

# A Tough Call

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and the Chicago History Museum

“So what do you think, Danny?” My best friend, Terence, was looking at me intently. We were on our way home from our Little League game. We’d won by three runs. I was still pumped. Baseball was everything to me.

I shrugged. “I don’t know, Terence. It sounds pretty good, but—”

“But what? Coach Thomas is a jerk! Why should we keep making him look good? The guy treats us like show dogs when everybody’s watching and like mutts once we’re off the field.”

Terence was getting riled up, but I couldn’t blame him. Everyone knew Coach Thomas was the meanest coach in the division.

“We could get back at Hawk at the same time,” Terence added. He had a point. Hawk was Coach Thomas’s son, a big bully who liked scaring kids. He was one of our better players, but having him on our team didn’t make anybody

happy. Except his dad, of course. Coach Thomas gave Hawk special treatment and didn’t try to hide it. The two of them walked around like king and crown prince.

“Come on,” Terence urged. “We get a couple of other guys in on it, and we just throw a few games against Bill’s team.”

Bill Moss was the one who had suggested the idea to Terence. Bill, a fifth grader too, played for our biggest rival team. Now our two teams were set to face off in the division championship. Bill’s team was driven to win, Terence said, because their coach had promised them plenty of good stuff if they did.

“Just let them win it, huh?” That was the deal, as Terence had explained it. In return, we’d get to see Coach humiliated. Plus, Bill was rich. If we threw the championship, we’d each get fifty

bucks. Not to mention, we were invited to spend two weeks at his parents' big, fancy lake house.

Summer was still on its way. But Chicago was baking already. Getting out of the blistering heat and living it up at some lakeside mansion for a while sounded pretty good to me. Plus, we'd become better friends with Bill. Maybe even switch to his team. It would serve Coach right if we could pull that off.

"Let's do it, Danny. A pitcher like you could make it happen, no problem. And I can just flub up a little in the outfield." Terence sounded way confident. "We can always win back the championship next year. Or better yet, move over to Bill's team."

I couldn't believe Terence was voicing my own thoughts. But hey, that's why we were best friends. As we neared my house, I mentally pictured the whole thing: hanging on a big private

beach, barbeque cook-outs by the lake, and baseball games on a huge green lawn. Being buddies with cool Bill Moss. And the cash? I was a diehard White Sox fan, with barely any allowance. I could even buy tickets to home games.

I nodded slowly. "Okay, yeah," I said. "I'll think about it and tell you for sure tomorrow."

Terence grinned as we got to my front door. "Think of that fifty bucks, man!" As he started off to his own house, he shouted a final thought. "And a better summer vacation than we'd ever see around here!" He was right about that, no question.

As soon as I got in the house, I saw a big, thickly padded package lying on the hall table. It had a white envelope taped to it with my name on it.

“What’s this?” I asked, picking it up and bringing it into the kitchen where my parents were.

Dad smiled. “Grandma Celia sent you that. It’s something Grandpa Charlie left you.”

Hearing his name, I felt sad. Grandpa Charlie had passed away recently. He had been as big a White Sox fan as I was. But he and Grandma had moved from Chicago to Florida eight years ago. So he hadn’t been around for many games since I’d been alive.

But during the previous season’s World Series, in October 2005, he and I had spent plenty of time on the phone discussing the games. The Sox had not just made it to the series. This time they had finally won! The thrill of it had riled us up good!

“What is it, Dad?” I asked now, shaking the package to see if it rattled. It didn’t.

“You’ve got plenty of time to see for yourself before dinner,” Dad said. Both he and Mom were grinning. They obviously knew what it was.

“I think you’ll be pretty pleased, Danny,” Mom added. I didn’t waste a minute. Before they could say another word to spoil the surprise, I was up in my room opening the card that came with the package.

