

Fred Bowen

PERFECT GAME



AFRED BOWEN
SPORTS STORY

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GAME**

FRED BOWEN
SPORTS STORY *Series*

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Summary: Isaac is a perfectionist, especially when it comes to baseball, and is unable to cope when things go wrong until his coach asks him to help out with a Unified Sports basketball team on which intellectually disabled and other kids play together.

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*For Joanne Pasternack,
who many years ago got me
thinking about this story.*



Chapter

1

O*ne hour to game time!* Isaac Burnett thought as he ran upstairs to his bedroom. *And I'm pitching!*

He headed straight to his dresser and opened the top drawer. The rest of his room was a mess, but his baseball uniform—shirt, pants, and socks—lay neatly in the drawer, just the way he kept it between games.

Isaac began putting on his uniform the same way he did for every Giants game. First he pulled his baseball socks up to his knees, making sure the stripes along each side were straight. Next he pulled his white baseball pants over his socks and tugged at each pant leg so that it ended exactly halfway between his knee and his ankle.

Isaac then unfolded the special blue undershirt (the same blue as the letters that spelled out “Giants” on his game shirt) and pulled it over his head. He slipped his arms into his game shirt and buttoned it slowly, taking care to leave the top button unbuttoned. He didn’t want it scratching his neck when he uncorked his best fastball.

He raced to his parents’ bedroom and stood shoeless before the full-length mirror that hung on their closet door. He checked his uniform from every angle. He adjusted his right pant leg just a bit so that it was perfectly even with the left.

Now he was ready for his hat, which was right where he’d left it—on top of his dresser with the bill of the cap wrapped around a baseball and held snug with two rubber bands. He slipped off the bands, then put the baseball back onto the dresser.

Sweeping his hair back, Isaac placed the hat slowly and carefully on his head. Then he slid his right thumb and forefinger across the bill of the cap. It curved in a smooth, gentle arc, just the way he liked it.

All of his other hats were battered and jumbled together in a basket downstairs, but he saved his Giants hat for game days.

All he needed now were his cleats. They sat cleaned and ready, along with Isaac's baseball glove, at the back door. His mother and father didn't allow cleats in the house.

Before he headed downstairs, he returned to his parents' bedroom and checked the mirror one last time. Everything was just the way he liked it.

The socks.

The pants.

The shirt.

And last but not least, the hat.

Isaac was ready to pitch. He stared unsmiling at himself in the mirror. "Eighteen outs," he said in a determined voice. "That's what I'm going to get today. No runs, no hits, no errors, no walks. Eighteen straight outs. A perfect game."

Chapter 2

Isaac turned toward the Giants catcher Alex Oquendo, crouched behind home plate. He saw Alex flash the one-finger signal and slide his glove slightly to his right. Fastball to the outside corner.

Isaac nodded and started his windup. He rocked back with his knee up high and then whipped the ball and his body forward with all his might. The ball flashed out of his hand and smacked into the catcher's glove. Alex never moved a muscle.

“Strike three!” The umpire raised his right hand into a fist. “You’re out.”

A perfect pitch! Isaac punched the pocket of his glove and walked off the pitcher's mound to the cheers of the crowd. It was the

bottom of the fourth, and Isaac had a perfect game going. No runs, no hits, no errors, no walks.

Isaac's father, Alan Burnett, was in the stands, cheering the loudest. "All right, Isaac!" he shouted through cupped hands. "Six more outs, buddy. Six more outs."

Mr. Park, the Giants coach, was shouting too. "All right, good inning! No runs, no hits, no errors." He glanced at the lineup posted on the dugout wall. "Let's get some more runs this inning. Max, Caden, and Ben are up. Everybody hits."

Isaac headed to the far end of the bench.

His teammates left him alone. They knew that some major league players considered it bad luck to talk to a pitcher when he had a no-hitter going.

He checked the scoreboard.

INNING	1	2	3	4	5	6
Royals	0	0	0	0		
Giants	0	1	1			

The Giants led the Royals 2–0. Isaac glanced over his shoulder to his father and mother in the stands. His dad gave him a quick thumbs-up.

Isaac stretched out his legs and thought back over the first four innings. Twelve Royals batters. Twelve outs. He was on a roll. This could be the day he pitched his perfect game.

Jackson Rhodes—the Giants third baseman—sat down on the bench. “You’re throwing great,” Jackson whispered, sliding a little closer. Isaac didn’t mind him coming over. Jackson had been his best friend since kindergarten.

“Yeah,” Isaac agreed. “I feel good. I got my best stuff today. Everything’s working.”

“Keep it up,” Jackson said. “We’ll get you some more runs.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Isaac said. “We’ve got enough runs already.”

Crack! Max Crosby, the Giants left fielder, smacked a liner into the gap and took off. He rounded first base and sprinted toward second, slipping his foot under the tag. Safe!

Isaac smiled and nodded while Jackson and the rest of the team jumped to their feet and cheered wildly.

“All right, Max!”

“That’s the way to get things started!”

“Let’s get some more hits!”

Jackson sat back down next to Isaac but kept his eyes on the game. “Come on, Caden. Be a hitter!”

