

Chapter 7 NETTUNO vs. MONTEFIASCONE



The evening before Nettuno versus Montefiascone, Pietro gathered the team on the steps of the San Giacomo dugout and told them: “We are now one team, *una squadra*. Everyone plays for each other, okay? This year is different. Because why? Because many things, many reasons. One of those reasons is here,” he said, gesturing with his neck to the far end of the dugout, where I stood loitering with my notepad and tape deck. The team turned and looked at me. “This year, someone has come to write about you. Think about that when you’re in the field or at the plate. Give him a good story to tell.”

Pietro was using me to motivate the team. I had to concede that it was clever managing (as opposed to simply yelling “YOU’RE WORTHLESS AND WEAK!” over and over) and, upon first blush, I thought I knew what the team was thinking: “I guess we’re really gonna be in a book. Geez, better not hit .190 again this year.” But the suspicious look on a few of the players’ faces suggested that they didn’t quite understand why, precisely, this writer had chosen to document their season of third-division scrub ball in the first place. In fact, I’m not sure that my intentions were ever clearly explained, although I did catch Pietro mumbling something to them about “*il libro sportivo*,” and, I hoped, its validity as a serious literary form. Still, the concept of what a writer was -- and why one might choose the Peones as his subject -- was a largely unexplored area to many Nettunese, and Italian, youngsters (and oldsters, too). Even though neighbouring Rome had hosted every major writer of the last century, from Keats to Byron to Henry James -- in fact, the summer of 2003 saw a Roman literary event where the author J. T. Leroy read for 2, 000 people at the Coliseum -- Italian writers were generally separated into two groups, either tweedy academics or muckraking soccer journalists. Actually, most writers were lucky if it ever got that good. A recent poll of 3,000 Italians, 18 to 70 years of age, revealed that, in a lifetime, the average Italian made love for 600 days or 15 minutes per day, devoted twelve years to watching television, five months to reading newspapers and soccer magazines, four months to enjoying the religious films of Lou Grant, and a mere twelve weeks to absorbing the greater works of literature. A cousin of Janet’s, who professed a fondness for the craft, sighed that “Italy is a land of many writers but few readers,” while Nicoletta Barbarito, a representative at the Canadian embassy, told me that, by selling 3, 000 copies, Mordecai Richler’s *Barney’s Version* had been considered a remarkable success. Italian libraries are notoriously small and pitifully out of date, that is when you can find one (though not in Nettuno or Anzio). Many North Americans lament the reduced role that authors play in the greater pop culture universe, but the ItaloLit scene makes the Toronto book milieu look like Paris of the 20s. When the coach of a youth team from Verona -- in Nettuno competing in a junior tournament -- was informed of the nature of my project, he asked, “Are you planning to write about baseball, or is this just research for a historical romance?” I considered this an outrageous notion until I learned, from Silvano Casaldi, that, a few years before me, Billy Crystal had visited Nettuno in hopes of making a romantic film set against the backdrop of pre-war Italian ball. The idea was nixed, however, after Crystal discovered that baseball’s genesis came after the war, leaving the door wide open for yours truly to change the course of my tale, moving from a first-person account of a summer among the sportsmen of Italy to the tale of a wayward Canadian writer kidnapped by a Borghian princess and held captive in her Forbidden Castle of Love. I was

quite pleased with my idea until I foolishly revealed my plans to Janet, who learned of this potential change of course with Lorenzo slung across her forearm, and Cecilia standing beside her, gnawing on a door frame. Her pitchfork eyes suggested that I stick to the idea of writing about the Peones, and while I had a hard time reconciling the thought of coming all the way to Italy without at least spending a few hours in a Forbidden Castle of Love, I decided it was best to take my wife's advice.

