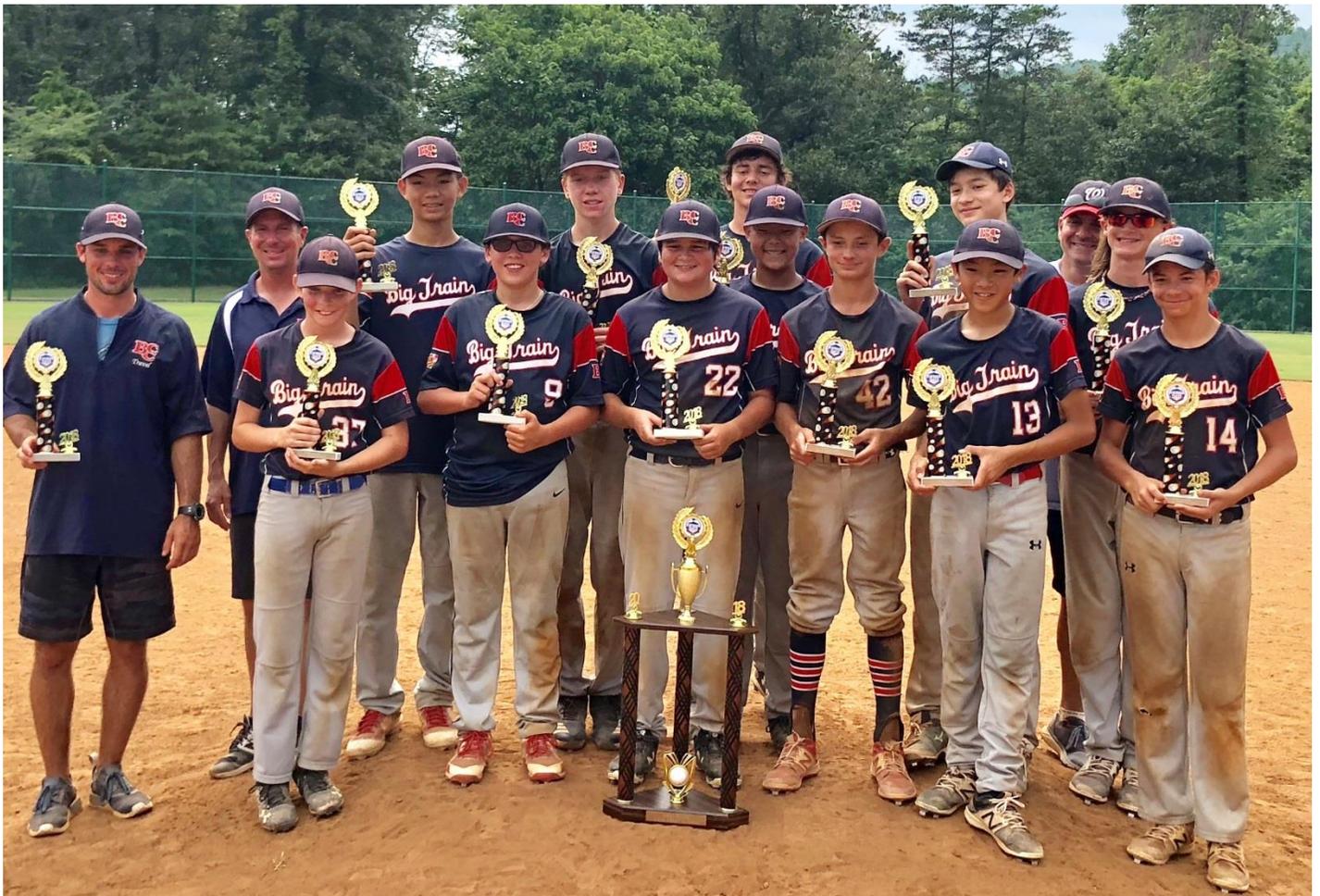


# The Last Inning

By Lanny J. Davis

Big Train 13U Cove Creek Park Tournament Champions, July 2018



(L to R): Coach Bobby, Dad Manager John, Sommers, Nathan, Jeremy, Shawn, Andrew, Matt, Mitchell, Owen, Kailen, Alex, Coach Dave, Liam, and Josh.

