PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

HEARTBREAK

The Pittsburgh Pirates entered the ninth inning of the seventh game of the 1992 National League playoffs with a two-to-nothing lead over the Atlanta Braves. The Pirates had made the playoffs three years in a row. They had lost the other two. It was a big night and my wife Andee and I let our three young children, Lauren, Rachel and David, ages eight, six and four, stay up to watch. One of them, Lauren, went the distance.

Doug Drabek was the Pirates' pitcher. He was their ace. In the biggest game of his career, Drabek had been masterful for eight innings. With a little luck and a little help, he might have been masterful for nine. But after defensive sub Cecil Espy could not handle a difficult fly he might have caught, a bobbled grounder by the usually reliable second baseman Jośe Lind, and a four-pitch walk to former Pirate Sid Bream, Drabek's night, and in fact his Pirate career, was over.

People often forget how close the Pirates came to getting out of that ninth inning. Stan Belinda came in and got two outs and the Bucs still held a 2-1 lead. Down to their last out, with runners on second and third, the Braves sent up Francisco Cabrera, who had three hits the whole season. There are

people, some of them on the Pirates, who will go to their graves believing that the strike zone was narrowed on Stan Belinda that night. Whether that was true or not, Cabrera smacked a solid single to left, Bream, who may have been the slowest player in baseball, lumbered home from second base with the winning run an instant ahead of the just-wide throw, and it was done.

As the Braves mobbed Bream and Cabrera, Lauren burst into tears. A few minutes later, CBS conducted one of those hard interviews with Pirate Manager Jim Leyland. Leyland rose to the occasion with dignity and grace, and what he said spoke directly to our daughter: This is a lesson for all you kids out there. You don't always win.

Our children are grown now. They have learned this lesson well. In the next eighteen years, they never saw another Pirate team with a winning record.

CHAPTER TWO

EIGHTEEN YEARS

In fact, the Pirates' eighteen-year losing streak was the longest in the history of American professional sports. This would be a better story if I said we lived and died with each of those eighteen miserable seasons. But it wouldn't be true. Are you out of your mind?

Truth be told, we mostly moved on. There was nothing else you could do. But it's a long summer. In a time of life when I let go of a lot of things, I never completely let go of the Pittsburgh Pirates.

I am not sure why. The Pirates were stuck at the bottom of baseball and there didn't seem to be anything they could do about it. This was an era in which some teams would spend five times as much for players as other teams. A time when virtually any good player the Pirates developed soon would be gone. Baseball was broken, and nowhere was it more broken than in Pittsburgh.

Yet the Pirates could scarcely complain. I need to be careful about this because for much of this period I was, of all things, an owner. Our law firm had been one of several local companies who pitched in to keep the team from leaving

town and, when we divided our share, I bought my tiny little piece. We had no real say—certainly I didn't—and rightly so. It was a civic duty. Let me just say it this way. The ownership group of which I was a microscopic part saved baseball in Pittsburgh and they also built one of the most beautiful stadiums that anyone ever built. But in an era when small market management had to be better, a lot better, they were not better. They did not invent Moneyball. They did their best but they did not have a good enough plan.

And when you lose for eighteen years in a row, nobody wants to hear it.

CHAPTER THREE

THE IMPOSSIBLE PIRATES

It wasn't always that way...

In 1962, when I was five years old, I used to listen to a wonderful record called "The Impossible Pirates." It told the history of the Pirates, the World Championship teams of 1909 and 1925, and the thirty-five year drought until the World Series of 1960, when the Pirates lost games by 16-3, 12-0 and 10-0 yet somehow found a way to win the only World Series ever to end with a home run in the seventh game. Each year, to this day, hundreds of people gather at the small preserved portion of the left field wall of long-ago demolished Forbes Field on October 13 at one o'clock in the afternoon to listen to the radio broadcast of that seventh game, culminating every year at 3:36 p.m., the exact moment of Bill Mazeroski's timeless blast over that wall and into Schenley Park.

In the 1960s, for me and just about everyone I knew, the Pirates were a part of the rhythms of a thousand spring and summer nights. More than anything, it was Bob Prince, the Gunner, backed by his sidekicks, first Jim Woods, the Possum, and later the giant and gentle-souled Nellie King. Bob Prince was the kind of play-by-play announcer who doesn't exist anymore. He was an unabashed homer, a legendary carouser,

and he was not always the most credible. But he made the game exciting and he made you care, and they have never come close to replacing him.

