

The Measure Of A Man

by Marc Nash

“No Pops, you stay here !” “Go on in the clubhouse and rest up in your rocking chair. Coach, lend him your quilt !” Now they're warnin' the Bench Coach to watch himself as they all rise up off the bench, cos if it's just him and me left at the end, I'll shoot him up into space. Wiseacres. “And hey Big Daddy, don't be goin' and eatin' all the chicken wings !” And then it starts, their dumbass chicken routine. Flapping their elbows and bumpin' and borin' into each other as they climb out the dugout. On the way to the slaughterhouse. To have their necks wrung. Bench Coach just fixes me with a look. I can guess what's behind it. How in hell I'm sposed to give 'em a heads up ? First they'd have to pull 'em from out their asses. Same ways they don't listen ta him. Don't want to hold his ice chip gaze any longer, so I rise off the bench. He don't shoot up into orbit. His chewing tobacco shoots to the floor though.

Rest of the time in the dugout, they give me a wide berth. Don't want to be in range of me chatterin' in their ear that they need to be figurin' out the pitcher. Watch what stuff he's got himself tonight. Not like I haven't faced him a hundred times before. So I know what he's gonna throw. I memorised him. Got him indexed in my mental book. Let these young pups write up their own books on pitchers if they ain't gonna listen up. But they got no respect for me. For my advice. My veteran status. For my numbers put up season after season. They always razzin' on me, cos in their eyes, the DH ain't an everyday player. 'Hundred and sixty two game season of sittin' on his butt every half inning, why he gotta get a night off now and then as well ? How's that work ?' Wish I had tonight off, way this is shaping.

It ain't no rocking chair, I got a recliner in the clubhouse. I rest up, visualise and focus in before a game. That's if they haven't

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pranked it. If it were a rocking chair, it'd be nothing but a pile of sawdust by now from my termite teammates. My chair ain't no privilege, any of them could do likewise. What bugs them is my earnings. Claim since I ain't out on the field with a glove, I shouldn't be pulling a full salary. Their calculations is wrong. Plain wrong. Like their attitude. Like their numbers. Maybe if they weren't so hyper with their music, and their lame pranks, they'd have something left to give out on the field. I'm supposed to bat clean up, but the table's never set for me to clean up. So you tell me how that's supposed to work ? I'm left to clean up the mess you knuckleheads make by not gettin' on base. And how comes my uniform is always covered in dirt, unlike you everydayers out there in the field ? Cos I play hard that's why. Everyday hard. You want someone who ain't an everyday player ? Try our Closer. But ain't his fault he's always sat there in the pen, like he's taken root. His number lines rely on the rest of the team. So he's flatlined right now. Sides, even if their thinking were true, I think my record in the game means I earned it. Not like them starting out now. Headlong into the big dollars while they're still at college. Mega bucks down on the farm. Major League contracts signed in the Minor League. Prospects not numbers. That's all they are. Let's see them post some real numbers. Not some digits plucked from the perfumed air of college and then set down on scented paper. They already won the Lotto jis by being here.

Look around the ballpark. Numbers everywhere your eye falls. Championship year pennants. Giant shirt numbers retired to mark the greats. Ghostly numbers. Dead men's numbers in some cases. 410 ft marking on the wall at center. The out-of-town game scores. Telephone numbers on the billboards. Live numbers. Money-chasing numbers. And I'm familiar with all of them. I've taken the trouble to tip my cap and honor them thru my eighteen seasons here. Clubhouse behind me is my home from home. But them there out in the field, they're only passing thru. They're only aware of their own

numbers. How stats translate into their market value. That's their sole concern. In this team game, everyone's in it for themselves. Looking after their own numbers. Everything's a would-be unassisted double play. And right now, the numbers are down. A team down on its luck. Down on its knees. Yet the payroll's up. That don't square. That just don't tally in my book.