***“The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It’s been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt, and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game, is a part of our past, Ray. It reminds us of all that once was good, and that could be again.”***

***--Terrence Mann, “Field of Dreams”***

**## ##**

**For anyone who knows and loves baseball, the most memorable “last inning” would probably be the bottom of the ninth in a game played at a stadium called “The Polo Grounds,” located in upper Harlem, Manhattan, on a cliff called “Coogan’s Bluff” -- the home of the New York Giants from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until 1957, when the Giants left New York City for San Francisco.**

**In mid-August 1951, the New York Giants trailed the mighty Brooklyn Dodgers, with Jackie Robinson and many other all-stars, by 13 ½ games. Yet they won 37 out of the next 44 games to end up in a tie for first, requiring a best of 3 play-off for the National League pennant.**

**The Giants won the first game, then lost the second. So, the final third game was played at the Polo Grounds, on October 3, 1951.**

**The Dodgers looked like they would win the tie-breaker – leading 4-1 going into the bottom of the ninth inning. But then came the Miracle at Coogan’s Bluff, as it came to be known ever since among major league baseball players and historians.**

**The Giants began the last inning with two singles and a double, scoring a run. The score was now 4-2, with two on. After the next hitter popped up, the Dodgers brought in ace reliever, Ralph Branca, to face Giants left fielder, Bobby Thomson.**

**First pitch – a fast ball, called strike.**

**The second pitch -- a high fastball, just inside the plate. Thomson seemed to be waiting for a fast ball. Wonder why.**

**Whack.**

**The sound of that hit was heard like a cannon shot to those who were there – often compared to the famous “Shot Heard ‘Round the World” that began the American Revolutionary War in Concord, Massachusetts, on July 19, 1775. Thomson’s line**

**drive hit the left field upper deck in what seemed like a split second. Home run. Game over – 5-4 Giants.**

**“The Giants win the pennant, the Giants win the pennant, the Giants win the pennant,” Russ Hodges, the Giants radio announcer, screamed into the microphone again and again.**

**Yes, miracles are possible.**

**After all, it’s baseball.**

**# # # #**

***“Shoeless Joe” Jackson: “Man, I did love this game. I’d have played for food money. It was the game....The sounds, the smells. Did you ever hold a ball or a glove to your face?***

***Ray Kinsella: Yeah.***

***Shoeless Joe: I used to love travelling on the trains from town to town. The hotels...brass spittoons in the lobbies, brass beds in the rooms. It was the crowd, rising to their feet when the ball was hit deep.***

***Shoot, I’d play for nothing!”***

**--“Field of Dreams”**

**# # # #**

**On July 14, 2018 -- sixty-six years and three-hundred-one days after the Giants' Miracle at Coogan's Bluff (and almost exactly 243 years after the actual "shot heard 'round the world" signifying the beginning of the Revolutionary War) -- the Bethesda-Chevy Chase (BCC), Maryland - "Big Train" 13-and-under baseball team experienced its unforgettable "last inning."**

**On that date, the BCC "Big Train" team (named after the legendary Washington Senators pitcher, Walter "Big Train" Johnson) played the "Akadema Rangers" from Forest, Virginia. They were playing in the 2018 Cove Creek Classic, a prestigious regional tournament for dozens of teams, 13 and under and younger age groups as well. The tournament was played in a massive baseball complex located in Faber, Virginia, built and financed by famous novelist, John Grisham, near the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.**

**This Big Train-Rangers game played on late Saturday afternoon game July 14 was the "play-in" game -- whoever won the game got to play on Sunday in the "Final Four" for the championship. The loser would go home. The game didn't start till 3 pm. That meant, due to time limits and sunlight, it would be limited to four innings. The Rangers were the "visiting" team -- they were up first. The Big Train would get to hit last in the bottom of the fourth.**

**And what a first inning the Rangers had!**

**In the top of the first, Big Train starting pitcher Josh Erd walked the first batter and the next Rangers batter hit a line drive home run over the left field fence. That quick, the score was 2-0 Rangers.**

**Then the first inning rout began.**

**Walk, single, single, single, and the score was 3-0. Another walk – the score was now 4-0.**

**In came a new Big Train pitcher, Owen Basso, who walked the next batter and the score was now 5-0.**

**But Basso struck out the next two batters to get to two outs and it looked like the Rangers offensive momentum had stalled.**

**But no. With the bases still loaded, the next Rangers batter walked, and the score was 6-0. A sharp single to center fielder Liam Bowen scored another run, making the score 7-0. Only Bowen's strong throw from center field to home plate prevented the 8<sup>th</sup> run from scoring.**

**Then on a 3-1 count, the Rangers batter hit a towering fly ball over the left field fence for a Grand Slam home run.**

**The score was now 11-0.**

**The third out of the top of the first came – finally – on a ground ball.**

**The Big Train parents watched, feeling despair for their sons. An 11-0 deficit after the first inning seemed decisive and impossible to overcome, at least to caring parents.**