In 1975, after twenty-seven years, Bob Prince was unceremoniously fired to a great public outcry. Ten years later, in an unspoken act of apology, the Pirates brought back a frail and raspy Bob Prince to announce the fourth inning of a game between the Pirates and the Los Angeles Dodgers. The last-place Pirates scored nine runs in that fourth inning and, a month later, Bob Prince died.

For a decade after the 1960 World Championship, the Pirates were in the middle. They did have one magical summer, in 1966, the year of the Green Weenie and a classic three-team pennant race between the Dodgers of Koufax, the Giants of Mays and the Pirates of Clemente. But it was not until the 1970s, in a new venue, Three Rivers Stadium, in the round, cookie-cutter style of the era (already past and not lamented), that the Pirates hit stride.

In the 1970s, the Pirates won two world championships and four other division titles. It was the decade of "The Lumber Company" and "The Family." But the team of teams, at least for me, was in 1971, for reasons that will be explained.

There was much to love about the Pittsburgh Pirates of 1971. They had a Hall of Fame bomber in the prime of his career, Willie Stargell. A group of excellent young hitters who had come up together in the late 1960s. A good if not great pitching staff, led by Steve Blass along with Dock Ellis, who claimed to have once pitched a no-hitter on LSD and to have worn curlers on the mound and who started the All-Star Game that year in Detroit and gave up a home run to Reggie Jackson that may not have landed yet.

Above all there was Roberto Clemente. The Great One. Thirty-seven years old and not an ounce of fat on him. A year and a half later, he would be dead. In the summer of 1971, I saw Roberto Clemente play baseball day after day. Anything that can be done on a baseball field he did that summer, and then, in the 1971 World Series for which he always will be remembered, he did all of them at once. There are people I hear from time to time who would exclude Roberto Clemente from the pantheon of the greatest baseball players. Those people are wrong.

The Pirates' last World Championship came at the end of the 1970s. Most of the stars of 1971 were gone, but Willie Stargell was still there, a grand old man by then but much more than that. In fact, in 1979, he was the co-MVP of the regular season, the MVP of the playoffs and the MVP of

the World Series. Stargell was joined by another player who could have gone to the Hall of Fame, although he never will. Dave Parker, six feet five and 235 pounds, with the speed of a running back. He was known as the Cobra and he also had a little Muhammad Ali in him, including his famous if unfulfilled guaranty that "when the leaves turn brown, I will be wearing the Triple Crown."

Dave Parker was a great player for the Pirates in 1979. In 1978, he was the best baseball player on the planet. The stunning and sadly forgotten comeback he led from eleven and a half games back in August 1978 fell just short. But not before Parker led them to a dramatic doubleheader sweep over the Phillies on the last Friday night of the season, news excitedly reported to me at law school just before midnight from a pay phone at Three Rivers Stadium by the girl who then was my new girlfriend and now is my wife of twenty-eight years. The Bucs did not quite make it in 1978 but they set the stage for "The Family" in 1979—and for mine too.

1979 was a watershed year for the Pirates, and also for Pittsburgh, which, it turned out, was looking down the barrel of a devastating collapse of the steel industry that would shake and permanently change the region. For the Pirates and their fans, the 1980s were as trying as the 1970s had been thrilling. During a disastrous period in the mid-1980s,

a proud franchise imploded on the field; Pittsburgh hosted an infamous federal drug trial that tarnished the name of many of baseball's most beloved players, including Stargell, and even more so Parker; and the Pirates came perilously close to leaving town.

But, by the end of the decade, the franchise had been saved—by the first of two community efforts, an oddball yet strangely gifted general manager named Syd Thrift, a career minor leaguer in Leyland in his first manager job, and a group of superb young players. One of them turned out to be one of the greatest players who has ever played baseball who, for his trouble—including MVP seasons for the Pirates in 1990 and 1992—quickly became and remains, eighteen years later, by far the most despised athlete in the history of Pittsburgh.

All in all, by 1992, my lifetime as a Pirate fan had been blessed. Three World Championships, each won in dramatic fashion. Seven other division championships. Clemente. Mazeroski. Stargell. Parker. Bonds.

But nothing in life is free. It was time to pay up.