

Trolley Dodgers

by Jeff Stanger



A Novel
iBook Edition

© Jeff Stanger 2005

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, including photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission from the author, except for the inclusion of brief quotations in critical articles or reviews.

Lyrics to the songs Texas Ride Songs, Good Things, and You Don't Get Much reprinted by permission of the BoDeans.

Original Print Cover Designer: Robert Aulicino

Original Print Interior Design: Mary Jo Zazueta

Ebook Designer: Justin Bessler

ISBN-13: 978-0979357435

ISBN-10: 0979357438

Created in the United States of America

Published by Blue Trolley Press, Indianapolis, IN



TROLLEY DODGERS HALL OF FAME

All Star Editing Team

Thanks to my editing team: Bonnie Hearn Hill (content), C.E. Gatchalian, Terry Sowka and Jeanette Baker (copy), and Lorrie Algate (color and shape).

Scouting and Front Office Support

Many people contributed with research, advice, and encouragement. I greatly appreciate the contributions made by: Darryl Neher, Matt Algate, Brian Groce, Linda Toupin, Mary Kay, Inc., Mark Shumacher, the Indianapolis Indians, BoDeans, Milt Thompson, Mike Lennox and Angie Kohlmeier.

Season Ticket Holders

Special thanks to my family and friends who kept this project alive.

Prologue

I remember the day I saw the shooting stars. Darryl and I were twelve. We were playing catch at Roxy's house. I remember throwing the ball over Darryl's head and watching it roll into the bushes. The sun was going down behind the trees that lined the back of Roxy's lot. We walked towards the golden sky to look for the ball. After a few minutes of looking, we found the baseball and turned our backs to the sunset to continue playing catch. That's when we saw them.

"Make a wish," Darryl said. Both of us closed our eyes, and made twelve-year-old wishes.

"What did you wish for?" I asked.

"To be a baseball player."

"Me too."

"Look, there's another one!" Darryl shouted. "Make another wish."

I closed my eyes and wished as hard as I could.

"Now what did you wish for?"

"I wished we had a baseball team in Bloomington," I said.

Darryl looked puzzled at first, as if the idea had never crossed his mind. Then his face lit up. "Wow. I wish I would have thought of that. Well, I'm sure it will come true. It has to."

Darryl was just as sure it would happen as he was that baseball bats were made of wood. Darryl was sure. I said, "I don't know."

One

I Was Kidding

“When I was a small boy in Kansas, a friend of mine and I went fishing . . . I told him I wanted to be a real Major League Baseball Player, a genuine professional like Honus Wagner. My friend said that he’d like to be President of the United States. Neither of us got our wish.”

~ Dwight D. Eisenhower

I spit coke all over the microphone. As it shot through my nose, I slammed my cup down, gasped for breath and feebly attempted to compose myself. Jesse held up his left arm, twisting it frantically towards Darryl, the signal to take a commercial break. To me, he made a neck-slashing gesture using his right hand. I quickly tried to wipe the fizzling brown liquid off the wooden console. All the while, I was still snorting, choking, and coughing.

“Hold that thought, caller, and we’ll answer your question after the commercial break. Stay tuned for more of today’s controversial topic: Bringing Major League Baseball to Bloomington, Indiana. Our in-studio guest is Bloomington Daily News reporter Andy Bennett. Kristy will update the news and weather after the break.”

Darryl took off his headset and started laughing. “What’s the matter? You know you’ve opened a can of worms now. These people are ready to do it.”

Jesse glared at both of us. Jesse may have been only an intern, but this was definitely his sound booth.

“Well, it doesn’t help that you’re encouraging these wackos,” I said. “And why do you keep calling it a ‘controversial effort’ to bring the Dodgers to Bloomington? There’s no effort underway, you tool. I just wrote an article. I was kidding.”

“You weren’t kidding,” Darryl shot back. “You’ve wanted this all your life. You’re just too much of a coward to admit it.”

