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**He Was the Best We'd Ever
Seen: On Baseball,
Greatness, and Writing**

Seth Sawyers Wonders Whatever Happened to the
Phenom of Allegany County

By Seth Sawyers

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Halfway up a hard-brown Appalachian ridge, high school baseball is mean. There is the sense that you, a quickly cooling dot in the middle of this ice-biting wind, should not be outside. Nor should you be holding this aluminum that, when it strikes a thrown ball, vibrates in your brittle-bone hands like a stick of angry rebar. High school baseball up in the Appalachians is a rough red sleeve wiped against the nostrils four dozen times. It's a Dan's Mountain wind whistling your batting helmet's ear hole. It's a dozen scattered parents, wrapped in four, five layers, large cups of Sheetz coffee long gone cold on the warped bleachers etched: Sentinels Rule Campers Suck.

No, there is the sense that you should be sitting in the Dunkin' Donuts downtown, or even in sixth-period biology, or, at the least, in the passenger seat of your dad's Grand Am that's been running for a good long while, radio tuned to country for all you care.

And so it would have been miserable anyway even if you had been out there—just turned 17, stick-thin and stiff—against say Allegany or Westmar or Hedgesville, but on this particular miserable metal ingot of a day, you're playing Beall High School, and Beall means only one thing: Walker Chapman.

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I often think about the gap between pretty good and very good, serious amateur and professional, between, say, doing the thing and doing it so that someone wants to pay money to watch it be done.

I just finished writing a novel, and though I tell people it took five years, it was more like six, and though some nights, falling asleep, I think those 90,000 words are pretty good, on other nights I think it's only a Microsoft Word document and that I'm not that funny and, in fact, some people find me boring. I think about what I wrote and then I think about Toni Morrison or Michael Chabon or Alice McDermott or Philip Roth or Shirley Hazzard.

Sometimes the book I wrote is a chair. Sometimes it's a pretty good chair. I'm still waiting for the night I think, hey, that's really a very nice chair. But what am I going to do? Quit? I'd rather drink puddle water.

But you can't second-guess your own words all day and so, a few times a summer, I walk down to Camden Yards and it seems more often than not I get to see some beauty. Maybe it's Manny Machado lacing a demon-spawn two-seam fastball nearly out to Pratt Street, and maybe it's because some part of me is out there in that perfect batter's box, but I think about levels, which means I think about chairs, which means I think about Walker Chapman.

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Walker Chapman was the best any of us had ever seen. He was the best our older brothers had ever seen, the best our fathers had ever seen, the best anyone in Allegany County, Maryland had ever seen and here's me, batting eighth, 145 pounds according to my driver's license, five-foot-eleven, a 33-inch, 28-ounce Easton on my shoulder that feels as useful as a length of railroad track, and I'm doing the sign of the cross real quick but at the same time real hard.

I want to make clear what kind of ballplayer I was. I could field grounders all day and I could throw as well as anyone. I was a skinny nervous whisper of a boy who chewed the insides of his cheeks to rawness, but still I had the fundamental ability to play competent baseball. I had a hat, pants, socks, a jersey with a number on the back. I was, to my spikes, just OK. I could hit the ball, maybe not with any real force or with any real regularity, but I could place round bat on round ball. It does not pain me to admit, now, that I was a chair. That's what I was.

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So far, up on the frozen brown mountain, it's been seven up, seven down, and here I am, bottom of the third, digging my back foot into the box, and then the front, and I take a practice half-cut, and only then do I look to the mound. Walker Chapman is spitting, he's adjusting his cup, and then he's staring at me, and he's six-foot-two and a full-grown man, and probably he has a mustache, and he's going into his windup and what's perfectly clear is that to him I am, I know in every cell, an afterthought.

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Baseball, like most other sports, is a meritocracy. If you're good, you'll make it to the next team up the ladder: little league to teenage summer league to junior varsity to varsity, and so on. Skill and even a little drive will keep you on the field. It is somewhat like politics, in that no one with any kind of ambition wants merely to be a single-term Representative from, say, Michigan. Almost everyone wants to be president. But politics is not quite the same as baseball, as it is not a meritocracy. Donald Trump can, and did, after all, get to the top.

