

Baseballissimo: My Summer in the Italian Minor Leagues, by Dave Bidini.
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[Excerpt]

During a typical home game, the Nettuno Peones, the last of the true Italian baseball teams, devoured coffee and pastries the way Lenny "Nails" Dykstra spat chaw. At the morning's pre-game workout, Mirko Rocchetti, a dashing veteran of local ball whom the Peones' coach, Pietro Monaco, had wrenched from retirement to run the odd practice, would arrive at the park carrying what looked like a parcel of laundered shirts, but was really a tray of sweets – cornetti, brioche, and paste. Having drawn the important second shift, Simone Cancelli (The Natural) followed twenty minutes later, holding aloft a large box, the kind in which you might store your winter boots for the summer. He placed the box on the ledge of the dugout and, with two hands, lifted the top, unveiling a layer of crepe paper under which lay a small mountain of fresh cornetti, their light, flaky shells engraved with vanilla cream. Not wanting to be judged as being of a people for whom a second round of sweets in the morning is considered gauche, I did my best to fill my hands. And when Francesco Pompozzi, the Peones' twenty-one-year-old fireballer, tore open a paper bag with two green-glazed fruit-juice bottles filled with sugar-soaked espresso, I couldn't exactly affect the posture of one of those nosebleeds for whom four coffees in an hour and a half is considered an impossibility. Pompo passed out little white plastic cups -- they reminded me of those small vessels that old people use to take their heart pills -- and we drank, hot and fast. If that weren't enough, Ricky Viccaro (Solid Gold, who always looked like he was standing in front of a wind machine) showed up a half-hour into the game, swinging a red Thermos filled with more espresso, which he cracked in the fifth inning, and refilled for the beginning of the second game. As for the boxes of sweets, they were placed on racks above the bench, and were picked at during the game by the players until they'd wiped them clean.

This sugar fiesta went against everything I'd learned as a young athlete growing up in Canada. I was raised to appreciate the value of slurping down buckets of water -- perhaps the occasional Gatorade -- or devouring oranges during the course of a game. But the Peones believe -- s do many Italians -- that sugar and coffee is enough to get you through. Andrea Cancelli (The Emperor) kept a cache of pills -- they came in a square, red packet with "ENERGY!" written on its side -- that tasted like tiny soap cakes. At a game in Sardinia, I saw Fabio Giolitti (Fab Julie) pat his rumbling stomach before fetching a box of wafer cookies from his kit bag, which he passed out, two at a time, to his teammates. On another occasion, Mirko asked me, "Davide? Are you hungry?" and, before I could answer, he handed me two panini spread with blueberry jelly -- the Italian athlete's equivalent of a power bar. At the same game, Mario Mazza gathered the team around him, as excited as if he'd just cracked the opposing team's sequence of signs, only to untwist a small, plastic bag, revealing twenty packets of sugar swiped from a café, which the Peones' promptly poured down the hatch.

The language was as much a cultural divide as the food in Nettuno, a sleepy seaside socket of 35,000 on the Tyrrhenian Sea, just an hour south of Rome, where I spent the summer of 2002 writing about the Peones. However, I was able to find my place among the team by hacking and slashing through a combination of English and Italo-Canadian Baseballese, all the while inching dangerously close to becoming Team Stooze. At times, I wondered whether the boys were asking me questions just to see how long it would take to get a response, and to what extent I might distort their mother tongue. Whenever I heard them use the word *scrittore* (writer), my ears perked up. In my mind, they'd be saying, "Here we are talking about him, but the *scrittore* over there has no idea!"

Once, Solid Gold asked me a question – his delivery, fast and slurred, would have made any language incomprehensible – to which I held up my hands in futility. He turned to the team's veteran catcher, and only English-speaking member, Paolo Danna, who was seated next to me on the bench, and wondered, in Italian – as Paolo would tell me later – “Does he understand anything we're saying?”

One day, Chencho Navacci, the team's left-handed reliever, heard me say “Il pollo é morte” to describe a hit, a phrase that, in translation, I assumed was universal among ballplayers.

“Tuo pollo?” he asked me.