What the numbers tell me, what I know from numbers, is that jis one team can win the World Series. Only a certain number of the teams got a chance of making it into the shakeup for it even. Half are out of contention by the All-Star game. A handful like us are out of contention before the first pitch of the season. I knew that when I saw the roster. No shoots of recovery to be had in Spring Training. Can't harvest much in a dustbowl of talent. Pretty clear we had no chance of winning bupkis, but still we gotta put nine guys out on the field, ten including me, night after night after night. To feed the dreams of the fans. They ain't no fools. They know the score. Or they could just look over to the scoreboard and see it written in ten foot high numbers. Scoreboard don't lie. This team is out for the count. Players only out for themselves. Just considering their own numbers. Look at some of the crazy plays they're tryin' to make out there. Impossible plays. Ridiculous plays. While the team nosedives around them. Cos they know this team don't catch much TV coverage. Gonna get no market-wide exposure here. No scouting reports. Other teams' Front Offices never even heard of them. So they try some bonehead circus catch to make their way on to a highlights reel. The only time they do get their uniforms dirty. The fans sense it. Attendance figures are down. They're no dopes. They know their collective dreams are built on feet of clay. Or dirt in this case. We are false idols. Sacrificial lambs. The franchise throwing us players to the wolves. When I've bled for this team. Busted knees, shoulders and ankles. Busted hopes. Man, if only I'd got some say in a trade written into my contract. Gotten me some leverage, I woulda been outta here faster than a tape measure dinger ! But me and my agent,

we lost that particular battle. The Owner, he don't miss a trick. Tough negotiator. Different type of hardball. He must know I want out at the end of the season. That I'm going thru the motions. But no less than any of the other stiffs here. How's any of us rotting down here going to help him make trades ? He may give me the evil eye, but what's he delivered up by way of a team ? Nuttin'. But you can't tell him that. Can't tell him his job. But he knows it like I know it. This team is uncompetitive. And for some time to come yet. I'm way too far over the hill to be part of any rebuilding job. You can hold your head up high each time you step up to the plate. But in your heart, your corrosive heart that eats at your resolve, you know.

The Owner was down in the Clubhouse before game time. Why not, seeing he owns the joint ? But what gives him the right to open his mouth to deliver us the grand speech ? The big words. Motivating us ? That's Coach's job. Taking team meetings. So just makes Coach look like a punk. People asking themselves just who's in charge down in the clubhouse anyway ? No way to run a ballclub. If the players think that the Coach is on the way out ... Coach, he's been tossed from tonight's game already. For showing his passion. Displaying his fight. Revealing his strain. The Owner, he don't know anything about the game. He may know money, but he never played the game. Well not above Little League anyways. Don't wanna catch his eye. So I stay out the clubhouse. Even though I'm tempted to grab some chicken wings, just to play them when they come in off the field. Can't chance it. Can't risk running into the Owner. He's sure to be pissed with our performance tonight. He's gonna be on the prowl, looking to blame someone. That someone ain't gonna be me. Not tonight. Got me my hit. A cheap one admittedly, a broken bat bloop. But a hit all the same. The fielding team didn't hustle on the ball. Taking evasive action from the sheared bat. Played percentages, rather than risk throwing the ball away in what would have been a bang bang play. They knew I weren't going to steal no bases. And they were even more confident that my teammates

behind me weren't going to advance me round to come home and score. No matter how ugly, it's down in the scorecard. A hit is a hit is a hit. More than the rest of my team. 0-fers all of them. O-fers and loafers. Carryin' on like they do. I done my bit. Maintained my numbers. Can't afford to get into it with the Owner. Not this season. Could be my last. Certainly need it to be my last here. Don't want to let on, not now, not til the offseason. My agent can deal with him. He's a pitbull, he won't be intimidated. I could affect going to the toilet and swing back by the food. A proper bang bang play. Damn, Physio's got his eyes trained on me now. Everybody watching everybody else. Who's gonna jump ship first ? Why don't he go tend someone ? Treat the Closer in the pen. His arm must have seized up thru inactivity. Muscle wastage. We're all wasting away one way and another. Go over to my cubbyhole and affect examining my wrist guard. My chicken wing as the guys call it.

My designated role to stay in the dugout. Rooting for my guys. Clapping and gettin' into the heads of my teammates, like the oldest cheerleader in town. Tough call, when the atmosphere in here stinks. The stench of fear. Of careers going down the toilet. Even worse tonight than normal. That weren't team spirit on display. They meant it with their elbows. Two of them in each other's ribs over a missed sign from last night. Big card debts still outstanding too I shouldn't wonder. Coach should have come down hard on that. Still festering. The name calling and accusations. Like rutting bucks. Twelve point bucks, with point twelve averages. Acting like street punks. Maneuvering for the leader of this team on the field, since Skip got traded away. Like it makes a difference in the long run. Other than maybe a percentage point or two in the contract. When you've been in the game as long as me, you learn just to let it go. Don't bear grudges. I'm too old, Who needs it ? Don't bother wasting your energies. They'll break the rest of this team up soon enough. Rip it apart. I'm aiming to sit on the bench, out of the crossfire.

That's why I don't bother coming back at them. That's why I sit on my hands.