Good baseball players are perhaps closer to doctors, who can range from urgent care all the way up to brain surgeon, or pilots, who can go from single-engine Cessna to F-22. Except, of course, some doctors are perfectly happy with urgent care and some pilots would prefer the Cessna. All, just like professional baseball players, are, to the lay eye or even the serious amateur eye, very skilled, very qualified, better than almost anyone you've ever met.

But the difference between baseball players and doctors or pilots is that no baseball player wants to work, for the rest of his career, in Little Rock or El Paso or even Las Vegas. They all want to rip a high double off the monster in Fenway. They all want to throw a no-hitter in Yankee Stadium. They all want to go as far as they can go.

The only corollary is in the field in which I try, an hour a night, to make my little mark. The only corollary is in the arts. But let's skip writers, for now. Writers can be messy and a little obnoxious. Let's say violin.

Have you ever seen a very good violinist? It is wonderful. And unless you, yourself are a violinist, there is magic in the way they make something difficult look easy, just as Manny Machado makes hitting a 97 mile-per-hour two-seam fastball look easy. And they both have drive. Violinists want to get to New York or London, though some of them stop at Cleveland, and even in Cleveland, the very good violinists are very, very good indeed.

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Behind the backstop, scouts with radar guns stamped their feet. Of course some dad peeked and that dad told some other dad who told the kid on deck, hey, this guy's throwing 91. And then that kid whispered into the dugout, and after that it was that number seared into our eyelids. Ninety-one miles per hour. Nine away from one hundred. The number glowed red, sharp-outlined, mean, swift, deadly. The number 91 is no fucking nonsense, motherfuckers, and when you can't feel your hands it's a step shy of impossible.

And yet here I am and here's the windup and here's the first pitch and it goes like this.

The ball is white as cake frosting but then it travels so incredibly fast—it's like seeing a normal pitch but set to fast-forward—that it zips past me, knee-high, I think, maybe on the inside third of the plate but who knows, and smacks the catcher's leather. The umpire says strike one and the catcher throws the ball back and Walker Chapman, who spits and adjusts something and now he's standing on top of the mound again and it's only when I step back into the box for the second time that I think: this is like reading Russian. I am unable to read Russian, and it would take me years to read Russian, and maybe I'll never be able to.

The count is 0-1, and Walker Chapman is going into his windup again, and I do not know how to read Russian. It feels like I can barely read anything at all.

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Baseball is all about levels. If you're a chair, as I was, you can play in high school, with other 17- and 18-year-olds. If you're the best chair not only on

your team or in your county or in all the counties that touch it but more like all the counties that touch those counties, you might get drafted by one of the 30 professional baseball teams. And unless you're the best pitcher in the whole country, you'll go straight from your high school graduation to the very first level, which is called Rookie ball. Each of these boys in Rookie ball is the best player their high school coaches have ever seen.

But the difference between baseball players and doctors or pilots is that no baseball player wants to work, for the rest of his career, in Little Rock or El Paso or even Las Vegas.

With his signing bonus from the Minnesota Twins, Walker Chapman bought a Dodge Viper. And then he, age 18, owner of a 91-mile-per-hour fastball, reported for work to the Rookie-level Gulf Coast League Twins. There, he started 13 games and pitched to a 2.56 ERA, which is pretty good. It will be the best year of his career.

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What happened next might have been the best part of my career. Winter wind making my eyes water, I choke up. Here goes Walker Chapman, and it's like nothing, it's like he's tying his shoes, and here's the speck of cake frosting again and while I don't see much of it, the ball happens to come at me more or less down the middle and now I'm swinging my beam of aluminum and there's no smack of the catcher's leather but instead, way back there behind me, a *poof*. I look over my shoulder. The backstop's tarp is fluttering. I've fouled it off. I've nicked it, have placed bat on just a stitch or two. Until now, no one's even touched him yet.

