

MARQSMEN FALL PREVIEW BOOK

MANDATORY FUN

Written by Gary Lundy

Jack wasn't accustomed to waking up at eight o'clock on Saturday mornings.

As a general rule, he preferred to keep the hour foreign, pleasantly eclipsed by long, rhythmicsnores and indulgent down pillows. But on this particular Saturday, the neon red of his nightstand clock shone 8:00 for a pleasant millisecond before the brassy sound of its wake-up call pierced any peace that hung in the room.

Moments later, Jack foundhimselfinhisrelentlessly and perpetually cold shower, a shower which demanded a

certain limberness in one's bodily movements, the absence of which created a comprehensive, head to toe It was a constant freeze. problem, to be sure, but this Saturday morning, at what was now 8:04, Jack found himself incapable of accepting his usual "It'll jolt me up and prepare my mind for the office" justification; there'd be no office this morning, no preparation mental Only the biting necessary. irritant of some company sponsored "mandatory fun".

The rest of the morning was of a similar tone. His favorite cereal, "Banana Nut

Crunch," was out, leaving little option beyond a fantastically bland, fiber-filled bowl of cardboard flakes, a favorite of his wife, who seemed far more concerned with regularity than he'd ever care to admit. His coffee was a touch too strong, lacking in water, or abundant in grinds, and as he made his way out of the kitchen, he sent his toe careening, with impressive velocity, into the leg of the kitchen table.

The sole redeeming factor of this fantastically dismal Saturday morning emerged from the disorganized mess that Jack

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labeled his garage. He entered, polishing off a limp from his earlier toe-table collision, keys in hand, cap on head, looking for his mitt- a week old lump of stiff plasticky leather that he'd bought and treated with oil in an effort to prep for the game. He lifted it from its perch atop a pile of dusted sports paraphernalia, before pivoting to face the door, when a flash of wood struck a far off peripheral in his left eye. There, out of the cartoonishly large pile of what was presumably worthwhile trash, was the narrow, stubbed end of what he used to call "Supernova", a name borne of an adolescent confidence, which precluded any inkling of self-doubt as to the acceptability of naming one's bat, let alone naming it "Supernova".

Jack picked up the bat. He held it in his hand for the first time in what must have been at least a decade. He allowed the familiarity of it's weight, the grooves of its well-worn handle to ignite nostalgic memories. He'd grown since he used the bat. He had purchased it as a five-foot-nine sixteen-year-old first baseman with acne and greasy hair, a stark contrast to the six-foot lawyer with silk suits and obligations to attend his daughter's dance rehearsals. For a brief moment, the familiar excitement of a pending game sedated his irritation.

By the time Jack arrived at the field nearly an hour later, any trace of nostalgia for his days as a ball player had long since passed. He held "Supernova" in his hand as he slammed his car door, sighed, and made his way to the group of balding, overweight, under-sunned men and women, performing incorrect stretches in the dugouts and on the brown-grass field.

"Jack Attack!"

The notion that Jack harbored distaste for the nickname "Jack Attack" never seemed to cross his boss' mind. It was, quite simply, Jack's name. And that was that.

"You're in the other dugout Jack-Attack.





Can't wait to see the former baseball great bite the dust!"

Jack's boss let out a sinister chuckle as Jack nodded, then made his way to the other dugout.

There was a prelude to the game, an irritating announcement about the importance of the event, the value of social interaction outside the walls of the office, and its role in creating a better work-environment. Jack zoned out for most of it. He stared down at "Supernova", and thought about the memories it might have, had it the capacity for remembrance. They'd be memories of glory, memories of youth driven confidence, memories of success. He imagined it as a living being, his only real friend at this baseball diamond an hour east of his home. Then the announcements came to an end, and he took up post at his old haunt, first base.

The vast majority of the first inning was bland in a manner that's entirely fitting to a company ballgame. There were wild pitches, dropped balls, and ill-executed slides. It took all of Jack's energy not to fall asleep on the bag, but when his boss stepped up to the plate two outs later, something strange happened. Jack watched a pitch or two fly by the blur of the overfed body, swinging clumsily for the fences, before suddenly, the ping of a ball colliding with aluminum rang out. Jack looked up to find Andy, a fifty something co-worker, fielding a dribbling ball from his shortstop position. Andy looked up to Jack, cocked his arm behind him and hurled the ball, going for the easy out, as his boss came barreling down the first base line. Instinct took over as Jack lifted his mitt to catch the flying ball, but there was no collision, no smack of leather against leather. Instead, there was the faint draft of the ball whizzing past Jack's body before the cling of a rattling chain-link fence sounded from behind. Jack was dumbstruck. Through years of high-school ball, and three years of college division one, only a handful of these colossal errors stood out.