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The note, from my grandmother, said, “Daniel dear, As you probably already know, Grandpa Charlie started out early as a Sox fan, too. It was one of the many things he loved sharing with you. He always said your love of the White Sox proved you had plenty of his blood in

your veins!” I smiled at those words and went on reading the note.

“The enclosed have been tucked away for years and years in an old trunk. We’d practically forgotten all about them, in fact! Grandpa Charlie always wanted you to have them someday, especially since they were created by your great-grandfather Daniel Craig, your namesake. I’m sure you’ll enjoy taking this trip ‘back in time.’ Much love, Grandma C.”

I put the note aside and picked up the package, bursting with curiosity. I opened it carefully and slowly pulled out its contents—two big, thick scrapbooks. Both had hard black leathery covers and were stuffed with pages bound together with gold cord. Inside each cover were handwritten dates. The first said 1915–1918. The other was dated 1919–1922. These books, I understood, represented eight years of

my great-grandpa Daniel’s life. He’d begun his first scrapbook when he was twelve years old, only two years older than I was.

The pages of both scrapbooks smelled kind of old and musty. But as I quickly glanced through them, I saw that they weren’t filled with a bunch of matchbooks and napkins from fancy restaurants, like some others I’d seen. To me, these were books of magic, both devoted entirely to the White Sox!

I knew very little about their early years, but I did know the Sox team had got its start in 1900, as part of the American League. It was hard to imagine that Great-grandpa Dan had been born only three years later!

Dad had also told me that the Sox’s owner, Charles Comiskey, had first named his team the White Stockings. But in 1902 they had shortened it to the White Sox. I laughed when Dad laid that

news on me. He had laughed, too. “You think that’s bad!” he said. “Here’s one fact I bet you didn’t know, Dan. The very first Chicago team known as the White Stockings wasn’t even the White Sox. The first team to use that name was actually today’s Cubs!”

I laughed. “Wow, that’s unbelievable! And whoever changed it was definitely thinking right!”

Now, I started at the beginning of the first scrapbook, wanting to slowly appreciate every page. On page one, a lone Charles Comiskey trading card stared back at me. Grandma was right. I was diving into a trip back in time, and it was going to be good.

My great-grandpa had saved ticket stubs from games at Comiskey Park on the South Side, too. On one page he wrote that the Sox had originally played at a place called South Side Park, at 39<sup>th</sup> and Wentworth. But in 1910,

Charles Comiskey built a new stadium. That was Comiskey Park, of course.

My team spent 81 years playing there, until it was torn down and replaced by U.S. Cellular Field. As I read about it, I realized that watching home games at “the Cell” put me just across the street from where Great-grandpa Dan had watched the Sox at Comiskey.

Seeing all those ticket stubs made me think again about that fifty dollars. I was as mad at Coach Thomas as everybody else was. With that money I could buy my own tickets, maybe get a new bat, a lot of stuff. Yeah, it would serve Coach right. And we’d benefit, too. I was feeling more and more justified.

Other souvenirs that Great-grandpa Dan had saved included game score books, pennants with players’ pictures on them, and a photograph of a commemorative pocket watch from the Sox’s

1917 World Series championship. It was all so cool!

But it was the newspaper clippings that really hooked me. Especially the ones about the new players Comiskey brought onto the team in 1915. Like a true fan, I guess, I zeroed right in on the stories about a right fielder named Joe Jackson. Joe, I read, had come up dirt poor from South Carolina. He couldn't even read or write. But when it came to playing baseball, no one could touch him.

"Shoeless" Joe, they called him. The stories said Joe had once played a game in his stocking feet because a pair of new shoes was giving him blisters. Someone in the stands called him a shoeless son of a gun, and people laughed. Joe didn't like it and never went shoeless again. But the name stuck.

As I continued to read, I began to understand why the long-ago White Sox fans idolized Shoeless Joe. He was the team's not-so-secret weapon. The way the reporters described him, Joe was dynamite on that field, with or without shoes. He was the greatest hitter you'd ever want to watch blast a hardball out into space. They said he had a powerful natural swing, made for hitting homers. His ball playing in the field took their breath away, too. The sportswriters made Joe out to be some kind of miracle worker out there on the baseball diamond. I was an instant fan, wishing I'd been around back then to see him play.