Before we broke practice, Pietro stressed to his team: "We leave at 6 am tomorrow. Okay? No being late. The bus leaves at 6:15, not a minute later." So it was that, at 7 am the next morning, the coach threw his first little shitfit, right there at the side of the road outside the ballpark, as the 50 seater pulled up an hour later than scheduled. The driver, inching his six-wheeled behemoth forward, held out his hands, then brought them together in an arrow and drew them towards his chest, where he tipped them back and forth in mercy. Pietro called him a "Cazzone!" and proceeded to drag the team's luggage -- bats, helmets, spikes -- towards the bay. If the late start hadn't already sandpapered the manager's ass, three players had failed to show: Sandro Valentini, a heavy hitting outfielder who was one of those rare Italians -- red-haired and freckle-faced-- whom I nick-named The Red Tiger; Davide Calabro, another outfielder, who would later be cut for missing the game; and Ricky Viccaro, aka, Solid Gold, the team's regular *centro campo*. When I asked The Natural why Solid Gold was missing (he was, by far, the most talented of the absentees), he told me, "Last night, he was at the disco, probably, 'til 5 o' clock in the morning. He is always there, even on the nights before important games," he said, shaking his head. I asked what he made of this.

"Some players," he told me, "Don't try hard enough because they don't love the game. *Non passione*," he said, punching his heart as we boarded the bus.

I'd only ever gone on one team road trip before, with my hockey club, the Morningstars, where I was voted "Most Totally Wasted Dude" for my post-game achievements. During the trip, I became aware that everything about the process -- the vehicle you take to the game, the route to the field, the field itself, the clubhouse, the lighting, the sound, smell, and feel of the playing surface -- makes playing on the road a singular athletic experience. Playing at home, you can usually predict what your day is going to feel like -- it's one of the advantages of knowing a field, rink, or court; you're familiar with the patterns of the event so that you can perform your best within them -- but playing away is always new and unpredictable because you never know what you're going to get. It's a different walk in the woods every time. Add to that the nature of having to travel a great distance -- not to mention waking at an ungodly hour to get there -- to do something that's usually done down the street and the whole activity takes on a strange spin. In my case, it was stranger still, considering that, technically, this was a 5,000 mile road game. And as the bus rolled through Campo di Carne, a small town that was nothing more than a dozen farmer's fields stitched together, I knew I'd reached a new personal bench-mark in world sporting travel when Paolo told me, tapping 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. 8,000 soldiers were slaughtered here by the Germans."

North of Campo di Carne, farms spread out for as far as the eye could see. The land was of a graded depth, like dinner plates scattered one lip over the other in a jumble of small valleys. I realize that, having only just arrived in Italy, I shouldn't have felt liberated in this new setting, yet I drew a certain freedom of thought in the bus's low tempo and the land's rolling setting. We

passed across farmland for about an hour until, suddenly, the country changed, forests growing thicker and swallowing the sky. Soon, we were sloping down narrow roads engulfed in the overhang of enormous trees. Once inside the hills, we were smothered in vegetation, categorically riding across the geographic belt where Lazio gives way to Tuscany, its verdant provincial neighbour. Perhaps it had been the time I'd spent in such close proximity to the sea, but I was thrilled by the bounty and darkness of the country, a scene that, had I passed through it a few months ago in Canada, would have seemed commonplace. Every now and then, we cruised through an old rustic village buried in the lap of the forest, the bus swerving between ancient walls and rows of pale yellow houses splashed with light until we'd lost ourselves, once again, in the dark, teeming green. For most of the trip, my hands and face were pressed against the window glass, trying to fully absorb the wonder of the journey, while the team slumbered quietly at the rear of the bus, their legs stretched out, newspapers flipped over on their laps, ball caps shading their tired eyes.