“No, not my chicken,” I struggled on in dubious Italian. “The ball. The ball is the chicken. The chicken is dead.”

“Okay, okay,” he said, smiling.

“You know: dying quail,” I said, in English. He stared at me blankly. “The chicken is dead,” I said, making a high, curving motion with my hand. “The ball -- la palla. La palla é il pollo.”

“Il pollo?”

I couldn't understand why Chencho couldn't understand.

“Sì! Il pollo é morte!” I repeated.

“Il pollo é morte. Okay, is good!” he said, turning away to join the others in the outfield.

Later that night, I told Janet, my wife, what had happened at the ballpark.

“*Il quailo*,” she corrected. “You should have said *il quailo*.”

“How was I supposed to know they had quail in Italy?”

“What did you think? They have chicken, don't they?”

“Ya, but quail?”

“Yes, quail. And I don't think *pollo* is the right word for chicken. *La gallina* is how you say chicken. *Pollo* is what you order in a restaurant.”

“Pollo is restaurant chicken?” I said, mortified.

“I think so.”

“So, you mean I was telling Chencho that a baseball is like a piece of cooked chicken?”

“Yes, I'm afraid you were.”

“Flying cooked chicken?”

I can only imagine what Chencho must have thought. Upon reaching the outfield, he probably told the other players, “The Canadian writer thinks that the ball is like a piece of cooked chicken,” making a twirling gesture with his finger at his ear.

For those first few weeks with the team, I probably walked around sounding like a fairly enormous moron. I regularly confused the word for “last” with “first,” and used “always” instead of “never.” (“Like never, I'll call you last!”) Yup: nutbar. I'd also fallen into the embarrassing habit of sounding the word for *penne* – little flutes of pasta – as if it were *pene*, the Italian word for penis. Thankfully, I was excused for saying things like “I'd like my penis with tomatoes and mushrooms” in public, and, to their credit, the team and collective townsfolk hung with me.

When I first arrived in Nettuno, the Peones' reaction to having a Canadian writer follow around the team was mixed. The players occasionally quizzed me about the nature of my book, not in the “Do you plan to deploy a postmodernist narrative or will the book be in epistolary form?” way, but rather, as in Pito the Stricken's case: “Your book? Peones? Vero?”

“Yes,” I told him. “Most of it is about the team.”

“Peones? You write, really?” he said, lighting a smoke and eyeing me with doubt.

“Yes, really.”

“Why the Peones?” he asked in Italian, wagging his hand.

“Perché siete matto,” because they are crazy, I said.

“Ah, sì, matto, sì,” he said, trying to understand.

Chencho, overhearing our conversation, asked, “Chencho is in your book?”

“Yes, Chencho, of course,” I told him.

“Angalaaaato, eh?” he said, swishing his eyebrows, using one of the more colourful Italian words for “sexy,” more or less, though I wasn’t sure whether it was a question or an answer.

“Chencho and the whole team,” I explained as best I could, twirling my index finger.

“Photo?” he asked, pointing at me.

“Si.”

“Photo nudo?”

“Maybe.”

“Angalaaaato,” he repeated, winking as if being poked in the eye with a stick.

Another time, Paolo told me, “You should write about a real team. This team is ‘bush league.’ You should write about the other Nettuno teams. Real baseball.”

“I’m not interested in real baseball.”

“But Dave, we just fool around. We play for fun, no?”

“That’s why I like it.”

“No,” he said, turning his face and waving his hand at me. “Really. Peones, this is not a normal team.”

We ping-ponged back and forth for a while, neither of us convincing the other that our idea was any better. Since I’d come from a sporting culture worshipped by most Italian baseball players, it seemed absurd to Paolo and the others that I might find charm in the Nettuno baseball community. I also suspect that a few people viewed me as not having what it took to write about major-league baseball, as if I’d flunked out of Boswell Tech and had been forced to ply my trade in the Italian hardball backwater. Previously, when I’d travelled around the world writing about hockey, the locals afforded me immediate respect, but in Italy, there were times when I think I was perceived as a bit of a loser. One evening, at Café Volpi, in the city’s main piazza, I interviewed a baseball writer from the local paper, *Il Granchio* (The Crab), and asked him whether he, in turn, might want to interview me about my book.

