

From Chapter 9. Trick Questions:

The Guessing Game

Baseball was a game of millimeters. We spent much of our time trying to sneak softly by the Great Spirits of Baseball, avoiding gremlins, and dodging the stochastic deities haunting our daily lives. Many players were confused as to which supernatural power they were trying to appease or fool. Nearly every player stepped over the foul line when running on or off the field, for example. I doubt if any could give you a rational explanation for this. Perhaps some foul line troll, awakened by a careless misstep, would dog you through the inning, causing mischief and misery.

Sometimes the Ethereal Authorities punished players for talking out of turn. You could easily ruin a no-hitter for a teammate simply by saying something stupid, like, "Hey, Barry's got a no-hitter going, doesn't he?" Immediately, a strange rumbling noise would emanate from deep beneath Barry's feet on the mound. Everyone on the bench would be horror-stricken. Cats cackled, roosters howled at the moon. The batter would take a vicious cut at the next pitch and hit a slow dribbler down the third base line. The third baseman would charge the ball and trip on a wayward caterpillar. The no-hitter was gone, and you would be banished from Baseball forever.

A player could cause a condition merely by mentioning it. He might have a perfectly awful premonition. If he articulated it, the Supernaturals punished him by making it come true. "Man, I think I'm going to strikeout five times today – I can just feel it in my bones," was not a good thing to say to anyone. In those days, the Higher Powers didn't want to hear predictions made by one's skeletal system.

The search for the elusive competitive edge and the evasion of bad luck looked much the same. Players might dine on magical fare, such as sauerkraut, before each game, or they might wear the same sweatshirt until it rotted into tatterdemalion. They might become obsessed with the arrangement of things – the glove always placed pocket downward on the bench, or the tongues of shoes always folded over the laces. And one player held a crucifix against the barrel of his bat before each game - he was a .180 hitter.