Many of the villages in greater Lazio were rich with lore (much of it about food and drink), and Montefiascone was no exception. The best, and most famous story, of the region centered around the town's local wine, *Est! Est!! Est!!!*. The story is from 1110, when German Cardinal Johann Fugger sent his steward, Martin, to scout the procession of inns that lay in Johann's path as he made his way to Rome for the coronation of Emperor Henry V. His instructions to Martin were to write the word "*Est*" ("it is", in Latin) in chalk on the door of whatever *osteria* was found to serve wine suitable for the Cardinal's rather prodigious consumption. In the olden days, this kind of assignment was considered to be a pretty good gig -- even nowadays, you wouldn't complain-- so Marty, humble servant that he was, embraced his mission with great zeal. Which is to say, he didn't make it past a certain joint in Montefiascone, where he was found sprawled on the ground outside, drunker than Yeltsin at a stein hoist. Above him, on the door, he'd written: "*Est! Est!! Est!!!*" The Cardinal, rather than punish his bilious servant, bettered him, sampling the wine to its fullest breadth, not resting until he'd been poisoned by the very drink that had taken down his scout. The way of his passing became such an oft-told tale that the word of *Est! Est!! Est!!!* spread, making it one of Southern Italy's most popular wines. In fact, everyone I spoke to before heading to Montefiascone told me I was obliged to kill a bottle or two in the old Fugger's honour. I told them I would try. Maybe The Most Totally Wasted Dude would go two for two on road trips.

The team from Montefiascone, it turned out, had no name, though I was hoping against hope for the *Est! Est!! Est!!!*'s (as far as I knew, the Peones were the only team to be called anything other than where they were from). Still, the M-Birds (they had no nick-name? I'd give 'em one) held down first place in Serie B, despite their alyrical handle. Last year, they'd competed one level higher-- Serie A2 -- but had been relegated -- *retrocedere* -- after a poor run against the bigger, better clubs. I remember asking Pompozzi at the start of the season whom he considered the team to beat in Serie B, and as he thoughtfully pitched a ball in and out of his glove, his face tightened when he answered: "Montefiascone." Paolo had also told me: "Montefiascone have two very nice pitchers. And they have a very nice catcher. He is very nice, very good." Nice didn't sound too daunting, but I got the picture. At present, Montefiascone were running away with the division, having lost only once, to Sardinia. In a previous engagement with the Peones, the M-Birds had swept both ends of the double-header-- reports had them crushing the ball to all fields-- and as we exited the main road and swung into the town of the division leader, I felt a little guilty that our trip had felt to me like a Sunday sojourn through the forest, when it might well have been a ride to a place where RBIs went to die.

When we rolled into Montefiascone and found the ballpark, I saw that it was 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 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 the remains of St. Margherita (a lesser saint, Lucia Fillippini, was buried there, too), and had given Montefiascone its name: “great flask mountain.” 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 have been 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.

A few days before the game, Pietro had lamented his starting pitching-- actually, his pitching in general -- after I’d asked him if he’d chosen his arms for the games against Montefiascone. Before speaking, Pietro shook his head for a second -- Pietro shook his head a lot when discussing his team -- then bemoaned the skeletal nature of his staff, which comprised Pompozzi the kid fireballer, Fabio From Milan, Pito the Stricken, Chencho, Solid Gold (who was good for only a handful of innings a year) and the veteran pitcher, Cobra Spera.

Allesandro Sandro Cobretti Spera – Cobra -- was the crafty elder of the Peones’ pitching staff. I suppose Chencho possessed a certain craftiness, too, but Cobra seemed craftier by nature of his character, which was stoic and resolute, if prone to moments of face-melting glee, usually provoked by Chencho. It was actually Chencho who’d given Cobra his name, an allusion to the fact that Cobra had, apparently quite heroically, got his wife pregnant. Chencho was forever explaining the name to me, as if I didn’t get it. “*Angallaaato...*” he’d say, dragging out the second last vowel and winking like a man about to suffer heart failure. To stress upon Chencho that I understood, fully, the implication of Cobra’s name (“Ha Fatto Sex”, the pitcher had written in my book, just to be sure), I rode the pitcher during practice, calling him “*Piccolla Cobra*” and flicking my thumb in the front of my pants where my hoolie would have been. But, after the taunt, I felt like I’d cast a stone at someone I barely knew.