**But somehow, their sons didn't get the message.**

**In the bottom of the first inning, after Owen Basso popped up and Josh Erd struck out, Nathan Gumagay walked on 3-2 count and went to second on a passed ball and then stole third. Gumagay's burst of energy, despite the score being 11-0, was an indicator of things to come, though no one knew it at the time. Third baseman Matt Roche and catcher Shawn Benjamin walked to load the bases. When first baseman Andrew Lombardo was hit by a pitch, the Big Train team had their first run.**

**The score was now 11-1.**

**“Well,” a Big Train parent said, trying to be humorous, “it's really like we're only behind now, 10-0.” Some Big Train parents laughed.**

**Center fielder Liam Bowen grounded out to second base for the third out, and the Big Train team raced onto the field as if to say, “game on...let's go.”**

**In the top of the second inning, with Basso still pitching, the first Rangers batter singled, stole second base, and the next batter reached first on an error. Runners on 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>. The Rangers player on first base stole second so now there were runners on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, with no outs. It looked like the Rangers were about to pile it on again, the way they had in the previous inning.**

**But Owen Basso stepped up. He struck out the next Rangers batter on three pitches, got the next batter to pop up for second out, and got the next batter to ground out to Big Train shortstop Nathan Gumagay. Three outs.**

**The score was still 11-1, Rangers.**

**In the bottom of the second, the Big Train team proved it hadn't given up, despite that 10-run deficit.**

**On a 3-1 count, second baseman Jeremy Davis began the rally with a single to right field. Left-fielder Alex Chang, a consistently reliable outfielder with a knack for getting the barrel on the ball when he batted, walked on a 3-2 count, moving Jeremy Davis to second. After a balk by the Rangers pitcher, Davis moved to 3<sup>rd</sup>, Chang to 2<sup>nd</sup>. Then right fielder Kailen Hargenrader singled on line drive to center fielder, scoring Davis and Chang, the first two RBIs of the game for Hargenrader.**

**The score was now 11-3. Still no outs**

**Owen Basso grounded into a fielder's choice, with a runner out at second while Basso remaining at first base. One out. Shortstop Josh Erd singled to left and Basso took second. Then Nathan Gumagay drove in Basso on a solid single to left field, with Josh Erd moving to third.**

**The score was now 11-4.**

**“Well, now the score is like only 7-0,” said a Big Train parent, “That’s right,” said another, with other parents laughing, nervously.**

**Nathan Gumagay stole 2<sup>nd</sup>, putting men on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>. Then third baseman Matt Roche singled on a sharp line drive to center, scoring Erd and Gumagay.**

**The score was now 11-6.**

**Catcher Shawn Benjamin singled on a line drive to left field, with Matt Roche advancing to 3<sup>rd</sup>. But two outs followed to end the inning.**

**“Well now it’s like we’re down only 5-0,”a Big Train parent said. Other parents were nodding their heads, almost starting to believe in miracles. But someone responded, “Quiet – you could hex us.”**

**The Big Train team knew it had to keep that deficit at 5 runs. In the top of the 3<sup>rd</sup> their pitcher Owen Basso and the team did it. But not without the Rangers threatening. After the first out on a ground ball, the next Ranger batter walked and next batter singled. A sacrifice bunt moved the two runners to 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>. Basso got the third out on a pop up to third baseman Matt Roche.**

**The score remained 11-6, going into bottom of the third inning.**

**The first batter for Big Train was hard-hitting center fielder Liam Bowen. He hit a sharp grounder into the shortstop-third based hole for a base hit. Second baseman Jeremy Davis lined out to deep center field for the first out. Left fielder Alex Chang grounded out to shortstop for the second out, with Bowen advancing to 2<sup>nd</sup>. Then right fielder Kailen Hargenrader hit a clutch two-out hit to right field, scoring Liam Bowen, for Kailen's third RBI of the day.**

**The score was now 11-7.**

**Another Big Train parent said , “So now it’s like only 4-0.” Many now were quietly agreeing, nodding their heads – but afraid to say anything, afraid of the hex that would kill the magic.**

**After Kailen Hargenrader stole 2<sup>nd</sup> base, Owen Basso flied out to left field for third out.**

**Top of the 4<sup>th</sup>, Rangers up. The time was approaching 5 pm. The umpire reminded everyone this would be the final inning. Could the Big Train team hold the four-run gap going into the bottom of the 4<sup>th</sup>?**