He declined.

“Aren’t you curious about how and why I chose Nettuno?” I asked him.

“Yes, but I don’t think we would publish this story,” he told me.

“Why not? It can’t be every day that a writer comes to document a season in the life of a Nettuno team.”

“Of course not, but ... I don’t think we would be very interested. Thank you, but no,” he said, smiling.

“But, next year, this book will be on the shelves of every bookstore in North America!” I cried, overstating the future of a work that, in fact, had yet to be written. “And then, everyone in the sports world will know about the Peones!” I confirmed, losing all sense of reason.

“Well, here’s a question,” he said.

I thought I’d succeeded in convincing him.

“Why the Peones?”

I was about to deliver my thesis when he interrupted me, shaking his head: “Because really, you could write about another team.”

I had a perfectly good reason to write about Nettuno and their beloved and bedraggled Peones. The prospect of eating fresh shrimp and bream spooned from the sea notwithstanding – to say nothing of the world’s finest wines available at the local corner store for less than a pack of breath mints – Nettuno occupies a charmed position on the international sporting map. The game unofficially took root there in 1944, just after World War Two’s Allied forces hit the beach as part of Operation Shingle, Nettuno – and its sister city, Anzio – sitting square on the pathway to Rome, which the soldiers had hoped to wrest from the Germans’ grasp. After encamping on the beach and in the surrounding countryside, the erstwhile American soldiers found the time to play a little ball, at least when they weren’t being assaulted by V1 bombers and marauding Messerschmitts. Still, there’s nothing better to take your mind off the inevitable blitzkrieg than a game of pepper, so, famously, Kip and Mouse and Sarge would break out the bats and scrub ’er

up a little, sometimes right there in the trenches. This practice, history tells us, occurred all around the world, resulting in baseball's growth throughout Asia and other parts of Europe, but it took particular hold in Nettuno, where, as early as the mid-1950s, youngsters were given baseball gloves and bats upon taking their first communion, a tradition that continues today.

No one I talked to could explain why the game captured the hearts of this small Mediterranean port, other than to suggest that baseball represented hope and rebirth amid so much rubble and death. After the war, hundreds of Americans remained in Nettuno to build one of the largest and most beautiful war cemeteries in all of Italy, and spent endless evenings playing cobblestone street-ball, a sporting spectacle that allowed the Nettunese to forget, if for a moment, the ravages of their medieval city, ripped to shreds from the fighting.

After being taught how to play the game by a pair of career military men – Lieutenant Colonel Charles Butte and Sgt. Horace McGarrity – Nettuno eventually formed two local teams, and when Prince Steno Borghese allowed his grounds to be used to build a baseball field, no one could have imagined that, in 2003, there would be six ballparks in the area – one more than the number of churches – and countless adult and kids' teams, the best of whom, the Nettuno Indians, would win seventeen Italian baseball titles and supply the Italian *squadra nazionale* with the very heart of its players.

Even Joe DiMaggio hit here, in 1957, driving in by Jeep from Rome upon hearing that baseball was so close at hand. DiMaggio showed up during a game between Roma and Nettuno. On the mound stood Carlos Tagliaboschi, the moustachioed local ace who was famous for taking his boat out at dawn on the days of important games, until fans burnt it to a crisp so that he might rest properly before a match against their provincial rivals.

DiMaggio, playing to a thrilled crowd spilling over the chicken-wire fences of the old park, stepped to the plate to face Tagliaboschi in the same suit of clothes that he'd worn to the luncheon where someone had whispered in his ear about Nettuno. The small, rakish Nettunese pitcher settled into his windup, his heart beating like a timpani, and offered DiMaggio his most biting fastball. With his long, majestic swing, DiMaggio reached for the ball and missed. The crowd paused for a moment's respect, then exploded wildly, incredulous that this five-foot son of a sailor had slipped a pitch past the world's greatest hitter. DiMaggio took off his jacket, folded it into a square, laid it at his side next to the plate, then rolled up his sleeves, telling Tagliaboschi, "More. Gimme some more." The tiny pitcher threw and DiMaggio made contact, sending the ball over the outfield wall, the neighbouring farmer's field, the sea cliffs, and the beach, until it bobbed like a puppet head in the surf. Seconds later the sea was filled with thrashing scamps trying to bring back this cherished piece of history. Which, of course, they did not.