I got one more move in me. Fat signing on fee. Before I can swap this clubhouse for a more forgiving one on a golf course. But DH's are hard to move on. Only of use in one of the two leagues straight off the bat. We only got a coupla tools to do the job apparently. That's not what my numbers say. My agent will get me the move. He's a pitbull. He don't let up. Just give him something to work with. Give him the numbers on paper. Then he can draw up his own numbers. Work his brand of magic. Throw his curveballs and sliders into the negotiations. Deliver him the numbers. So he's got something that holds up on paper. Don't show them you're on the slide. That the old bat doesn't have quite the same pop in it. Sure the power numbers are down. But can't get me no ribis if there's no one on base in front of me can I ? My coach the agent. Get our stories straight. Our excuses. Some numbers lie don't they ? They're right misleading. You can see that. You gotta know how to read 'em is all. But not the Won-Lost column for this team. Can't effect that. So gotta bust my own numbers out. This has to be the year. Now or never. Sluggers go downhill very quickly. Just maintain the numbers for this one season and I'll be okay. Doesn't matter what my body has to say after that. Once the ink's dry. The ink on the past numbers is long dry. Set in stone. Down in the records. Can't take them away from me. That must count for something. But it's always the next set they're interested in. The numbers to come. For as long as you're playing, there'll be a set of numbers against the letters of your name. For as long as you've a number on your uniform. Even Coach has a number on his back. His past achievements a burden for him to carry now. Bet he wishes he was numberless. Two ways to get a number off your back. Feats that get your number retired and taken out of use. The upper deck dream when we all start out. When we first get assigned our number. Or get your shirt ripped off your back and canned, like Coach's is aheading. No real place for lowly numbers. For humble dreams.

They're coming back in now to bat. Stay out their way while they toss their gloves. I press my face to the chain-link. Lookin' up into the press boxes. Ow, it hurts to look up there. Must be the dazzle of them sharpening their knives, catchin' in the lights. Cos you know those buzzards will be all over us in the locker room again. Like a rash. Making themselves right at home where we live. Hands hooked over our locker doors so we can't shut them and leave. Trapping us. Pinning us in their spotlight. Eyes always on the move. Never giving us their full attention. Always scoping. Scouting out a greater scoop. I don't give nuttin' away. 162 game season, ups and downs (mainly downs). But I keep it level. We all bin here before. Last night and tomorrow. Last season and maybe next, we'll still be back there. God forbid. They don't come my way no more. They know I'm an old hand. A DH who plays excellent defense. In the locker room at least. The cut-off man. A slugger content to bunt their off speed stuff away and try and beat out the throw. So to them, even my quotes are tired. Tired old quotes from a tired old player. Designated hitter, but never designated spokesman. Not team leader. This team without a leader. Since they traded the Skip. For more goddamn prospects. Headless chickens. Chickens with wrung necks. The Media chase the brash players. The ones who don't hold back. Them that don't watch their mouths. Those who don't know any better. The ornery ones, who feel cheated by being with this organization. I could have told them from the get-go this team weren't going nowhere. Not very loyal to the ballclub, but then who really is deep down ? We're all looking to our next contract. The reporters know that. They sniff out them who're frettin' over their future prospects mired down in this clubhouse. It's no great skill. It's all round in the air. It's in the steam from the showers. The atomized spray of the deodorants. The analgesic fumes we patch up our bodies with to go on playing. Instead of masking our fear, it's broadcast from our very pores. Scratch'n'sniff venality. 'I want outta here, tonight and forever'. You can't leave the clubhouse if your

locker door is still open. Team rule. The Press know that. They wedge their elbows inside the doors. Microphone pushed in our face. Press got us pressed in tight. Now no elbow room to be had. No space to catch your breath after our endeavors. We're getting changed round them. We're half-dressed and they're fully clothed. We're eating chicken wings as they talk. A strange intimacy. But beneath their bromide questions, they're really asking us about our next contract. We're talking about our day just done, when the journalist blindsides us. Right in the guts. They got their elbows in first. Their low blows. The angry ones slam their locker doors but the Pressmen jump their elbows clear. They got what they came for. Can't strike back. Who can we lash out at, 'cept each other ? Owner pays our salaries so he's gold plated. Can't feel anger with the fans. Number one rule. They can murder you and they do. But they also contribute to our wages. That's what their money buys, if they can't buy a winning team. They got a right they paid top dollar for, to holler for our blood. They vote with their feet. And their wallets. Gate receipts are down. Merchandise sales down. They don't want to yell their allegiance. Not to this team. They come, they pay their money and then they have the right to slaughter us with no end. The Press love it. The Press lap it up. The Press interview the fans during a game. Get the fire from them that they see as lacking in the clubhouse. Put the fans in pinstripes. See how they get on. Put the goddamn Press in a uniform too.