**With Basso still on the mount, with even more determination, they did. The first Rangers batter walked and immediately attempted to steal second. Big Train catcher Shawn Benjamin would have none of that. He jumped to his feet and in one motion threw a line drive strike bullet to second base, with shortstop Gumagay applying a firm, low tag. One out. The second out came on a line drive to second baseman Josh Erd. The next Rangers hitter reached first base on an error by shortstop Gumagay, followed by a single, putting men on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>. But again, Basso bore down. He threw three straight strikes for the K -- and the inning was over.**

**Bottom of the fourth, last at-bats for The Big Train. They remained down by four runs, 11-7.**

**Just three innings before, the margin was 11-0.**

**Shortstop Josh Erd began with a single, a hard ground ball to center field. Erd stole 2nd. Then shortstop**

**Nathan Gumagay hit a towering fly ball no-doubter, well over the left field fence, for a two-run home run.**

**The deficit was now down to 2 – 11-9.**

**Still no outs.**

**Third baseman Matt Roche doubled on a line drive to the Rangers' center fielder, and catcher Shawn Benjamin walked. Runners on 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>. First baseman Andrew Lombardo walked to load the bases. After Liam Bowen struck out on a 2-2 count, second baseman Jeremy Davis hacked to a 3-2 count and got the RBI by walking and scoring Matt Roche from third.**

**The score was now 11-10,**

**Now Big Train parents sat still, as if they were in a frozen state, afraid to move, afraid to breathe, to do anything that might break the magic. It was nearly 5:30 pm, and the cloud-covered sky should have been growing darker. But somehow, somehow, it seemed to be getting brighter.**

**Bases loaded. Left fielder Alex Chang popped out in foul territory to the Rangers first baseman and there were now two outs.**

**One more out and the game was over, one run shy of The Miracle that seemed impossible just four innings before.**

**But Kailen Hargenrader had other things in mind. So far, he was 2-2 for the day, with three RBIs.**

**1<sup>st</sup> pitch, strike, looking. The air was still. All dead quiet. Time seemed to have stopped.**

**2<sup>nd</sup> pitch, ball. 1-1 count.**

**3<sup>rd</sup> pitch – a low inside fast ball, at Hargenrader’s shins.**

**He swung. Smooth. Sweeping. Upward.**

**Crack of the bat. Sweet spot. Launch angle high. The ball took off like a rocket soaring high in the air.**

**High.**

**Long.**

**Going, going.**

**SEE. YOU. LATER. Ten, twenty feet over the right field fence.**

**A walk-off, Grand Slam home run. Game over.**

**Final score: Big Train 14 - Rangers 11.**

**The Big Train kids came roaring out of dugout to greet their teammates at home plate. First Shawn Benjamin crossed home plate from third, then Andrew Lombardo from second, then Jeremy Davis from first, and finally, the walk-off hero -- Kailen Hargenrader, his third straight hit and 7<sup>th</sup> RBI of the game, jumped into the air and landed on home plate, as his deliriously happy teammates swarmed around him.**

**Miracles do happen.**

**After all, it's baseball.**

**# # # #**

**But there was still another last inning to be played – in the championship game the next day, Sunday, July 15 – that is if the BCC Big Train team could win the semi-final first game in the late morning.**

**They did, winning by a surprisingly wide margin to get into the championship game in the early afternoon against the “Batting Cave Cavemen,” from Grottoes, Virginia -- whose name was as daunting as the size and skill of their players.**

**Once again, since this was second game of the day and last one in the tournament, the game had to be shortened, but this time to 5-innings.**

**Before the championship game, Big Train Coach Bobby assembled the team, with all the boys sitting, exhausted on a grassy slope. The coach, knowing how tired everyone was, asked someone to volunteer to start as pitcher of the final game. At first no hands raised, with many of veteran pitchers having pitched the day before and in that morning's semi-final game.**

**Then two arms were raised: Catcher/left fielder and sometimes relief pitcher, Mitchell Hwang, and the usual closer and right fielder, Sommers Turner.**

**In the first few innings, with Mitchell Hwang pitching steady, virtually walk-free baseball, the Big Train team jumped to a quick lead. By the bottom of the third, Big Train led 8-2.**

**But in the bottom of the 4<sup>th</sup>, the Batting Cavemen showed they weren't about to give up. Hwang got the first batter out on a fly ball to center fielder Liam Bowen. One out. But Mitchell seemed to be tiring. After going 3-2 on the next batter, he put a fast ball over the center of the plate, waist high.**

**Boom. The Cavemen batter hit a towering home run over the left field fence. The score was now 8-3.**

**The next man walked on four straight balls, and then a second walk after a 3-1 count. Batting Cavemen on first and second with only one out.**