A few pages on, I came to a bunch of stories about the White Sox's thrilling 1917 World Series win. By then, Comiskey had put together a power-packed team, so it was no surprise they won. Every page I turned proved that my team

really was the best—and had been for practically a hundred years. I was floating on a high cloud!

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Just before Mom called me down to dinner, Terence phoned me. “So?” he asked, too impatient to wait 'til the next day to get an answer, I figured.

I didn't say anything for a second, weighing the choices. It bugged me more than a little to think of losing baseball games on purpose. But the payoff was pretty tempting. And anyway, next time around we could do major damage!

But still. The nerves in my jaw were twitching. Why was Terence putting pressure on me right in the middle of my awesome White Sox flashback?

“I already talked to Jake,” Terence pushed. Jake was another kid on our team, a good hitter. “He's in.”

I thought for a minute. Terence was my best friend. But if I said I didn't want to do it, he'd probably pester me forever. Or never stop calling me a loser or a chicken. “All right, all right,” I replied, trying not to sound annoyed. “Fine. Let's do it then.”

“Excellent!” Terence said, obviously relieved.

But before I even got a chance to tell him about my scrapbooks, he was saying goodbye. I sat for a minute trying not to think anything, one way or another, but it was impossible. What were we doing? Whatever it was, money and a fat time at the lake would make up for it, I told myself.

I was still thinking along these lines as I sat down at the dinner table. But my family's eager

questioning about the scrapbooks stopped all that. I launched in right away about my new hero, Joe.

“Shoeless Joe was probably the greatest White Sox player who ever lived! They called his baseball glove ‘the place where triples go to die!’”

My older brother, Dave, laughed. He always laughed at me whenever I got really excited.

“You’re right, Dan,” my dad agreed, “but Joe lost his moral compass.”

“What’s that mean?” I asked.

“What he did was a shame,” Mom said. She glanced over at me. “All those boys involved put aside what they knew was right, just for the money. That’s what your father is talking about.”

“I guess you haven’t read up on the Black Sox scandal yet,” Dave said. I hadn’t. I didn’t have a clue what they were all talking about.

“It’s all in the second scrapbook, Dan,” Dad explained. “You’ll find it all in there. But here’s the long and the short of it. What would you do if you were in the World Series, and someone offered you money to intentionally lose?”

“*What?*” I said, stopped in my tracks. I felt like my family’s eyes were all glued to me. Before I was forced to say anything more, my brother spoke up.

“The mighty White Sox threw the World Series of 1919, Danny boy. On purpose. For money.”

“I haven’t really looked at the other scrapbook yet,” I replied, but my voice sounded small. I bit into my corn on the cob, crunching down hard.

“The Sox had it in the bag,” Dave informed me now. “They would’ve creamed Cincinnati. But

some big gamblers paid eight players to intentionally play bad and lose to the Reds.”

“Including Joe Jackson,” Dad added, shaking his head. “He took \$5,000.”

This hit me hard. “But Dave said ‘Black Sox,’ not White Sox,” I spoke up, confused.

“An old legend says the team got nicknamed the Black Sox because Comiskey wouldn’t pay for cleaning their uniforms,” Dad told me. “The players had to pay out of their own pockets. So apparently they didn’t splurge on laundry.”

“When the press found out about the payoffs, they had a field day,” Dave continued. “Calling them the ‘Black Sox’ took on a whole new meaning.”

“Everybody says Mr. Comiskey treated those boys just terribly,” Mom piped up.

“Comiskey was a cheapskate and a bully,” Dave went on, like he knew anything about the Sox, or their owner. “They were at the top of the league, but he paid them less than worse players got.”