DiMaggio hit home run after home run, astonishing the crowd and exhausting Tagliaboschi, who bequeathed the rubber to a few of his teammates, eager for the privilege of serving taters to the giant of the grass game. Finally, someone shouted, "If you keep hitting, we'll have no more balls!" DiMaggio graciously stepped out of the batter's box and disappeared into the ether.

The Peones are more like the players against whom DiMaggio had competed than any other modern Nettuno team. While the Indians of Serie A and the Lions of Serie A2 are stocked with a sizeable American and Latin contingent – locals grouched that many of these foreigners had, in fact, roadblocked the advancement of young local up-and-comers – the Peones of Serie B last year were wholeheartedly Italian, with the exception of their travelling Canadian journalist, whose name at least ended in a vowel.

I accompanied the team all summer, from the top of Italy to the bottom. Our first road trip was to Montefiascone, a country town settled between Lazio and Tuscany. As our bus rolled north across the Castelli-Romani, we passed through Campo di Carne, a small town that was nothing more than a dozen farmer's fields stitched together.

Paolo tapped the window with his knuckle: "This village, it was given its name after World War Two. It means field of ... how do you say?" he asked, tugging the skin on his arm.

"Skin?" I asked.

“No. Not quite.”

“Flesh?”

“Yes: Flesh. Field of flesh. Eight thousand soldiers were slaughtered here by the Germans.”

We rolled into Montefiascone and found the ballpark, a beautiful spot. The town sat perched above the field on the rim of a volcanic crater, its buildings rearing over the park on a grassy promontory. Looking at it from behind home plate, it seemed built to the edge, as if only the glue of history was holding it in place. In the centre of the town stood the *duomo* of Saint Margherita’s Cathedral, the third-largest *duomo* in all of Italy, which had been built to accommodate relics of St. Margherita. (A lesser saint, Lucia Fillippini, was buried there, too.) From *centro campo*, the *duomo* dominated the park’s backdrop like an enormous marble skull rising from the hill. I imagined that throwing the ball into such a view would be like flicking a pea into time’s chasm, a daunting sight for any ballplayer unable to blot it out. Personally, it was all I could look at as I walked around the outfield, which bookended the stadium’s opposing view in the form of thirty tall pines, giving way to a small forest just below the park.

Once the game got underway, the Peones’ bench was a bubbling fountain of voices. BaseballSpeak is generally known as “chatter” – a word that implies the relentless clucking of monosyllabic words and phrases – but, in Italy, the tone and tempo of an animated dugout is more like a Keith Moon drum fill: one hurried tom roll landing over another. While the North American tongue generally reigns in its vowels, Italians sound their o’s and a’s with a fanning of the throat and a widening of the mouth, causing words like *rubà* (steal) and *palla* (ball) to bounce out of the mouth. Chencho, unsurprisingly, was the leader of this lyrical parade, shouting “Buon’ occhio!” (“Good eye!”) and “Bella palla!” (“Good ball!”) with the ring of a man hollering down a well. Pietro, urging the Cobra, Nettuno’s starting pitcher, Sandro Spera, with “Buono, Sa!” and “Sa, tranquillo!” had a naturally deep tenor that resonated in the concrete dugout and boomed out to the field, while shortstop Skunk Bravo, second baseman Mario Mazza, and the team’s other small players tried to overcompensate for the relative size of their chest cavities by launching frightening *Guarda la palla*’s (“Watch the ball!”) and *Buono tiro*’s (“Nice throw!”), which, if you weren’t expecting them from such a modest package, would shake you out of your seat. Being third-generation Italian, I thought it only polite to join in – and really, it looked and sounded like so much fun. I also viewed the exercise as a way of both ingratiating myself with the boys and learning the Italian language. Together, the Peones and I rolled the r like a humming outboard motor, then skated long and smooth across the ahhhh!, which we managed to stretch like warm toffee. We must have looked great singing this word as a group, rising off the bench with our throats taut and bodies leaning forward like a team of ski jumpers, hollering our howl, as if suddenly assaulted by bees.