What's the score ? What's the game position ? What does it matter ? One thing the retired number shirts up there don't come provided with, is giant rally caps. I'm in the hole. Like this team. Like my career. Randy's at the plate. Surefire what's coming next. See it at BP. In the cage he's swatting away at everything. Like the devil's swarm's taken the form of baseballs and comin' after him. Not that Randy's a religious man. None of 'em are. No prayer meetings no more. Hardly any team meetings for that matter. Money is his god. Money is the god of them all. And stats the way into the

Promised Land. Pay dirt Heaven. Paradise is a long ways off from this ballpark. We've such a poor conversion rate in our church of the on-base percentage. The sin of avarice. The congregation out in the bleachers is thinning out weekly. So concession sales are down on their numbers too. They're demanding a miracle out there and we got no one to deliver. No wine to be had from gatorade. Our outfielders baptized in beer thrown from the stands. From aspersion to submersion. Keep your head down. We're beyond saving. The boos start up.

See, what I tell you ? Three pitches, three swipes and an out before the announcer's got his name out over the PA. The catcalls getting' louder. Randy's stuck at the plate looking down at his bat. As if that's gonna clue him in. Even the Mascot's shaking his outsized head. He's got it tougher than the players even. Trying to boost us to this crowd. Man they're baying for Randy's blood. I told him a thousand times to take a few pitches. He's finally steppin' off now. Moreno's already out by the batter's box, having to hold up for Randy. So it's part deliberate then. Lay down a marker. But it's a bad play, cos he's exposed himself to prolonged abuse from the crowd. God they're murdering him out there. Now he's feeling it for real. They got to him. C'mon man, don't drag your heels. Head for the refuge of the dugout. The bat dragging along the ground behind him. Like a tail between his legs. The Devil got him good then. Less like idols, more persecuted saints with arrows sticking in our sides and our guts spilling out. What with our banged up bodies and pitchers hurling missiles at our heads. And the barbs of the crowd. Yeah okay we're well paid martyrs, but we're easy targets all the same. Lashed to the diamond. Warning track serves to protect us from unforgiving fans, more than an unforgiving concrete wall. Randy finally makes it off the field. I should ask and he oughta volunteer bout the pitcher now that there's moisture in the air. But neither of us swap any darn thing. Just move the hell away from each other as fast as possible as I go on deck. Put as much distance

between us, as I take up my stance and he puffs himself up to trash something in the dugout. Put on a show. Get the cameras tracking him. Highlighting his passion. Like the phoney even gives a damn. I swing the bat off my shoulders. The displaced air sings. I slay a thousand imaginary devils. They drop out the air and fall at my feet. I went yard on them. I'm going yard on all their tails.

Nobody on, what a surprise. Moreno will be gone, so I'll get me a free go. Don't matter really what I do. Got me my hit already. Two out, with what's behind me we ain't gonna build squat even if I get on. Maybe I'll get my chicken wings when I get back. Get me a second hit on the night, a multi-hit game and I would have earned it. Battin' for average now. Keepin' those numbers up. No one can pull me up on that. Not any of those chumps who are all hitless. Not the Owner as I'd be the only one showing all his prospects, his stalled hopes, his long-shots who can't even hit it off the infield, how it's done. He couldn't begrudge me some sustenance. Sure as hell none to be had from my teammates. I watch the pitcher as his arms reach back to hurl. Visualise tearing his wings off him and devouring them. Making his scrawny neck turn round to see my ball hurtling off into the night sky like a comet. Moreno didn't last long. Swinging at the first pitch. Like all youth today, no patience. Didn't give me no real time to warm up. To get the muscles firing. Here he comes now. Like he can't vacate the field quick enough. Like it's a punishment to go out there. It should be fun hombre. We are privileged to be doing something we love, for good pay ! He pauses only to glare at me as I get the weights off the bat. Shelling peas. Shucking devils.