“So maybe the guys just wanted to get back at him,” I suggested, wanting to justify my team’s actions. “Because they deserved more.”

“Could be,” Dad said, being all reasonable. “But the way they went about ‘getting more’ wasn’t exactly on the up-and-up, was it, Dan?”

When I didn’t reply, Dave said bluntly, “It’s what you call selling your soul to the devil.” He cackled melodramatically.

“Whatever,” I replied, leaning back and folding my arms across my chest. I was done with dinner. Even dessert didn’t interest me anymore. I excused myself and went back to my

room. I needed to get a good look at that second scrapbook.

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Sure enough, it was all there. Just as Dad and Dave had claimed, the White Sox had been the huge favorites to win the 1919 World Series. But overall, they did lousy. Out of eight games against Cincinnati, the Sox lost five. They even gave away the final game to the Reds, getting beat ten to five. The Cincinnati Reds whipped the greatest team playing that year and became the 1919 World Series champs. It was hard to accept, even for me in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The papers made it clear that betting on baseball games was a pretty big business back then. Some of the reporters complained that

gambling was completely ruining baseball and had to be stopped.

As I read the vivid details of the newspaper stories, it felt like history was coming alive. But the facts didn't exactly make me happy. The plan to throw the series did involve eight guys. Later, two confessed the whole thing, including an important pitcher named Eddie Cicotte. The other was Shoeless Joe. Joe admitted he'd agreed to take \$20,000 to lose. But after getting \$5,000, he claimed he didn't see another penny.

I studied the baseball cards of Eddie and Shoeless Joe that my grandfather had included. They were real collector's items, I realized. My own Sox stuff, like the t-shirts and pennants I had, might also be valuable one day. As I went on reading, I thought about passing those things down, too, just like my grandfather had. I was glad there were no scandal stories though!

After Joe and Eddie confessed, a few other players in on the plan came forward, too. The guy who had started the whole thing was first baseman Chick Gandil. He had gone to the gamblers with an offer to throw the series. Then he brought the others in. Everyone said Chick got away with more cash than any of the rest of them. But there was no proof.

Even if Joe hadn't gotten the full \$20,000, he did—as Dad had pointed out—accept money to help the Sox lose. Some of the news stories said that, after taking the cash, Joe must have had second thoughts, because he tried to get out of playing in the series. Comiskey wouldn't bench him though. So whether or not the great Shoeless Joe played straight or not was an unanswered question. I took a deep breath and read on. But my stomach was churning.

Reading about Charles Comiskey was another eye-opener. Despite the pictures of him, I imagined him with a face like Coach Thomas. Everything I read seemed to agree with what Dave had said. When it came to the way he treated his team, Comiskey did come off like kind of a dictator. Refusing to pay the team's cleaning bills and things like train fares to away games was just a small part of his tactics.

The papers even mentioned the Sox's poor salaries. The top guys—of the ones who were in on blowing the World Series anyway—only made \$6,000 a year. Some got as little as \$3,000. Here they were, the best team in baseball at the time. But guys on less talented teams were making a whole lot more. The unfairness of it, I had to admit, made it easy to see why they'd been so tempted by the money.

Dad knocked on my door just as I was finishing reading about the trial. There was a trial, of course, since what those players had done was illegal.

“It says here,” I told him, “that in September of 1920, all eight players were indicted. What does that mean, Dad?”

“It means they were formally charged with a crime,” he explained. “From that point on, they were out of the game. Suspended from play for the rest of the season.”

“Yeah,” I said sadly, “and with the best guys gone, the team wasn’t any good at all.”

Dad nodded. “You’re right, Dan. They had a pretty poor season.”

“So how much would a \$3,000 salary be equal to today?” I asked him, thinking about all the money involved. “Or \$6,000?”

Dad was good at calculating stuff like that. “I’d say \$3,000 would equal about \$35,000 today, Dan. And \$6,000? Probably a little more than \$71,000.”