Even when we weren’t shouting, but merely speaking, we were a busy calliope of voices, Italian bouncing off fractured English, English pausing for the occasional moment of butchered Italian. After a while, I tried my hand at “FORZA, PEONES!” while the players attempted “ATTABOY, FABS!,” my heretofore most significant contribution to the Nettunese lexicon. Every now and then, whenever an error was committed or an M-Bird reached base, the sound of the dugout grew heavy with indigestive groans and huffs of outrage, but it was only a matter of seconds before the wheel spun again. And, as the Peones marched their way to what appeared to be certain victory in their first game before their Mediterranean Plimpton, I noticed only one player for whom such robust cheering appeared to be a bother – the old third baseman, Chicca – who said nothing all afternoon, choosing to sit alone at the far end of the bench, his dark sloe eyes trained suspiciously on the field.

Somewhere around the seventh inning, Banca Cattolica Montefiascone, frustrated by Cobra’s change of speeds, tried to get the better of the Peones by using other, far more insidious, means than heckling: They started cooking lunch. The kitchen was just to the right of the dugout – so was the dining room, where photos and trophies from the local team’s conquests hung on the walls and sat in a huge trophy case – and when I went to investigate the nature of the day’s repast,

I noticed a man with a shaggy Van Dyke in an apron moving an enormous wooden spoon around on a frying pan the size of a radial tire. I made a half-interested comment about the food – conscious of my role as touring baseball diplomat, this was not “I’ve seen better pasta *fagiole* chucked into a French dumpster,” as the Peones might have hoped – and was promptly invited into the kitchen.

So, with the blue and white safely in the lead, I chanced a trip into the enemy’s den, where the cook proudly lifted the lid off the pan to show me his great, bubbling creation: *spezzatino al cacciatore*. When I asked him what he’d used to make his sauce, three women who were helping prepare the meal reached for the cupboard doors, which they opened and explained, excitedly, “Rosemarino, salvia, sedano, carota, aglio” (rosemary, sage, celery, carrot, garlic). The room was hot with the delicious scent of the veal sweetening in its stew, and I was nearly taken by its intoxicating perfume before I pulled myself back, announcing to the kitchen that it would be best if I rejoined my team on the bench, lest they fear I’d slipped over to the other side. But before I could move through the door, a fellow with a scrabbled beard and Freddie Mercury teeth whose midriff was the shape and size of the St. Margherita *duomo*, gripped my arm, pulled me towards a small table set up in the corner of the kitchen, and without invitation, plugged a glass into my hand and slapped the tablecloth with his fist, bellowing three words (or rather, one word with three different punctuations): “Est! Est!! Est!!!,” the name of the wine for which Montefiascone is famous.

Karma policeman that I am, I wondered what it might have meant in the eyes of the baseball gods to sit down and indulge in the opposing team’s drink of choice while the club to whom I’d committed my summer was not twenty feet away, staring into the restless offensive cannon that was Montefiascone. I decided it wasn’t proper, but, once it was poured, I drank the damned thing anyway. All eyes in the kitchen were upon me, astonished and amused, as if I were attempting to set the swallowed-tadpole record. I drained the glass, sucked in some air, and the fellow refilled it. When I chanced a look through the window at the field, there was Chencho, leaning over the pane.

“Davide! EST! EST!! EST!!!” he said, giving me the thumbs-up before, no doubt, running back and telling Pietro that, right there in the opposing team’s den, the Canadian writer was getting hammered with the potentates of Tuscan baseball.