Cobra was a small man. He was all shoulder and breastbone. Whenever he’d suck in a deep breath-- which he did before each batter -- his entire chest would heave, lifting the balls of his feet off the ground. Unlike taller pitchers, the mound never seemed to elevate his stature -- he probably hadn’t loomed over a batter in his life -- and because of his small frame, one wondered how he’d ever deliver the ball over the plate with authority.

A wry veteran of local ball, Cobra was someone against whom the element of surprise did not exist. His eyes suggested that he’d seen it all. On the field, he wore a look of great concentration, as if mentally ordering a messy room strewn with clothes and toys (as opposed to physically ordering a room strewn with toys, which yours truly was required to do at four hour intervals every day). Even when fly balls skied over his head, or home runs exposed his middling fastball, his face stiffened like contact cement. Very few incidents made him react as if he’d been mortally hurt.

In his own way, Cobra was authoritative, cunning and cool. The Italians had a term for how he pitched – *spregiudeto* -- which meant gaining success with whatever means were at your disposal. The Peones leaned on him for quiet leadership because, unlike the rest of the flakes and misfits and reclamation jobs, Cobra was steadfast in his work, not to mention good. And clever. Occasionally, he’d shake out his arm while facing the batter from the mound, rippling it at his side as if it were a limp, water-logged towel. This attitude of weariness was merely a ruse to draw the batter into a false sense of empowerment. In this way, Cobra gave the batter very little with which to judge him. He rarely ever got upset with his fielders (in this way, he was completely unlike Chencho) and, in the dugout, he showed about as much emotion as a batting donut. He mixed his four pitches -- curve, fastball, sinker, slider -- like a chemist quietly preparing a poultice, molding the game into a flat mass, spiked with as few corruptions as possible.

When Cobra came to the bench after an inning -- any inning -- you’d extend your hand to commend him, but he’d let his fingers fall through it, as if storing his energy until the beginning of the next inning. On the bench, he wore a perpetual look of concern, like he was about to receive the results of a test in which he feared he’d done badly. But then he’d walk out to the

mound -- almost a defeated figure, head lowered, arms drooping his side -- trying to draw the other team into believing that they might end his career with one swing. This gave him all the advantage he needed.

Upon arriving at the park, the players immediately hit the dressing room, aware that the lateness of our departure had stolen from their usual preparation time. Within an instant, the room was filled with the snapping of waistbands and the clapping of spikes and the slithering of arms into sleeves as the team climbed into their uniforms. Once tucked into their spit-clean *divisi*, the Peones transformed into ballplayers. I was thrilled to find that they wore blue and white, the colours of my team of teams, the Blue Jays, and their winter sisters, the Maple Leafs, to say nothing of the Brooklyn Dodgers, baseball's most mythic club -- if mythic for having lost pennants rather than won them. This aura of Dodgerdom was further invoked by the Peones' choice of chewing gum, BROOKLYN, which was the most popular brand in Italy, featuring a graphic of the Brooklyn Bridge on the wrapper.

One of the reasons the Peones looked like actual ball players was because, for the first time since I'd met them, they were all wearing their *cappeli*, which they hadn't once brandished during practice. After finally getting a look at the cap, I understood why. The icon that sat above the bill, which a friend of The Emperor's had drawn on a napkin, was supposed to be a smiling, leather-skinned Mexican peering out from under his sombrero. But instead, it reminded me of a turd being squashed by a giant foot.

Really, it wasn't nice at all.

Still, these hats and uniforms seemed to affect the way the ballplayers moved (part of this might have had something to do with the snugness of their polyester trousers), carrying themselves as if they were a suddenly proper crew of athletes, which, by association, made me feel a little more like the real deal, too. With an actual competing team to write about, I felt like my job was finally in play, inspiring me to do what any serious sportswriter would do, which was to find a seat in the shade of the dugout, pull my hat across my face, and grab twenty quick ones while the fellows ran their wind sprints.

