to the big leagues after those five earned runs in two-thirds of an inning. Eight years. And the weight of those five runs is nothing compared to the weight of the lies I've told.

The weight of those five runs cost Joe Nuxhall eight years; it took him that long to get back to even. I wonder how long it'll take me to get back to even. I wonder if it's even possible.