I left the kitchen with the parting words, “Adesso, io posso dire que ho bevuto il vero Est! Est!! Est!!!” (“Now I can say that I have drunk Est! Est!! Est!!!”), and was cheered by the chef and his crew. While wearing the shine of an early morning’s buzz, I strode gaily back into the Peones’ dugout – experiencing that sweet traveller’s moment of suddenly realizing where I was, and how great I felt being there – only to discover that the *bianco e azzurro* were now barely hanging onto a three-run lead. The happy creases fell from my face. Chencho’s eyes had dimmed. He sat near the end of the bench, biting a nail. Mario Mazza stared at the floor, rubbing his gammy leg. It was the bottom of the ninth inning and Nettuno was leading 12-9, having hacked up a five-run furball in my absence.

The scoreboard in the outfield was painted in Roman numerals. Underneath them, a little light flashed whenever a run was scored, and once I’d settled back into the dugout – the nervous quietude of the game’s outset having returned to the players – that light began blinking like a lascivious barfly. No sooner had I clapped my hands and shouted “C’mon! Forza, Peones!” in my adopted stadium slang, than Montefiascone’s lead-off hitter singled, was pushed to second by another, and, moments later, came wheeling home on a stand-up double. Montefiascone’s play changed suddenly, like a giant yawning and stretching awake.

Cobra, his small shoulders slumping as beads of sweat bubbled across his brow, was weakening under the late dawn of the M-Birds’ batting prowess. Cobra’s disciplined pitching style – which, to be effective, required a clever mix of change, fastball, and curve coupled with an acute sense of what to throw when, and where – was melting as quickly as candle wax. Where his command had kept Montefiascone off balance for most of the day, each pitch was now hucked in

self-doubt and fatigue. The Montefiascone batters, to their credit, had studied Cobra's sequences throughout the day, and were well-prepared for their final at-bats, having homed in on the ball's location like an animal echo-locating its prey.

With each run, the entire Peones' team – myself included – hung on Pietro's decision to make a pitching change. But since he only had five pitchers at his service, he was loath to burn Chencho – his fireman – should he be needed for game two, which would take place a half-hour after the completion of the first. So, instead of acting, he sat on his hands, only to watch one of Montefiascone's sluggers, a fellow named Zerbini, cut the Peones' lead by homering off Cobra to dead centre field.

With the flight of the ball, the Peones pushed their faces into their hands. At the beginning of the at-bat, it looked like Pietro's non-move might play itself out as genius under-management, for Cobra had slipped ahead of the slugger 0-2. But instead of busting him inside, he hung a ripe curve, which the Zerbini destroyed, one of five *fuoricampi* – home runs, literally out-of-the-fields – the locals would clobber that day. The ball was hit so far and high that it seemed to hang in the air forever, like a small plane trailing a salutary banner. Its exit gave Cobra a goadingly long time to think about what he'd done, and as Mario Simone, playing centre field, hid his face in his glove and knelt to the ground, you could feel the promise of the day squeezed out of the dugout like so much stale air.

Pietro, seated next to me, huffed through his nose, staring into a single spot on the floor. Chencho's command spiked the dugout silence – “PAOLO!” – as the backup catcher grabbed his glove and ran with the reliever down the left-field line, where they warmed up in haste behind third base. Cobra, looking into the dugout for the hook, hung his arms at his side, trying to make eye contact with his manager. Pietro, staring through the floor a moment more, raised his eyes and looked back. Realizing that Montefiascone were all over the pitcher like rhinestones on Elvis, he harrumphed the kind of disgusted harrumph that only a beleaguered hardball manager can manage, and rose to take his long walk to the mound.

Soon, the entire infield was crowded on the hill – sailors on the prow of a sinking ship.

Those of us in the dugout – The Natural, The Emperor, Julie, Christian, and Pito the Stricken – assumed that the coach, by leaving Cobra out there for a few extra seconds, was stalling for time until Chencho got loose. But they assumed wrong. Pietro looked over the next batter – a green ballplayer named Cuccari – played the scenario over in his mind, and, to everyone's surprise, decided against making a move. Cobra, his weary body goosed with renewed hope, straightened his shoulders and punched the ball into his mitt, giving his manager an “I can do it, Skip” nod. Pietro turned and headed off the field as the tiny hitter inched dervishly towards the plate.