The parents explode: Attaboy, Sawyers! You got him now! Behind me, my teammates shout: Yeah, Buck! Which is my nickname. I can maybe hit this guy, maybe. All I need is just a little more choke, a shorter swing, and I can hit this guy. He's throwing so hard, all I need to do is make contact. I can shoot something out to right, between first and second. Everyone will love me.

Glove tucked under his armpit, standing atop the mound again, Walker Chapman is rubbing the ball. And then he smiles at me.

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After that first good year in Rookie ball, Walker Chapman bounced around. A promotion to Single-A Fort Wayne and then some time on another Rookie-league team in Tennessee. Back up to Fort Wayne for a year. Another promotion to high-A Fort Myers, where he's converted to a reliever, a bullpen guy, and where he plays with future All-Star catcher A.J. Pierzynski and future Hall of Famer David Ortiz and then, for 49 innings, or 204 batters, Walker Chapman plays at the highest level he's going to get to, which is the Double-A New Britain Rock Cats, in the Eastern League, where he plays with future big league outfielder Torii Hunter, who after a long career retired just a few years prior to my writing this.

And up in Double-A, where everyone's a Walker Chapman or better, Walker Chapman's still throwing gas, but by now his ligaments and tendons are blown out, are rubber bands stretched too many times, and eventually he stretches something one time too many and is sent down to Fort Myers again, where he throws another 50 innings against another 209 batters, and, right arm more or less busted, that's it. At 22, he's done. He'll become a cop in Prince George's County, Maryland, just outside of DC, 40 miles from where I now breathe.

But for half a season in New Britain, Connecticut, he's a promotion away from Triple-A and if he somehow catches fire there, who knows, maybe a Minnesota reliever stubs his toe in Kansas City and the big team needs a right-hander and Walker Chapman's flying to Boston, working on maybe his brand-new cut fastball, hoping he can turn his already excellent chair into a chair that motherfucking sparkles.

But there are so many levels in baseball. There are so many levels, and he never quite got there, and I think about that in my seat down at Camden Yards and I think about when I read Kazuo Ishiguro and I think about Walker Chapman when I'm out back, laptop warm on my thighs, and I'm tapping out

words that try to get close to what's inside me, which is all the time trying to break your heart.

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Choked up a full two inches now, I dig in as far back in the box as I can go. If I can just slap something to right, who cares what happens after that. Maybe even the girls in spectra trig might hear about this, the ones who are both smart and pretty and so much more grown up than me that they may as well be of a different, third gender. The girls who have boyfriends at the Catholic school up on Haystack Mountain. The girls who listen to Tori Amos, who have been skiing, who have had, it's said, sex. Maybe they'll even have heard of Walker Chapman.

And here's the pitch and it's past me, on the outside corner, before I can think of lifting the bat from my shoulder, and I have been struck out. As I walk back, behind me out on that frozen brown diamond, Walker Chapman, who is just getting started, circles the mound, and I think about him now, more than twenty years later, his cake-frosting laser beams, his ability to spit out brilliance that I was lucky to see for one day, one at-bat, three pitches. So there are levels, everywhere, in violins, in baseball, and though just about none of us gets to the top, not ever, that doesn't mean the world is a cold, dead place. Walker Chapman does not remember me, I am very sure, but I remember him.

Tall, pinstripes, Beall's blue-and-yellow on his cap. Maybe a mustache. Big, strong guy. Threw absolute gas. Cheese. Pure disgusting heat. Made me feel alive, once, on the side of a hard frozen mountain, on which I shuddered for three quick moments, where the very impossible and the very possible meet.



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Seth Sawyers is a writer living in Baltimore. His writing has appeared in *Salon*, *The Rumpus*, *The Millions*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Sports Illustrated*, *River Teeth*, *Fourth Genre*, and elsewhere. He has recently finished a novel. He is online [here](#) and at @sethsawyers