“Wow!” It seemed like a lot, but it was still unfair. I’d also read about a rule back then saying players couldn’t even switch teams. I thought about what it might take to switch to Bill’s team.

“I can see how the Sox might want to take the money,” I said finally.

Dad looked at me sharply. “Can you?”

I looked down at the open scrapbook, avoiding his gaze. “Well,” I said, “it might be tempting.”

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“So if you had been on the jury, you would have found those guys innocent?”

“The jury *did* decide they were innocent!” I exclaimed, pointing out the trial article. That was exactly what happened. At the Black Sox trial, in 1921, fans filled the courtroom. And after hearing all the testimony, the jury delivered a verdict of not guilty for all eight guys. The jury members must have been big fans, too, I figured. Who wasn’t?

When that verdict was announced, the whole place broke into enthusiastic cheering. People in the courtroom went wild, even picking up some of the players and carrying them around the room like heroes. It was like another game had been won.

I felt satisfied to be showing my dad the article about all that, proof in black and white. He smiled. But his eyes dug into me like he was trying to read every secret I had. Bugged, I turned away again. In my mind, I saw myself

lounging by the lakeside, a big wad of money in my pocket. It would be so fine!

“Why do you think that happened, Dan?” Dad asked me now. His friendly voice forced me to meet his gaze. “Everyone knew fixing games was wrong, so how could a whole jury let them off?”

“Because they were getting burned!” I replied at once. “Comiskey owed them something! I guess the fans wanted to give it to them.”

Dad shrugged. “They weren’t happy, that’s true. But they were weak, too. Just too darn weak.”

Dad didn’t spell out what he meant by that, but I got it. Those guys caved. And even though they got off in a court of law, they had still *broken* the law. That was the weird part, I realized. Just because the court says you’re innocent, maybe

you really aren't. Those eight guys must have ended up regretting what they'd done. Because in the end, they still had to pay.

Right after the verdict was announced, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, the high commissioner of baseball, made another announcement. Judge Landis was tough, and he wanted the public to respect the sport. So he took harsh measures, aiming to make baseball an honest game. Landis banned all eight players from major league baseball forever. To keep on playing, Joe had to go back to the minor leagues. He wasn't the only one.

Those players had had a chance for greatness, and they'd blown it. None of their lives ever added up to much afterward, I found out later. But Joe still had fans, including me. And I'd always be one. But still.

After Dad and I said goodnight and he left my room, I sat on my bed for a long time paging through Great-grandpa Dan's awesome scrapbooks. They were more valuable, I realized now, than I had ever expected them to be. They'd given me something I hadn't expected.

I held the telephone in my hand for a long time, too, before dialing Terence. After he heard it was me, he waited to see where the conversation would go. I told him my grandfather had left me an amazing gift. I shared a few details about the scrapbooks and some of the Sox stuff. I mentioned how my great-grandfather had put them together, bit by bit. But I didn't tell him about the Black Sox scandal.

Finally I got around to bringing up our own plan. "Listen, Terence," I said, "we can't go through with Bill Moss's idea, you know that, right?"

“What are you talking about?” Terence countered. “It’s a done deal. Easy. Worth it, too.”

“Not worth it,” I said. I’d wavered earlier, but now I knew where I stood.

“Ahh, man, come on! Think about it,” Terence urged. He started reeling off the benefits. “Some money in your pocket for once. Getting one over on Coach and Hawk. And a great time in Moss-ville.”

“I know, I know. But listen, come over tomorrow, okay? You really need to see these scrapbooks.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” Terence shot back.

“It does,” I replied. “I swear. You have to read about this thing called the Black Sox scandal.”

“Sounds interesting,” he said.

“More than interesting,” I told him. “You’ll see.” I didn’t have to explain further. The scrapbook would tell it all, page by page. Grandpa Charlie’s gift was for both of us, and there was no way Terence wouldn’t get it. I knew he would. After all, he was my best friend.