Was Darryl right? The previous caller uttered the one sentence that I never expected to hear. I thought some people would call in and say the article made them laugh. I thought others would say that I wasted seventeen inches of newsprint on a pipe dream. I wasn’t prepared for someone to actually call in and say, “I want to invest. Where do I send the money?” That was the question that launched the carbonated shower onto the console.

Why was this caller ready to shell out his life savings? Well, just a week earlier, I was approaching my weekly deadline, and as always, I had no idea how I was going to fill my quota of newsprint for the Bloomington Daily News. When I was stumped, I would track down my good buddy Michael Turner. Michael was a chat machine who knew everything about sports. I need only ask one sports question, and three hours, six beers, and four debates later—usually Michael debating himself—I would have a story idea.

On this particular occasion, Michael was ranting and raving because the Los Angeles Dodgers were up for sale. Michael, being an East Coast transplant, was constantly lamenting the Dodgers' move from Brooklyn to Los Angeles in the fifties. He was already talking (to himself) about the Dodgers when I sat down at the bar. Like most Dodger fans, he couldn't bear the thought of his beloved team falling into the hands of some giant corporation. I took a pitcher off the bar, filled his glass with topic juice, and motioned for the waitress, Jenny, to bring me a glass.

Michael was an MIT graduate who had devised a computer ratings system for sports teams. His system was so successful that all the major sports networks paid him royalties. Despite his inherent genius and financial success, he always had a couple of days' worth of facial hair and a raggedy set of clothes. His salt and pepper hair hadn't been combed since the early nineties. On the bar was a faded bag that he carried everywhere he went. I remember having to carry a bag like that when I was in middle school.

He looked me in the eye and whispered, "I think we could do it. I know we could do it. Let me figure this out."

He squinted, tilted his head and started mumbling to himself. He mumbled between sips of beer for about ten minutes. I didn't disturb him. When Michael went off on one of these tangents, it was best to let him be. Most of his words were impossible to make out. Sometimes I could understand a phrase or two. "Twenty thousand dollars . . . all the adults . . . the commissioner would have to cave . . . sell shares . . ."

Then he spoke directly to me. As I look back now, I realize that a light should have been shining down on the two of us at the time. It was Moses coming down from the mountain, or Martin Luther King delivering the "I have a dream" speech, or Gilligan figuring out how to get off the island. The next sentence to come out of his mouth would change an entire town. "If everybody in this county age eighteen or older would borrow \$20,000, we could buy the Dodgers."

"Right." I paused, waiting for the punch line. "The Dodgers? The L.A. Dodgers?"

"Absolutely!"

"Jenny, how many pitchers has he had?"

"That's the first one," she called down from the end of the bar.

"Is this topic juice or liquid peyote? Michael's talking gib-berish!"

"I am not. We could do it. Jenny, how would you like to own a baseball team?"

“Would the players tip better than you two deadbeats?”

“Sure,” we said in unison.

“I’m in,” she replied.

“See how easy that was?” Michael said.

“You didn’t mention the money,” I added.

“What money?” Her enthusiasm halted abruptly.

“You’d need to come up with a rather large investment,” Michael said. “But the payoff could be enormous.”

“I’ll settle for a tip. No more topic juice.” She grabbed the pitcher and walked away laughing.

“OK, explain this whole thing to me. How are we going to do this?” I asked.

“We form a publicly owned company, sell shares, you know, a public offering, and use the money to buy the team. Like the Packers are owned by the people of Green Bay. The cost of the team is \$250 million. We get everyone in the county to borrow from their local bank and we’re set.”

“We don’t have a stadium,” I pointed out.

“We’ll build one. We’ll leave the team in L.A. while we build a stadium. Hey, you’re the one who’s always talking about bringing baseball to Bloomington. You should be behind this all the way.”

“That was minor league baseball.”

“This is the Dodgers!”

“OK, you’ve got me there.”

“Jenny, it wouldn’t have to be that much,” Michael yelled.

Jenny brought back the pitcher and we fortified our juice reserves. “It wouldn’t?” she asked.