Standing in the third-base coach’s box, Coach Park touched the bill of his cap, swept his right hand down his left arm, and clapped his hands.

Isaac elbowed Jackson. “Coach wants Caden to bunt,” he whispered.

His friend nodded. “With the way you’re pitching, I guess he figures if we score one more run we’re a cinch to win.”

Max was ready to run. He had one foot on second base and the other stretched toward third. As the pitch came in, Caden squared around in the batter’s box and held the bat level in front of him. The ball plunked against his bat and rolled slowly out toward third. Max took off. The Royals third baseman rushed in, grabbed the ball

bare-handed, and threw to first for the easy out.

The Giants had a runner on third with one out. Ben Badillo, the Giants shortstop, stepped up to bat.

“Come on, Ben!” Jackson yelled from the bench. “Drive him home.” Ben smacked a high hopper over the pitcher’s mound and through the infield. Max raced toward home and crossed the plate with his hands held high. The Giants were ahead, 3–0!

A fly out and a strikeout later, the Giants ran out to the field and Isaac walked to the mound for the top of the fifth. Two innings to go. Six outs to get.

“We’re up by three runs,” Coach Park called out to his players as they took their positions on the field. “Just throw strikes, Isaac. No walks. Make them be hitters.”

You mean make them be NO hitters, Isaac thought as he toed the pitching rubber. Six more outs. No way the Royals are going to wreck my perfect game.

Isaac started the inning fast, blazing three straight fastballs by the Royals

cleanup hitter. One out, five more to go.

The Giants infielders cheered him on.

“Way to go, Isaac!”

“No batter, no batter!”

“One-two-three inning!”

The next Royals batter knocked a sharp grounder to Isaac’s right. Isaac panicked but Jackson was ready. He gobbled up the grounder, steadied himself, and fired the ball to first base, nipping the runner by a step.

Out!

Isaac let out a deep breath and pointed to Jackson. “Great play.”

Jackson smiled and held up two fingers. “Two outs,” he called to the Giants outfielders.

Isaac stared in at the hitter stepping into the batter’s box. *Okay, get this guy*, Isaac told himself. *Then it’s the bottom of the order and a perfect game. No sweat.*

On the third pitch, the Royals batter sent a slow bouncer spinning toward third base. Jackson charged hard, but the ball took a funny hop and bounced off the heel of his

glove. Just like that, the runner was safe at first and Isaac's perfect game was gone.

"My error," Jackson said, tapping his chest and tossing the ball to Isaac. "You still got your no-hitter."

Coach Park clapped his hands and shouted, "Shake it off, Jackson! Tough hop. Remember, we have a force play at second base. Get the easy out."

Isaac tried to concentrate, but he kept thinking about the bad-hop error. He was pitching great. He had a perfect game going and Jackson blew it.

Four pitches later, another Royals batter was on base with a walk. Isaac paced around the mound to calm himself down.

"Come on, Isaac!" his father shouted. "Throw strikes!"

Isaac got back into position and took a deep breath. He toed the pitching rubber and fired. But the moment the ball left his hand, he knew he was in trouble again. A belt-high fastball across the heart of the plate. An easy pitch to hit.

Crack!

Isaac froze as he watched the line drive go deep into center field and the Royals runner on second speeding toward home. Jared Jankowski fielded the ball cleanly, but his throw skipped by the catcher and smacked against the backstop.

“Come on, Isaac!” Coach Park shouted, pointing behind home plate where Isaac should have been. “Back Alex up. Get your head in the game!”

But Isaac couldn’t get back into his pitching groove. After his next two pitches sailed wide, the Giants infielders traded worried glances. But they kept the patter going, trying to pump him up.

“Come on, Isaac, one more out!”

“No batter. No batter.”

“Bear down! Nothing but strikes.”

Isaac reared back and threw the next fastball with all his strength.

Crack!

Isaac turned quickly. He saw Jared racing back for the ball rocketing to left center field. It almost got away, but Jared leaped high and snagged it for the final out of the

inning. Isaac blew out the big breath he had been holding in.

Coach Park pulled Isaac aside as he entered the dugout. "I'm going to have Liam pinch-hit for you and bring in Charlie to pitch the last inning."

Isaac nodded silently. He didn't want to pitch anyway, now that his perfect game was gone.

"Good job," Coach said as he patted Isaac on the shoulder. "You just let things get away from you a little bit in the last inning. But you gave us a chance to win. That's what a good starting pitcher is supposed to do."

Isaac put on his jacket and slumped down on the end of the bench. The spring afternoon felt colder now that he was out of the game.

Jackson came over and stood in front of Isaac. "Sorry about the error," he said. "I should've had it. The ball took a weird hop."

"Yeah," Isaac said, barely looking up. "You should've had it."

"Hey, lighten up. We'll get you the win,"

Jackson said, turning away. “In case you haven’t noticed, we’re still ahead.”

Isaac sat still and silent. He hardly noticed his teammates cheering and banging their hands against the dugout screen, or the four-run rally that put the Giants safely ahead, 7–1.

Isaac wasn’t thinking about the Giants hits, runs, or even their win. He was thinking about the one bad-hop error and the perfect game that had slipped away.