I was eventually drawn back into the waking world when Pietro, his cleats scraping the concrete floor, walked over to Cobra and told him that he would start the first game (Pompo would go second). Upon getting the news, the veteran moved to the end of the bench and sat by himself -- in my first moment of baseball journalism, I wrote about how he'd walked to the end of the bench and sat by himself-- applying gobs of Aulin liniment to his right arm and shoulder and trying to steady his nerves (that is, when the Canadian writer wasn't hovering over him, writing about how he'd applied gobs of Aulin liniment to his right arm and shoulder and tried to steady his nerves).

Pietro sat on the ledge of the dugout and dictated the starting line-up to the Emperor in a low, furtive rumble: "Cancelli, Simone, Mazza..." The Emperor, as part of his executive capacity, ran a carbon of the line-up to the official FIBS scorer sitting under an umbrella behind home plate, his official team binder tucked under his arm like a nerd mulling chess club scores, as modest a task as had ever been executed by any Italian Emperor of anything.

Once Pietro had set the roster, he cupped his hands to his mouth and bellowed "OWWW!" to the players warming-up on the field. With that, they hustled back into the dressing room, where they sat underneath their hooked trousers and shirts and waited for their manager to speak. Once everyone was seated, I found a place at the edge of the bench near the door, trying to roll up like a carpet beetle and not be noticed. Pietro moved into the middle of the room and affixed his baseball face, dimming his eyes, squaring his jaw, and tightening his shoulders as if he were a cellar door locking in anticipation of a great storm. The looseness of his gait seized as he walked about the room, his form only slightly belied by the merry sound of his spikes, which tapped like hooves across the cool clubhouse tiles.

"Alora," he said, standing in the middle of the room, his low, sonorous voice rumbling like the roll of a tympani drum. "Touch chest: bunt," he told them, moving his hands up and down the

front of his shirt as if smoothening a tie. "Touch arm," he continued, looking around at his players, "Is *batticore*," to which he brushed his hands over his arms like a man sweeping the crumbs from the sleeves of a dinner jacket. "And here," he concluded, "Is for steal. Touch belt: steal," he said, ordering his belt buckle so that it weighed evenly in the centre of his trousers. "Eh, and this, this is take a pitch," he remembered, pinching two fingers to his cap as if evening its brim. "Okay: repeat. Christian. This?" he asked the seventeen year old second baseman, for whom he pretended to brush the soot from his sleeves. Christian answered correctly, but, after approaching the Emperor while patting the hair on his chest, it was clear from his silence that the team captain didn't know a brim-broadening from a belt-hiking. "Owww!" said Pietro, his eyes flaring. "You no bunt today?" he asked, a menacing smile squeezed across his face. The Emperor sat with his glove on his lap and stared at the ground. When he raised his head, Pietro was jockeying his belt-buckle as if sifting sand from his waist. "*Ruba*," said the Emperor, daring to touch his own waist. "*Ruba*, okay?" said Pietro, his voice punching the stillness of the room. The Emperor nodded and said, quietly: "Si." We lingered in silence for a spell until Pietro, his eyes passing across his players, finally sat down, at which point the Peones, realizing that there would be no pre-game speech, sprung from their seats and burst back into the dugout, readying themselves for the game. I stayed to make a few notes, and as Pietro walked past me, I grabbed his arm and asked, "Hey, coach. What's the sign for three run homer?" Absorbed in his pre-game moment, he emitted a sigh. "Dave, this is all they can remember," he said, parting his arms.

