

The Devil Advocates:

DR. SETA C. HAWKINS brings RELIEF FROM SHODDY THINKING

DAMN IT! DEMOTED TO THE BULLPEN!
AND THEY ALL SMOKE AND CHEW OUT HERE?
COULD BE WORSE, COULD BE NEWARK. WANT SOME RANCH-FLAVOR SULFUR CHIPS?



A likeable fellow, Larry Bearnarth looked like a tall, handsome relative of actor Colm Meaney. I do not have handy my copy of *Lives of the Saints* (autographed by some cardinal or another), but it is abundantly clear that Larry successfully prayed to whoever is the patron saint of Making the Most of Absolutely Impossible Situations (even though he did not begin life as a reliever). His first job was as a middle reliever for the 1962-1966 New York Mets, enough time to get him his pension, as he later reminded me. But before you scoff, realize that Larry Bearnarth is the only pitcher of any kind to post a winning career record while working for the Mets in their first five seasons. That may even be one leg toward canonization.

Larry had the misfortune of reaching the crucial middle years of his career at about the time the Mets had a starting rotation of Seaver, Koosman, Gentry, and some kid named Nolan Ryan (what ever happened to him?). Prudently, The Bear realized that he could add to his pension by starting a coaching career early. After he hit some sort of turf ceiling in the Mets' system, he was with the Brewers' organization for a while, then surfaced as pitching coach of the Montreal Expos, with quite a bit to work with . . . but some of you already see where this is going. His boss, the manager, was none other than Dick (I Don't Really Know a Damn Thing Except How to Take All the Credit) Williams, and it was great to see Larry on tv, mostly out on the mound when his charges hadn't done what he told them, delivering the message that the next man to come out here will be a whole lot less pleasant than me, and I'm a SOB, but a good-natured one. What wasn't so great was listening to broadcasters and sports-writers drone on about what a brilliant pitching strategist Dick Williams was, while I yelled: "you saps! Williams has no room left in his head for anything after they squeeze his ego in! It's Bearnarth, you clotpolls!" It was also pretty rotten to be in Plattsburgh, New York on business, turn on the motel tv, and hear, in your choice of two languages, that your classmate had been fired. The patron saint mentioned earlier truly came through (and gave Bearnarth the second leg on canonization) recently when Larry's latest MLB job was to be pitching coach for the first three years of the Colorado Rockies' existence. But then I thought, this is a job where you can do nothing wrong! The combined expectations of expansion and what Bill James so euphemistically calls "park factors" meant that the season would be a success if any Rockies' pitcher had a complete game, an ERA under 6.34, or (gasp!) a shutout! Still, the jinx got him after three seasons. I was hoping he'd be named manager at Tampa Bay, but prayers can do only so much.

My finest day with the Bear came in the summer of 1969, when several highly improbable events happened: the Czech uprising, a pennant for Larry's parent club, and me "working" on a cheap, easy Ph.D. at Boring Green State University. One day when Tidewater was in town, Larry put me on the pass list for a doubleheader, and since I had some business in Toledo that weekend, it was easy to get over to the Mud Hens' field and spend a day in the visitors' bullpen. Such is the alertness of minor league management that no one thought it odd that someone wearing a tie and carrying a briefcase spent all day in the bullpen.

One would imagine that I might remember the name of at least one of the guys that Larry was in charge of, but I don't, even though they were there all day too, as the Mets' farm system was deep in starting talent back then, and I don't remember a need, given the Mud Hens' lack of hitting, for anyone even to stir and warm up. They weren't asleep, though, for they wanted to hear all the stories about college life at St. John's, mainly to see if Larry had embellished anything. Then were much more partial to anecdotes about coeds, drinking, and pranks involving small explosives than they were to the witty things that valetictorian Fred Randal said in metaphysics class (actually, that's a lie: Fred was brilliant but not witty, and so he became an English prof at UC-San Diego).

Larry was damned kind to me, considering that I was such a pain back in college, and had an irrational grudge against his frat. He arranged for the Commodore Perry Hotel to give me a free room on the grounds that I was a scout for the San Diego Padres. Actually, I think the Padres got the bill. There was a Shriners' convention there, so if you've ever heard about a Padres' official tossing one of those stupid little cars out of a seventh-floor hall window in a Toledo hotel, now you know.

Larry had something important to take care of, so he gave me some team money so I could "go have a steak with Amos Otis and Duffy Dyer," and disappeared. I'll assume that he had to visit some dying kid in a hospital, or have a long phone chat with Mrs. Bearnarth in Florida. So he put me on the team bus to get from the ballpark to the hotel. I was sitting up front, and the manager, former Cubs' catcher Clyde McCullough (who in fourteen innings hadn't noticed an interloper in the bullpen), looking much the worse for wear and nine months' pregnant, paused in the stairwell of the bus, gestured in my direction with an open can of beer, and said, making eye contact to the back of the bus, "Who the Hell is this?" Amos Otis replied: "It's Bearnarth's friend from college [Amos erred: Larry had lots of friends, in several sororities]." Clyde finally looked in my direction, and still gesturing with the beer can, said, "Oh yeah, St. John's, real fine school." What did he know? He was only a catcher.

The Vincentian priests who ran St. John's University were a lot smarter than they at first seemed. Now, they weren't Jesuits or anything like that, but they didn't need to be, for all they had to do was give a rudimentary classical education to the sons and daughters of New York City and Long Island working-class commuters who weren't any brighter than their parents were when they went to class with the same priests. All we had to do was shut up and do whatever St. Thomas Aquinas said we should. But as Aquinas said, I have a couple of proofs here, in this case of the existence of intelligence among the Vincentian Fathers.

The first thing that the Vincentians did in the late Fifties was get the hell out of Brooklyn. They figured that the Dodgers must know something. So they bought themselves a golf course (I am not making this up) in the ritzier section of Jamaica, even now free of any real Jamaicans and their steel drums, and put up a campus. Since this was a former golf course, it lacked such things as a science building, field house, and library at first.

The second smart thing that the Vincentians did was to build the field house before the library. As they patiently explained to us, the field house will make enough money (our NBA farm team's home court had been Madison Square Garden, which charges rent; ironically, in later years, they made even more money by playing important games in a packed MSG) to build the library, but if we put up the library first, it won't make any money to build the field house. And they were correct. They also kept their promise to build the library next, which is more than your average Jesuit would have done.

They also let us have a baseball team, since it didn't cost much to put in a field where the 16th through 18th holes had been, and careful scavenging of the sand traps made an interesting infield and warning track. Since there were dozens of colleges in The City (yes, that is what we call ourselves: it is the source of Chicago's self-given name, Second City), many of them good, it didn't cost much to have a superb schedule. And with a seemingly endless supply of big, dumb, strong Irish and Italian Catholic boys, we were all set for catchers, outfielders, power-hitting first basemen, strong-armed fastball pitchers, and so on. Now and then we would go up to the Bronx with scholarships and rosaries and come back with middle infielders named José and Manuel. No wonder we got to the College World Series in 1960, where we had the bad luck to have two of our first three games against Arizona State and Rod Dedeaux's USC.

The less well-informed Minnesotans assume that the first St. John's alumnus of the modern era (there probably was someone named Kelly or Ryan who made it into a few September games for the Giants in the 1920s) was Frank Viola. As Hawkins so loves to say, well, you're wrong. Viola wasn't even the first pitcher from St. John's to reach the majors. In 1962, straight out of his career as a starter for the Redmen, Larry Bearnarth became the first of our guys to play MLB.