Cuccari readied himself for Cobra's pitch. He leaned back on his heels and raised his front elbow, which he pointed straight at the pitcher, like a man hiding behind a cape. I walked over to Pietro and, casting off any kind of journalist-player protocol, warned the veteran baseballer, “Watch out for this little dickhead; he might just bunt.” To which he waved his hand in front of his face and replied, “He is no problem. This batter, he is nothing.”

You can probably guess what happened next. Like Zerbini, Cuccari had barely touched Cobra's first two offerings, quickly digging himself a hole, 0-2. But on his third look – this time, Cobra would try and waste one outside rather than hang a Zerbinian curve – the small infielder reached out and doinked the ball between first and second. His swing had all the force of a spatula hitting a raisin, but contact is contact; you put the ball in play and anything can happen. Fabio from Milan, tipping sideways like a chainsawed oak, just missed getting a glove on the ball, which skipped insolently across the red dirt and onto the waiting baize. Mario Simone kicked it around a little, and by the time the boys in the dugout had drawn their faces from under their forearms, goat boy was jumping up and down on top of third base, having put Montefiascone's winning run in scoring position. At this point, it didn't matter how loose Chencho was – or whether he might pitch again in the afternoon – because Pietro had no choice

but to use his reliever with the score tied. Cobra walked sullenly off the mound with, in the words of P. G. Wodehouse, “a slow and dragging step like a Volga boatman.” Once in the dugout, he sat and stared silently at his shoes. Of course, no one said a word. Instead, we collectively turned our attention to the field, where Chencho effectively induced an easy ground ball out, but, to the quickening beat of our sinking hearts, lost the next hitter. Game tied 12-12.

It looked like extra innings, but Montefiascone wasn’t done yet. The baserunner advanced on a loud out – a fly ball that nearly handcuffed Mario Mazza – and was in scoring position for another one of the Montefiascone bangers, a behemoth who, as Lefty Gomez might say, looked like he had muscles in his hair. He glowered out at the mound from under the plastic brim of his batting cap. Chencho glowered back. All of the reliever’s facial elasticity was gone, and he had the look of a feral cat. With his first few pitches, Chencho made the batter appear awkward, his clunk swing wrapping around him as he sliced the air.

Chencho did what he had to do: He made the batter put the ball on the ground. Bouncing across the diamond, it headed towards second base, where Skunk Bravo reached down to field it as if plucking a lily from a parkside pond. He rose out of his crouch and bounced on his shoe tops to throw the ball to first, only to discover that the ball wasn’t there. Instead, it sat in front of him like a tongue-wagging pup, and as he bent to collect it, the clock hand moved just enough to give the runner – however lumbering – a chance to beat out the throw. Rushing the play, Skunk missed Fabio’s waving leather target. The runner on second turned towards home and scored. 13-12 M-Birds.

Coming off the field, Big Emilio, the Peones’ catcher, wailed his catching armour against the dugout wall, and with that, all manner of gloves and hats exploded through the air, as if swept by a sudden gale. Chencho, a brimming volcano, swore repeatedly to himself, sustaining a crow’s cry of *porco* everything, proving that losing sucks in any language. With their game-winning grounder, the home team hotfooted out of the dugout and slapped each other in delight, their bodies like a gold and green train bouncing across the field. You could hear them from behind the door of the Peones’ clubhouse, where Pietro, after sullenly gathering his charges, stood in the middle of the room and, instead of painting the air an even deeper shade of blue, told his team, “Forget about this morning. It is over. *Finito*. Put the game away, don’t think about it. We still have another game to play. Okay? Okay?” He looked around the room for confirmation, but, of course, there was none. The damage had been done. Forty minutes later, the Peones took to the field, only to lose 16-9. Pompozzi, the young fireballer, lasted all of three innings. As I sat in the dugout watching the team flail away in their last at-bat, I noticed the logo of one of their sponsors, Consorzio Atena, printed in black on the back of their shirts. It was the silhouette of a crane hoisting a slab of concrete over a construction site. To me, the message was clear. There was still a lot of work to do.