“No, it wouldn’t,” I answered. I didn’t have that kind of money either. “We could have shares for small time investors, too.”

“I like the sound of that,” she said.

“Me, too,” I replied.

“It’s almost happy hour, which means the tipping customers are on their way,” she said. “You’ve got a deadline coming. You’re not seriously going to write about buying a baseball team are you?”

Was Jenny daring or warning me? I took it as a dare. Deep in my heart I wanted a baseball team in Bloomington. However, I always envisioned a minor league team with a small stadium. Michael was talking about the Dodgers—the L.A. Dodgers! Were we crazy?

We tossed some cash on the bar and headed outside. Michael said his usual goodbye, which is no goodbye at all. He just wandered off muttering to himself. He left me standing outside on Kirkwood Avenue with a head full of questions.

The next day, I wrote my column. I called the mayor and got a quote from him. I included diagrams of possible stadium locations. I even included a picture of Ebbets Field—where the Dodgers played in Brooklyn—with the mayor’s name superimposed on the front of the stadium. I think he really liked the ring of “Gomez Park.”

The story was completely tongue-in-cheek, and devoid of facts and research. I hoped it would get a few laughs and maybe get people to one day think about minor league baseball in Bloomington. Instead, a large and quite scary segment of the population thought I was serious and wrote letters to the newspaper. It seems there were plenty of crazy baseball fans in town who were braver than I. Darryl was right. I was too much of a coward to admit I was serious.

At any rate, I gave Darryl a lively topic for his afternoon radio show. WGCL is an AM station with an all-talk format. My friend, Darryl Robinson, hosted the afternoon show. Although he was in his thirties, he could easily pass for a grad student. Radio was a part-time gig for him. His real job was teaching speech communications at Indiana University. He looked the young professor part, sporting a shaved head and wearing glasses with round wire rims.

I had perfected the small-town reporter look: short blonde hair, average build, with a pencil usually tucked behind my right ear. A golf shirt and khakis were my summer uniform of choice.

Darryl and I had been friends since the second grade. That was when my parents had moved from Indianapolis to Bloomington. My father was born there and wanted me to grow up near my grandparents. Darryl and I had gone to Indiana University and took jobs locally when we graduated. He was the responsible one: married with two kids. I was the irresponsible one: single with a dead goldfish.

Jesse signaled to us that the commercial break was ending. In a separate booth, Kristy Parker finished reading the news and weather. Darryl thanked her and returned to the previous caller’s question. “We’re talking right now to Dan from Bloomington. Before the break, Dan said he would invest in a team if this was a serious effort. Dan, do you have any more to add?”

“Thanks for taking my call, Darryl. I just want to know, if this effort is for real, how can I get involved? It’s always been my dream to be the owner of a pro sports franchise.”

“Well, Dan, I’m going to let our in-studio guest answer that.”

What a goon. He knew I had no idea how to answer that question. “Dan, I think it’s premature to start sending in money. We would need to form a corporation, set up a board of directors, and do a lot of other things to convince Major League Baseball that we are a serious competitor for the Dodgers franchise.”

Darryl thanked him for his question and moved on to the next caller. All the while he was laughing at me. “We’re now talking to Ray on line two. What’s your question, Ray?”

“Well, Darryl, I just think you need to stop having these marijuana-smoking, left-wing nuts on your show. Only a fool would think the city of Bloomington could buy a Major League Baseball team. Indianapolis only has a Triple-A franchise and they have a population of about eight hundred thousand. We have only about sixty thousand.”

“Well, Ray, I’ve never heard Andy Bennett espouse any political leanings, so I wouldn’t be inclined to label him a right-wing or a left-wing nut,” Darryl said.

Apparently I was an independent nut.

Darryl made the L-shaped loser sign towards me and grinned. I grabbed a small ice cube and tossed it at him, just missing his head. Jesse scowled at both of us.

Darryl continued. “He is, however, convinced that we can pool our cash and buy the Dodgers. Next caller.”

