

Chapter One of Nine Bucks a Pound, by James Bailey

Submitted for 2015 Baseball Book Festival

ONE

Delton Tanner lifted a white puka shell necklace to his lips and scratched out what remained of the back line of the left-handed batter's box with his cleats. He pointed his two-toned bat toward the pitcher, drew it back, cocked his elbow behind him, and waited. Locks of curly brown hair stuck out under the back of his helmet, scraping the collar of his jersey, which billowed loose over his frame as if he had borrowed it from an older brother. The first pitch came in high and outside, and he took it without moving. He stepped out, jangled his limbs, and lined up again, extending his bat head moundward before reeling it back and freezing. Another wide fastball put him up two balls and no strikes.

The lanky first baseman went through his ritual once more. The third offering was thigh high and straight. He took a short stride and whipped his bat through the zone. The ball rocketed toward right field, never climbing higher than a telephone wire. The right fielder gave chase, angling back toward the wall, but the ball eluded him, hopping once on the warning track before bounding over the fence. The umpire, who had followed the ball into the outfield, turned and lifted his hands above his head. He pointed to second base as Tanner coasted in with a ground-rule double.

Seated in the third row, just to the right of home plate, Ian Wicker jotted a note on his scorecard, "#14 Elizabethton sweet stroke." His eyes wandered to the spiral-bound notebook balanced on the knee two seats to his right. The fellow's pen was as still as the flag in left field. He'd written nothing since Wicker had last stolen a glimpse when the teams changed sides after the home half of the first.

Wicker cleared his throat. "That's a pretty nice swing."

The man dropped the nose of his radar gun into the cup holder in front of his seat and slid his mirrored Oakley sunglasses up on top of his head, revealing lashes so fair they were nearly lost against his ruddy skin. His golf shirt, emblazoned with a Cubs logo on the left breast, stretched tight over well-defined shoulders and pecs. "He's got a quick stroke. But that's about as far as I've seen him hit one, even in BP?"

Wicker was batting .500 with scouts on the week. He'd lucked into one in Greensboro who liked to chat, an older gentleman straight out of central casting, with a straw hat shading his freckled forehead and a cigar poking up out of the breast pocket of his shirt. Two nights later he got the glare from a square-jawed Phillies scout who covered the readout on his radar gun when he noticed Wicker peeking. "I'm not allowed to talk, and even if I were I wouldn't waste two words on any agent," he said when Wicker introduced himself.

Tonight's visit to Martinsville marked his first foray into Virginia after seven days in the Carolinas. He'd logged 700 miles on his rented Sebring since landing in Raleigh-Durham and hadn't yet signed a single player. But he was laying groundwork. At least that's what he told his old man.

Back in Los Angeles there was a cubicle waiting for him in his father's law firm. An ergonomic chair of his own where he could study for the bar exam in between the research assignments Wicker Senior tossed his way to build his foundation. The Teflon tongue that had carried him through law school had earned him a reprieve—from the cube and the bar. Wicker preyed on his father's own regrets, the '60s ideals that had faded into a lucrative but numbing career in transactional law, buying himself a summer to chase a dream of starting his own baseball player agency.

That glibness, in conjunction with a glossy business card, had brokered his entry into four minor league parks thus far, in Greensboro, Hickory, Columbia, and Asheville. The ferret-faced ticket agent in Winston-Salem seemed to actually resent him for trying, drawing his eyes into tight slits and sneering as he lectured him, "California lawyers gotta pay the same as anyone else 'round these parts, an' y'all are lucky we don't charge ya double." The rejections didn't dissuade him from trying again in the next town.

Certainly the five-dollar ticket here in Martinsville was little obstacle considering the walking-around money his father had bestowed upon him when he graduated. What made him do it was the high of talking his way into something for free. Something that anyone else 'round these parts would have to pay for. When the high-school girl working the pass gate just smiled and waved him in, he almost felt cheated. She didn't even seem to know what an agent was. Or care. Maybe she let everyone in free. Then again, it might have been his dimples or his warm hazel eyes or the waves of his dark, scrupulously mussed hair.

The park hinted at no connection, howsoever remote, to the major leagues. It couldn't even pretend to belong among its brethren in the higher levels of the minors, where Wicker had seen exploding scoreboards, roller-skating mascots, and disco-dancing hotdog vendors. Its meager allotment of aluminum seats was complemented down each line by lawn chairs, stored in the beds of pickup trucks by the few dozen diehards that adopted the fresh-faced boys in white each summer. Martinsville was the bottom rung on the ladder for the Houston Astros. Its roster featured a mix of high-school and college kids with a sprinkling of Dominicans, most spending their first summer away from home. The Twins, visiting from Elizabethton, Tenn., three and a half hours to the west, were built on largely the same formula. This, as Wicker was learning, was his best chance at finding clients. Many of these hopefuls were yet unrepresented. There were gems here to be mined.