He sprinted to the ball, removed it from the fence, and threw

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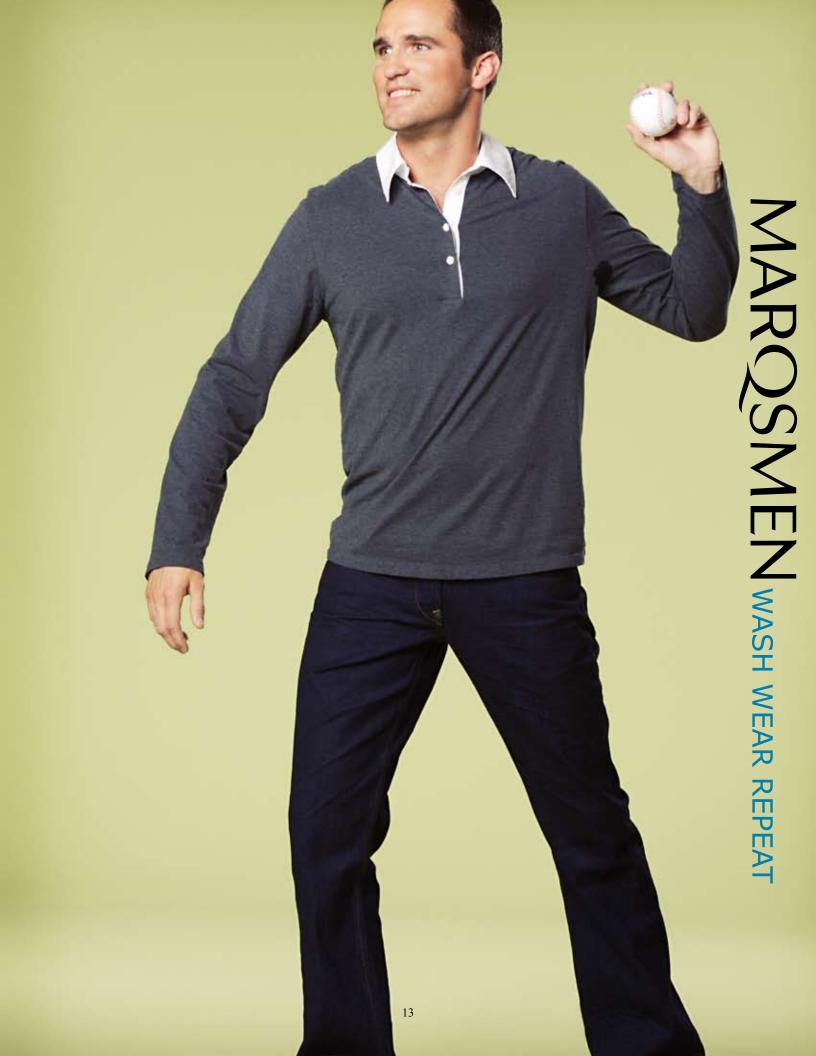


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it to third, the fast approaching destination of his overzealous boss, but the throw was wild. The ball sailed over the head of Pete, the third baseman from Human Resources, and into the recesses of the outfield. His boss rounded third, and, quite unnecessarily dove, head first, into home plate before turning to Jack, and laughing like a rabid hyena.

For a brief moment, Jack felt the sting of humiliation. He felt the disappointment of disappointing, even if only applied to a team of co-workers who would all rather be sleeping, drinking coffee, or nursing a hangover.

"I'm sorry." Jack yelled to his teammates. They squinted beneath the stiff, cardboard brims of their seldom-used caps and nodded as if to say, "I couldn't give a shit, Jack."

Six more innings came and went, until the game stood 3-0, Jack's team on the losing end. Any joy that could have been gleaned from this foray into the world of sports seemed entirely missed by all those participating, excepting of course, for Jack's boss, who gloated like a maniac as he made his way to the mound, to finish off the final bottom inning of the game.

The first two batters popped out, bringing the game an out away from its long-awaited conclusion. Jack breathed a sigh of

relief as he watched Daniel, a fresh-faced paralegal make his way to the plate.

Daniel was uncoordinated to a degree that would astound even the most seasoned of grade school PE teachers, so Jack found himself somewhat astounded when Daniel smacked a line drive over the head of the shortstop and took his place at first. Angie, the company receptionist, was up next, and quite unexpectedly drove a quick dribbler past the second baseman. Next came Alex, who, at the conclusion of a full count, watched the ball sail passed him and land, just too high, in the mitt of the catcher. So, somehow Jack found himself approaching the plate, supernova in hand, with the bases entirely loaded, his team trailing by three.

He felt a slight inclination to throw the game, to end this ridiculous weekend outing. But when Jack stepped into the batter's box, the familiar, gravel beneath what should have been his cleats jarred something deep within him, a long since forgotten competitive drive, a burning desire to connect with the ball and send it sailing over the fences for a grand slam.

Jack looked into the eyes of his boss. He lined up, and waited. The first pitch was wild, in the dirt, saved by the unexpectedly swift instincts of Barney, a sixty-year old partner with halitosis and a penchant for mundane

"JACK ATTACK!"

film talk. Jack took a deep breath and lined up again. The next pitch was perfect, right down the middle, soaring in a slow motion rarely present without the accompaniment of a bombastic string section. Jack took a swing. Supernova made contact, but the ball went foul, just left of left field. Jack stood back from the batter's box and for the first time, he noticed his wife and daughter perched in the center of the rusted, dusted bleachers just beyond left field.

Jack's wife had never seen him play. They'd met after his injury, the excruciating, and debilitating torn ligaments that forced him to give up the game in favor of law school. It was unclear how long she had been sitting there. In fact, it was possible that she wasn't there at all, that Jack had simply manifested her visage to facilitate the necessary coordination to make direct-enough contact to send the ball out into the heavens. But none of this mattered; what mattered was that Jack had seen them: his wife and daughter, clapping and smiling, waiting for Daddy to end the game. Jack smiled back.

"Jack Attack!"

Jack turned to find his boss, arms spread, palms-up, in a gesture of confusion. Jack smiled. He took a step forward and lined up. His boss pulled back, throwing the bulk of his excessively bulky bulk into what sure to be a fastball. Jack watched the ball spin in the air.

He watched it approach the plate. He pulled back. He shifted his weight. He swung. And quite as quickly as it had began, the game was over.







