

It's Only Just a Game

by [Paul H. Yarbrough](#) (April 2024)



The American National Game of Baseball –by Currier & Ives, 1866

He said his name was Stinkwaddle Jones. But he had just made it up. He said baseball players had to have “good” names as much as good arms, legs and eyes. Names like *Dizzy* or *Daffy* or *Ducky* or something special like *The Georgia Peach* were the kind you needed. He said he was afraid to call his-self *The Tennessee Peach* or *Pear* or any other fruit since somebody might accuse him of being a *plag-er-ist*—a word I have no idea where he located. Besides he was a pitcher, and the *Georgia Peach* hadn't been no pitcher for sure.

I seen him the first time at the Cumberland County Fair, which

was up close to Sgt. York's area. Not that that affected his pitching skills one way or another but I always thought it was nice that I first saw him close to such good a stock of folks. Anyway, he was 17 and he was at one of those game concession prize-game things where you can throw baseballs at wooden milk bottles and knock down all of them to get a prize. This particular concession was positioned next to the side show that had the *Fat Fady with A Hundred and Six Tattoos*, and the *Cheese Man*, whatever the hell that meant. I think I'd been afraid to ask.

But nobody seemed to be entering the tent looking for tattoos or cheese anyhow. Most everybody close-by was gathered 'round Stinkwaddle, watching him knock down milk bottles fast as they put 'em up, and him throwin' nothing but fastballs. Finally, the Barker, the guy who was taking 25-cents per ball and givin' up 35-cent prizes told Stinkwaddle he'd won enough and to move on. Stinkwaddle was reluctant but figured he'd better. Some of them Fair workers were pretty tough when it came to losing money. And Stinkwaddle didn't wanna risk his arm with a wild punch thrown in the heat of the moment. Specially not with nothing more'n a 35-cent prize or two at stake.

The crowd kinda moaned and did some little boos, but nothing really came of it like mob action or nothing. The Barker shifted most ever' body's attention by saying that the next dozen people to line up could get in to see the *Fat Lady and the Cheese Man* for free. That's when I first took up with him and learned his name.

"Well, boy, you sure can pitch a baseball. Can I buy you an R.C. Cola?"

He turned to see who was addressin' him, paused to hitch up his britches and tuck his shirt with one hand while he juggled the four statue-prizes in the cradle of his other arm. "Well, yessir, I wouldn't mind. Nice of you to offer. Would you like a prize? I got more'n I need."

I thought it was a strange way of puttin' it: *need*. Them prizes may have been worth 35-cents in United States money, but to the naked eye they wasn't worth a hard Yankee damnation. A couple of them looked like little elves with beards and the other two, a bear and a zebra, all made out of some kinda plaster, probably. I wouldn't guess anybody'd *need* any of 'em. But I didn't wanna hurt him so I just gently declined.

We walked over to one of several food concessions, him kinda shuffling through the sawdust instead of liftin' his feet. He walked like he was 17 which is what I guessed in my mind before he confirmed it. "I wanna talk to you about baseball. You seem more than capable of chunkin' one. You played any in high school?"

"No sir. I stopped going to school after the sixth grade. Daddy said he needed me at home, since Momma had died. She had been bit by a neighbor's bird dog that got bit by a rabid skunk. Momma died of the hydrophobia disease. So did the bird dog. But anyway, I was killing more crows in the cornfield chunking rocks than he was shootin' at 'em."

"I see," I said.

"And Daddy said all they tried to teach in school was writin' and arithmetic and geography. And since I could count to more'n hundred and could read most of the Bible, I didn't need no more. Geography was something that the army would teach me since they had a call on a couple of my years after I got old enough. And they'd likely as not send you all over the world to places like Chiner and Russsher. Or more likely Koreer, where lots of fellows are shootin' and getting shot at right now."

"Well, what about baseball? You thought about playin'?"

"Yessir. I thought maybe I'd catch a ride down to Memphis and ask the manager of the Chicks if I could pitch for them. Maybe

make some money before the army took me over. I don't think the army pays much unless you're a general."

"Well, you're right about that. They don't pay much."

"You ever been in the army, Mister?"

"Long time ago. Matter of fact I was in General MacArthur's Rainbow Division in 1917. In France, we was. Looks like the General's still doin' okay. He just kicked them Commies in the butt at some place call Inchon...But let's talk about baseball. My brother-in-law is in management with the Memphis Chicks. And I do a little bird-dogging for the team."

I could tell without no doubt that he was interested. Just a look he had. And he wasn't guzzling his R.C. like he wanted to get away. He kept stickin' his thumb in the top and forcin' it back out. That gave off a poppin' sound. When someone did that it meant they were interested in what you were sayin' I'd learned that a long time ago. Way before France even.

I got him signed by the Memphis Chicks for \$2500.00. He and his daddy hadn't seen that much money in one stack ever, probably. Course I got a \$100.00 from the team for steering him their way. They knew if he was good enough and made the team they were more'n likely going to lose him for a couple of years on account of the army and war and everything. *But I been through that already.* They figured he still would get plenty of years in, in spite of it. After all he wasn't the first to give up ball years for the army and war: Ted Williams. Jerry Coleman, Bobby Feller and a whole bunch of 'em.