I mouthed, “No, I’m not,” and threw another ice cube. Jesse took my glass. It’s a sad state of affairs when two men in their thirties need to be chastised by an eighteen-year-old with acne and social studies homework.

I wrote “Darryl is a ‘mic’ monkey” on a piece of paper and held it up to the news booth window. Kristy, the news reporter, rolled her pretty brown eyes and kept on working. She was too serious, I thought.

“Jesse, who is on line three?”

“That would be Cecil from Smithville.”

“Cecil, what do you think about today’s topic?”

“Hello?” Cecil said in a slow, plodding, I-just-got-a-mechan-ized-plow-last-week sort of drawl.

“Cecil, are you there?”

“Darryl?”

“Yes?”

I took my headphone cable and started to strangle myself with it, prompting Jesse to smile for the first time in weeks. Kristy didn’t smile.

“Darryl, I’d just like to say that the farmers of this community are not going to stand by and let this Bennett fellow chew up twenty acres of good farmland just so he can . . .”

Darryl cut him off in mid-sentence, “The stadium would be built downtown.”

“Oh-umm—well, how much are tickets?” he replied after about five seconds of dead air.

“Again, let me reiterate that I was merely having fun with the idea. There would be a lot of issues that would have to be worked out to make this work.” I was really backpedaling.

“Next we have David from Bloomington. What’s your question, David?”

“Isn’t Roland Green, the guy who owns the Mega Media Net-work, negotiating to buy the team? How are you going to outbid Roland Green? You can’t be serious. This has to be a joke.”

Moments. Life is a series of moments which punctuate the mundane, the common, and the routine. This was a moment. It was absurd. A small town of sixty thousand mostly middle-class people couldn’t possibly outbid a billionaire media mogul. However, never underestimate a college town. College towns have liberal, radical thinkers. College towns have entrepreneurs and rich alumni. College towns have lots of crazy people with copious amounts of free time. It was because of this eclectic mix of people that this crazy ride got started. The anti-corporate people wanted to fight Roland Green. The entrepreneurs thought there was a dollar to be made. The crazy people just wanted something to do. The baseball fans wanted to chase a dream. And the twelve-year-old boys masquerading as adults wanted to see if you could really wish upon a star.

Bloomington is a community of ultraliberals and ultra-conservatives and everything in between. So when Dave from Bloomington asked “How are you going to outbid Roland Green?” he was really challenging a community.

I started to say again that it was a joke. But the air in my throat lingered for a moment. Adrenaline made me sit up straight. Why not? Why shouldn’t we try? The skeptic in my brain took a leave of absence.

“We’ll find a way, Dave! We’ll raise the money. We’ll start a massive campaign. If we have to, we’ll recruit investors from all over the state of Indiana. Baseball is America’s game, and what town is more American than Bloomington, Indiana? We’ll galvanize this city and we’ll buy the Dodgers.”

When did the televangelist get here? Who was in my headphones preaching the gospel of baseball to the unwashed masses? Sweet Moses, it was me. I was possessed.

Darryl was laughing out loud, on the air. Jesse, being the only one resembling an adult in the room, cut to commercial. Darryl flipped a piece of ice at me, hitting the news booth window. Kristy jumped and spilled her coffee. She began dropping four-letter bombs from the shelter of her news booth. Due to the soundproof properties of the room, Jesse was spared the expletive chorus. Realizing that he had failed to disarm both of us, Jesse took Darryl’s glass.

The phone lines lit up and reflected off the studio ceiling. Clouds that kept the station in shadow throughout the day suddenly parted. Light poured into the small windows that overlooked the street below and lit up the octagon-shaped console. That afternoon a moment of illumination occurred in the downtown AM radio station. There just might be enough people in Bloomington who believed in this idea. There might be enough people willing to put their own

money on the line to chase this dream. There might be a lot of people angry at me if this didn't work. One thing was certain—it wasn't going to be just another boring summer in Bloomington.