**Coach Bobby walked out to the mound, patted Mitchell on the shoulder, and took the ball. As Mitchell walked off the mound, head justifiably held high, he was greeted by a standing ovation by Big Train parents and high fives by his teammates in the dug-out. He ended up pitching 3.1 innings, threw 62 pitches, walked only 3, 2 of which came in the last top-fourth inning. He had given up only 3 earned runs on 4 hits.**

**The closer waved in by Coach Bobby was Sommers Turner.**

**Turner took his practice warm-up pitches in classic Sommers style. All strikes. No overpowering heat – a lot of off-speeds and breaking balls. The Batting Cavemen team seemed to watch with confidence. Turner looked easy to hit, they must have been thinking. Or so they may have thought.**

**The reality was another matter.**

**With runners on first and second, Sommers gave up an immediate sharp ground ball to ace third basemen Matt Roche, going to his backhand. Tough play. Matt bobbled the ball and the throw to first was too late. Now bases were loaded, with still one out.**

**With one home run swing, the score would be 8-7, with the tying run coming to home plate. “OMG,” one of the**

**Big Train parents whispered, mirroring the nightmare that other parents must have been having. Is this yesterday in reverse?**

**The next Cavemen hitter smacked a solid base hit to the now-left fielder, Mitchell Hwang. Hwang scooped the ball up and threw a rifle shot to the cutoff man, so only one run scored on the bases-loaded hit.**

**But now the score was 8-4, with bases still loaded and still only one out. Tying run at home plate, that is, on a Grand Slam home run. It was impossible to avoid that horrific thought if you were a Big Train parent.**

**But wait. You could almost see pitcher Sommers Turner gritting his teeth, his eyes narrowing with intensity. No, he seemed to be thinking – it's not going to happen. Time to close it down.**

**First pitch, a sharply breaking curve ball, a pop fly to third baseman Matt Roche, an automatic out under the "infield fly rule."**

**Two outs.**

**Next batter – again, at least to the Cavemen batter, an annoyingly slow change up on the first pitch. He swung way out in front. The result: a weak ground ball, again to third baseman Roche, and a bullet throw on target to first base. Three outs.**

**The score remained 8-4 going into the bottom of the 4<sup>th</sup>, the last half of the last inning.**

**The Big Train team was not about to rest easy on a four-run lead. They remembered what happened in the late afternoon just the day before, when they came from behind after an 11-0 first inning. They knew they needed more runs.**

**And they got them.**

**After Josh Erd hit a fly ball to left field for the first out, Nathan Gumagay walked, advanced to second on a pass ball, and stole third. A surge of energy seemed to overtake the Big Train dugout. Even more so after Matt Roche walked and stole the open second base. Then catcher Shawn Benjamin walked to load the bases, still only one out. Andrew Lombardo worked the count to 3-1, then walked making the score 9-4.**

**Bases still loaded, one out.**

**With the infield in, pinch-hitter Jeremy Davis, who had pitched successfully in the first semi-final game, hit a sharp ground ball up the middle, snagged by the second basemen, who threw home for the second out. But then the next two Big Train batters – Kailen Hargenrader and Alex Chang – walked in two more runs, and the score was now 11-4. Owen Basso hit a**

**sharp ground ball to the third baseman, thrown out at first by an eyelash, for the third out.**

**And now it was bottom of the 5<sup>th</sup>.**

**This time pitcher Turner wasn't messing around with any thoughts of miracles by the Cavemen team.**

**First pitch, breaking ball – ground out to second baseman, Owen Basso, one out.**

**Next batter, first pitch, fast ball, another ground out to Basso, two outs.**

**Turner was not to be denied. He threw all curves and change ups and reached a 3-2 count. But then, he reared back and – fast ball on the outside edge of the piece – swing – strike three! Game over!**

**The Big Train team rushed onto to the field to hug and raise Sommers Turner into the air. They gathered around Coach Bobby, arms linked. They were one unit then – as they had been throughout the tournament.**

**They were the 2018 Cove Creek Tournament champions.**

**They were not individual players anymore. They were a team. And baseball teams win, not individuals.**

**###**

***“Is this heaven, Ray?”***

***“No, it’s Iowa.”***

***--“Field of Dreams”***

**# # # #**

**It was also heaven in Faber, Virginia, on July 14 and 15, 2018, for the great Big Train 2018 13U Cove Creek championship team.**

**That’s right. Team.**

***\*| Lanny Davis is an attorney specializing in crisis management as a co-founder of the Washington D.C. law firm of Davis Goldberg Galper PLLC. He served as Special Counsel to President Clinton in 1996-98. Much more important to him, he is a baseball dad and loves the Washington Nationals.***