He wasn't yet 18 when he started his first game. It never occurred to me he didn't know the throwing of a curveball. I mean, how'd a fellow ever make a rock curve? Or why would he? And he dang sure didn't use one knockin' down milk bottles. But by the dangest of heavenly days, he blew that fastball by 17 batters and the rest didn't hardly hit one out of the

infield. The Chicks got him five runs and he shut the visitors out on three hits. I thought: *Boy hidey, if they ever learn him a curveball.*

He took a lot of ragging over his name. Most of the players knew he probably made it up but they said if he hadn't they'd giv' it to him anyway. He could dang sure pitch, they told him, but he was so bow-legged that he indeed waddled more when he ran, than ran, when he ran. And since he stunk up the base-paths when he *ran*, he, indeed was Stinkwaddle. As to his last name, they said even a sixth grader oughta know his last name for certain. So Stinkwaddle Jones had become a baseball player—in name and deed.

He had won sixteen games by September 14, the last day of the season *and* coincidentally his birthday, and the team suggested to him and his daddy that he go on and sign up for the two-year army draft. By the time he got out he would just be twenty and maybe another half season with the Chicks, and if he was still burning 'em in and stiking 'em out he would be in the big leagues by his twenty-first birthday. I tried to sketch a picture in my mind of just how far he could sling a hand grenade.

He spent his basic training in Georgia, so he wasn't far from home. And he remained there for almost six months so he got home to see his daddy once in a while on leave. And he got to keep his arm sharp chunkin' at crows. He was a handsome youngster in his army uniform. And I know his daddy was gonna be proud with his boy's picture on the mantle and all.

But the day came and he was to be shipped out for Korea. I was at the train station with him and his daddy when he left. I told him to be careful, 'cause by this time MacArthur had been fired—recalled they said.

"It's hard for me to believe," his daddy said, " that some dumb son-of-a-bitch would fire Douglas MacArthur; the greatest

general next to Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson there ever was."

Neither Stinkwaddle's daddy nor myself mentioned the dumb son-of-a-bitch's name, by name, since technically he was Stinkwaddle's commander. Nevertheless, there was a bit of what probably some writer would call *melancholy* floating around the train station, what with the new bad kind of confidence in the war all about the place. General MacArthur didn't like losing. The government didn't mind at all.

"Well, daddy, I'll see you in about fifteen months. That's what our Captain said, anyways."

They shook hands and I shook Stinkwaddle's hand and we all said the things you say when people go away on to war on trains. And when the train pulled out he stood on the train step holding the railing and made a final claim: "I'll buy us a nutther hundred acres when I get up to the big leagues, Daddy." And he waved a big wave with that powerful right arm. And we waved.

In case you'd gotten worried— he got back from Korea okay and very fit. He even got an early discharge in August because of his fine service—he had done proud his Cumberland area—so that he got to pitch a bit before the end of the Chicks' season. The manager pitched him two innins' in relief and started him a week later in which he pitched his-self a no-hitter against the Birmingham Barons. This sterling performance got him a guaranteed invitation for Spring Training for the Big team; and a promise that if he made the team he would get a \$6000.00 additional bonus.

Needless to say, the next Spring, when he was told he had made the team and was given a check for \$6000.00 he was as happy as a pig in slop. He giv' that check to his daddy and reminded him of his promise the day he went off to Korea: "I told you Daddy, I'd git us another 100 acres."

But he never got into a big-league game. A week into the season, he snapped something in his elbow when he was in the bullpen warmin' up, and nobody, nor... no doctor even, ever figured it out—what the ailment was or what caused it. My opinion was always that somebody tried to get fancy in a way of teachin' him a curveball.

But he was sent back down to the minors, down past the Chicks even. But he never got fixed or arm-well. Finally, he told them that it was over and he was just gonna go back and help his Daddy, who, he said, had plenty to do with that additional 100 acres.

The last time I saw him was at his farm there in Cumberland County. I had sold my hardware business and wasn't bird-doggin' anymore. I was gonna retire and liv' in Nashville. Maybe in my old age I would try to get on with The Grand Old Opry. But, back to Stinkwaddle: I drove up to see him one more time since his retirement three years before. He and his daddy were out on the porch late in the afternoon havin' a glass of iced-tea. I was invited to the drinkin' as I stepped up on the porch.

"Well Mr. Jones," I said to his daddy, "your farm's lookin' prosperous. And so are you and the boy here."

"Well, nice of you to say," he replied.

Since it was the last time I was to see him more than likely, I just felt I had to ask, specially since I had *discovered* him as a baseball player. "Stinkwaddle, do you ever get saddened by your career being so small and not lasting long and ever'thing?"

He pulled down his glass from his mouth, then looked, then shook the ice in the bottom. I kinda saw in him what that *same writer* might've called *pensive*. Writers like to use unknown and useless words like *pensive*.

“No sir. Not too much. It was fun but it was after all, like Daddy said, ‘In the long-run scheme o’ things, well, it’s only just a game.’ It wasn’t for nothing anyhow. My baseball business, as brief as it was, got us a nutther hundred acres. And I can still chunk at crows.” He smiled.

“And you can still count to a hundred and read most of the Bible,” I said. Then we all smiled.

I drove down the dirt road to the paved county road thinking as I went: *Dang that boy sure had a fastball!*

I signaled a left turn with my arm sticking out, turned onto the paved road, and pointed myself toward Nashville.

[Table of Contents](#)

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