Nearly a head taller than the Martinsville shortstop positioned in the long ribbon of shadow emanating from his size fifteen cleats, Tanner clapped his hands and took his lead off second base. The roster in the program listed him at six-foot-four and 190 pounds. If anything, that weight looked inflated.

"Guy's a toothpick," Wicker offered, lacking anything more insightful but desperate to stoke the conversation far enough he could add a name to his contact list.

"That's it right there," the Cubs scout replied. "That boy needs to go on the steak-and-shake diet. He doesn't run well enough for the outfield, but he lacks the pop to profile at first."

"He could beef up in time."

"He could. But I wouldn't bank on it. He's a senior sign, must be twenty-two already. Late pick from out west somewhere, Oregon or Washington. He's a nice fundamental ballplayer with quick reactions on defense, but I see him topping out at Double-A. Organizational guy."

"Really?"

"Eh, I could be wrong. Who knows? This ain't an exact science. I hope I am. He works his ass off. First guy here on either team this afternoon. Spent an hour hitting off the tee."

Twice more Tanner hit the ball hard, driving a deep fly that was tracked down by the center fielder in the fourth and lining a sharp single to right in the eighth. Maybe Wicker wasn't a real scout, but he saw something in the Twins first baseman he liked.

When the game ended he wandered down the right-field line toward the locker rooms. Drawing his frame to its full height he leaned against the chain-link fence and casually surveyed the collective parents, girlfriends, and hangers-on milling outside the Astros clubhouse. Soon players began to emerge in groups of two or three from each building, the Martinsville players exchanging handshakes or hugs with the locals before heading to their cars in the parking lot, the Elizabethton players quietly filing onto the bus idling outside the gate.

Tanner was among the last to appear, walking out of the visitors' clubhouse with another player Wicker didn't recognize as having participated in the game.

"Delton?" he asked, stepping forward as they approached.

"Yeah," Tanner replied, glancing cautiously at Wicker's extended hand. He was nearly half a foot taller than Wicker, with correspondingly long arms and fingers. His hair, dangerously close to mullet-length in back, was short and choppy up top, as if he had cut it himself. His brown eyes were set just a skosh too far apart and his left eyelid fluttered nervously as he sized Wicker up.

"Nice game today. You really put some sizzle into that ball."

"Thanks."

"Ian Wicker. I represent players in several of the leagues around here. Are you working with anyone?"

“Del Tanner.” He finally took Wicker’s hand, which had been held out so awkwardly long it was on the verge of being pulled back. “How do you mean am I working with someone?”

“He means, do you got an agent, dipshit,” Tanner’s teammate cut in.

“Oh.”

“Ryan Edsell,” the second player said, shaking Wicker’s hand when Tanner released it. The Rutgers University media guide had listed him at an even six-feet, generous by nearly two inches even with his blond hair spiked into a rooster comb. His tight knit shirt, perhaps a size too small, showed his muscle to more advantage than Tanner’s, but it was mere window dressing, tone and definition without significant strength beneath the surface. “You have to forgive him. Tandy does his best work at the plate. We don’t count on him for a lot of brainial activity off the field.”

“It’s my fault,” Wicker said. “I wasn’t really clear on what I was asking.”

“Well, I got it, leastwise. And I already got a guy, thanks for asking.”

“Who are you working with?” Wicker asked. “Do you like him?”

“Not really, but I’m stuck, ’cause he’s my cousin and I ain’t starting World War Three until there’s some actual money involved, anyway. But I sure as hell wouldn’t recommend him to anyone else.”

The Twins trainer, a walking foothill whose neck was nearly as big around as Wicker’s waist, lumbered by shouldering an oversized duffel and carrying a white clipboard. “Two minutes, meatheads,” he grunted. “Skip’s on his way.”

“We gotta go,” Edsell said. “Bus is leaving.”

“It was nice to meet you guys.” Wicker reached into his pocket for his leather business-card case and slid the top one off the stack with his thumb. “I’ll be in town another day. Give me a call. Maybe we can grab some lunch tomorrow.”

Tanner nodded as he read the embossed print.

“He’ll ring you in the morning,” Edsell said. “I’m optimistic we’ll be up for some Applebees.”

“Steak and shake,” Wicker thought as the players climbed aboard the bus. “Twenty or thirty pounds and I got myself a find.”