Just after ten o'clock, Montefiascone's starting pitcher climbed the mound. The players from Montefiascone stood about a foot taller and twenty pounds heavier than the boys from Nettuno. Stationed around the field, their bodies filled the diamond. They wore green and white uniforms of different shades, as if their clothes had been mixed and matched from a trunk of cast-off garments. This manner of discomposition implied a certain disregard for baseball's decorum, of which the Peones -- having been raised in the cradle of Italo-ball -- were so respectful. Many of the M-Birds looked as if they'd simply fallen out of bed, pulled on whatever doubleknits were at hand, and walked through a field of nettles to get to the park. The first player I noticed was a tiny goat of a man -- Cuccari -- who wore a long beard and a ratty afro, and who threw with a kind of jerking motion that lifted his whole body off the ground. I can't put my finger on it, but he looked very pagan (his voice may have sounded like a cackle, but I wasn't sure). The team seemed to follow an entirely different tradition-- perhaps one of old-time country ball played at spring festivals and All-Saints Days, with the odd goat sacrifice thrown in -- and their faces, born from the brush of Viterbo and Lake Bolsena, had none of the Peones' smooth, Romanesque élan. They walked to the plate hunched over, their feet shuffling through the dust. They were a composite of crook-fingered noses, taxi cab ears, slouching foreheads, and big asses. To quote Mickey Rivers, the M-Birds were so ugly that when you walked past them, your pants wrinkled. Just as the Peones evoked the visage of the noble Centurian, the faces and form of the players from Montefiascone suggested ancestors who'd cut roads in cold and darkness, hauling marble to build the city's magnificent duomo, which hung above us as a testament to the town's resilience. The Peones might have arrived representing the ancestral home of Italian baseball -- and, if that wasn't enough of a burden, the birthplace of Western civilization-- but the M-Birds' legacy lorded over the game, high on the hill. While the visitors were required to play well to flaunt their historical pedigree, all that Montefiascone had to do was stand at home plate, and point backwards, like Babe Ruth in reverse.

The M-Birds sent out a railbird in flood-pants to coach third, and put an obese kid in glasses at first. If you'd have judged the teams' chances on the look of their managers alone -- Pietro was the silver-haired Nettunese legend; Montefiascone's manager didn't even wear a team hat -- you would have assumed that the locals were dead in the water. But from the first pitch, the visitors were visibly nervous in the presence of such a hulking opponent, who'd already beaten them twice this season. Because of this tension, none of the light-heartedness of the Peones' practices was evident in the dugout at the beginning of the game. The bench was almost sullen, and I

wondered whether having an interloper in their midst had tightened them just so, conscious of wanting to leave the right impression should this Canadian writer turn out to be someone other than the freakish Italo-ball documentarian they'd suspected, and was, in fact, carefully writing down the colour of the players' shoelaces, number of times Chicca swung the bat in the on-deck circle and the style by which Christian punched his fist in his glove for a greater purpose other than his own bizarre journalistic fetish.

Despite the fact that Pietro had been required to field a scotch tape line-up, with Mario Simone and Mario Mazza playing the outfield and Fabio From Milan at first -- Solid Gold would've been in *centro campo*, and The Red Tiger probably would've DHed, if they hadn't been AWOL -- the boys in blue kept pace early, and actually took command of the game in the middle innings with an surprising 8 run 4th. The M-Bird pitchers ran into a case of the wilds, walking four Peones before Skunk and The Natural hit screaming, back-to-back triples. This action seemed to ignite the day, and with it, the players forgot what it was they were supposed to be uptight about, and became almost instantly loose.

From near silence, the Peones' bench bubbled into a fountain of voices. Baseball rabble 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 was more like a Keith Moon drum fill: one hurried tom roll landing over another. While the North American tongue generally reigns in our vowels, Italians sound their o's and a's with a fanning of the throat and a widening of the mouth, giving words like *ruba* and *palla* the boisterous weight of airships bouncing across the sky.

Chencho, unsurprisingly, was the leader of this lyrical parade, shouting "*Buon' occhio!*" ("Good eye!") and "*Bella palla!*" ("Good ball!") with the force of a man hollering down a well. Pietro, urging Cobra with "*Bouno Sa!*" and "*Sa: Tranquillo!*" had a naturally deep tenor that resonated with the concrete of the dugout and boomed out to the field, while Skunk and Mario Mazza and FFM and the other smaller players tried to overcompensate for the relative size of their chest cavities by launching frightening "*Guarda la palles!*" and "*Buono tiros!*" 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 was only polite to join in-- and really, it looked and sounded like so much fun. I also viewed the exercise as both a way of ingratiating myself to the boys and learning the Italian language from the dugout forth. At the outset, my favourite word to yell was "*ruba*," though it remained to be seen whether or not knowing how to shout "STEAL!" would prove to be practical in everyday Nettuno (of course, I hoped it would not). Together, the Peones and I rolled the first 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 thrust and bodies leaning forward like a team of ski jumpers, hollering our sudden, terrifying howl, as if suddenly assaulted by bees.