I step out on to the field. The crowd stop booing. That's something at least. They still recognise me for what I achieved over the years. The numbers I put up. Take note all those in the dugout. Not that they're probably even watching. I've quieted a whole stadium. Me. All by stepping out. What the number on my back stands for. Not

quite a hushed breath of expectation like in the past. But I'll settle for it all the same. No, more than settle for it, I honor them. They're the true lifeblood of this team. The ones who stick with us thru thick and thin. Thin and thin. Year after year. They don't go off in search of a better deal. My feet scuff the dirt around the plate. Put my stamp on it. My imprint. This is my home. My home plate and I'm here to collect. Catcher's fiddling with his mask. Superstition ? I don't know, he's new to me. Come over from the National League. Don't be worrying about him. Look to yourself. I sweep the dirt with my foot some more. I'm the bull, the bat is my horns, ready to keep this matador with his deadly projectiles at bay. Ready to gouge his eyes out. To spear him in his chest and send him reeling back to the dugout. Done for the evening. His numbers all messed up. I hold out the bat, Samson's jawbone cudgel, in my left hand. I raise it slowly, pinpointing for my landmark in the middle deck. To the left of the banner flapping in the breeze. A bulls' eye target urging me to hit it bang on the money. A thousand bucks to my charity if I do the business. Only the banner's been a bit neglected recently. All forlorn there, a corner rippling back in the breeze. Flapping so it's covering up the center of the target. Folded in on itself. Hibernating in the high summer. Do the sponsors know ? Do they care ? Even sweet charity has given up on this ballclub. No, cut out that negative thinking. Okay, we're aligned now. Nice and tight. Dead ahead straight. The bat don't feel quite right to me though. Course it don't, it's a new one after old faithful got shattered last AB. They should still all feel the same though. Made for my requirements. Made to my specs. To deliver me up further numbers. Monster numbers. I draw it back behind my shoulder. It pulls funny thru the air. I swear bat quality ain't like it used to be back when I was starting out. Craftmanship gone to hell with the rest of the game. Aw man, I'm down a strike already. I wasn't focussed. All this chatter going thru my head. Catcher don't have to bother himself. C'mon, lock in now. Fastball right ? Probably reckon I can't catch up to it and he'll toss me another one. I know this guy. Faced him so often. He won't change a winning formula. Why should he ? I wish I could change a

losing one. Maybe I just will in my own small way. With this next ball. I'm sitting dead red. Fastball. Gotta be. Two seam or four seam's only question. I'm ready. Just think of those wings, those fine, fine wings. Wings stand up and take a bow ! Argh, he threw me offspeed. I was miles out in front. Rock, paper, scissors. His rock blunts my scissors. Man, he seems to have grown even taller since I faced him on his home mound last. Taller than three innings ago even. Damn he's one lanky sonofabitch. Seems he's got the lights working for him now. He must have moved across the mound. Only a coupla inches, a tiny change, but now his release is straight outta the lights. Can you believe that ? The ball's on you before you can pick it up. The matador's got his knives raised and is dazzling the light off them into this bull's eyes. Our home park and it's made for him. Maybe we ought to trade for him ? He'd never come to this bum team. Need to make an adjustment of my own then. Get my line of sight away from having to stare into the glare. A couple of inches to the right in the box ought to do it. Remember to compensate as regards the plate. Everything's thrown out of whack. Screwed my mechanics. This guy's got inside my head. No elbow room. Step out. Shake him clear. Evict this trespasser from our home park. Two strikes. Gotta protect that plate and work my way back in to the count. Count, more numbers. Everything measured and tabulated. The measure of success and failure. Not the score, that don't matter. That's a team thing. I'm talkin' bout the measure of a man. My numbers. Versus the pitcher's numbers. It's a pitcher's count right now, 0 and 2. But this pitcher don't throw too much out of the zone. Use that to my advantage. Know he's gonna give me a chance. Don't let them in the bleachers feel they've been cheated by this AB. Don't let them down. Get some wood on it. Something. Anything. Sacrifice another broken bat to do it. Keep fighting him off. Keep fighting. Stay alive. Make him toss some extra pitches. It's forever about the numbers. His arm's on the clock. Not just the speed gun giving readings. His pitching coach's stood there with a ticker to count 'em. Wear him out. Throw him the chair. Send him back to his dugout done for the night. His arm packed in ice. His tired old arm. My

tired old shoulder. Bench Coach's ice chip eyes. Give something to my team even if I don't get a hit. Cover the plate. Goddamn, he threw high cheese and I couldn't lay off it ! Crossed myself up with all this clutter. Damn ball started high and stayed high and I still chased it. Didn't break at all. Cept broke my heart and 25,000 other hearts up in the stand. Catcalls not curtain calls. No chicken wings this innings. We're dead and buried. For tonight and the season. They'll break the team up before waivers. But they won't be able to move me on so easy. All the teams still with something to play for, to fight for, they got themselves solid DH's already. Each player with decent numbers, 1 thru 9. That's why they're up there. I'm screwed on that front for this season. Looks like my number's finally up. For good. Maybe I can sneak me those wings during the Seventh Inning Stretch.