Even when we weren't shouting, but merely talking, we were a busy calliope of voices, Italian bouncing off fractured English, English pausing for the occasional moment of butchered Italian. After awhile, I tried my hand at "FORZA PEONES!" while the players attempted "ATTA BOY, 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 incredulity, 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 disinclined to cheer -- 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, the Banco Catholica M-Birds, frustrated by Cobra's change of speeds, tried to get the better of the Peones by using other, far more insidious, means: 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 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 beard in an apron moving an enormous wooden spoon around on a frying pan the size of a radial tire. I made some 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 *bianco e azzuro* 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 alla cacciatora*. When I asked him what he'd used to make his *sugo*, three women who were helping prepare the meal reached for the cupboard doors, which they opened and explained, excitedly, "*Rusamaria, salvia, sedano, carrota, alio.*" 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 to rejoin 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, Freddie Mercury teeth and a midriff 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!!!*"

Kharmia 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 less than 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 looked 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 disappearing from view, replaced by the Most Totally Wasted Dude, who was preparing his unruly comeback.

But it never got that far. I left the kitchen with the parting words, "*Adesso, io posso dire que oh bevuto 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 traveler's moment of suddenly realizing where I was, and how great I felt being there-- only to discover that the blue and white were now barely hanging on to a three-run lead. The happy creases fell from my face. Chencho's eyes had dimmed as 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 were 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 in the dugout -- the nervous quietude of the game's beginnings 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 the M-Birds lead-off hitter singled -- *il singolo* -- was pushed to second by another, and, moments later, came wheeling home on a stand up double by the host side, whose sudden change in play gave the appearance of a giant yawning and stretching awake.

Cobra, his small shoulders slumping as beads of sweat bubbled across his brow, was weakening with the late dawn of the M-Birds' bats. 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, where-- was melting as quickly as candle wax. Where his command had kept the M-Birds 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-bat, having honed 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 loathe to burn Chencho -- his fireman -- should he be needed for game two, which would take place one half hour after the completion of the first. So, instead of acting, he sat on his hands, only to watch one of the M-Bird's barrel-assed sluggers, Zerbini, cut the Peones' lead by homering off Cobra to dead center 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 green giant destroyed, one of five *fuoricampos* the M-Birds would clobber on the 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 centerfield, hid his face in his glove and knelt on the ground, you could feel the promise of the day quickly leave the dugout like so much stale, escaping air.

Pietro, seated next to me, huffed through his nose, and stared 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, after a moment staring through the floor, raised his eyes and looked back. Realizing that the M-Birds were all over Cobra 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 like 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, looking over the next batter -- the naifish 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," nodding of the head. 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 the M-Birds' 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 turned our attention to the field, where Chencho induced an easy groundball out, but, to the quickening beat of our sinking hearts, lost the next hitter.

Game tied 12-12.

It looked like extra innings, but the M-Birds weren't done yet. The baserunner advanced on a loud out -- a fly ball that nearly handcuffed Mario Mazza in CF -- and was in scoring position for another one of the Montefiascone bangers, a behemoth who, echoing the words of Lefty Gomez, 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 M-Bird appear awkward, his clunk swing wrapping around him as he sliced the air.

Chencho did what he had to do: he made the batter to put the ball on the ground. Bouncing across the diamond, it headed towards second base, where Skunk 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 clockhand 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 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 M-Birds 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 floor 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 one of their sponsors' logos-- SCORZIO 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 sight. To me, the message was clear:

There was still a lot of work to do.