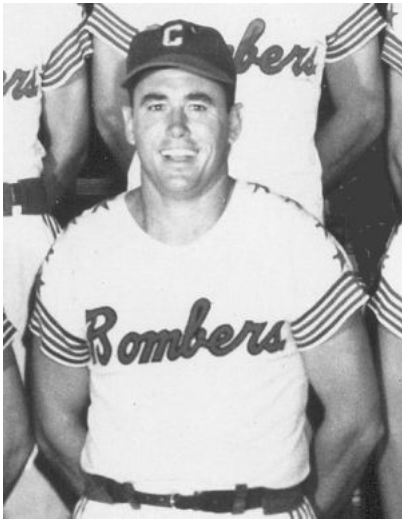


# The Greatest Moment

Mike Moore

**God had a special ending to this sporting event.**



Nothing even comes close.

I am 73 years old. I have seen many things in life, met lots of people, and traveled quite a bit. I have been involved in many ways with athletics. I have participated in several sports and watched dozens, perhaps hundreds, of games, contests, and matches. Some sporting events involved my children and grandchildren so I was there, cheering. I was present for some because I was involved as an official, such as the scorekeeper. I was the coach sometimes. I have covered other events for several different newspapers.

I have met good, average, and awful athletes and non-athletes. I have seen skilled performances and some that would best be forgotten. I have interviewed players and coaches, winners and losers. I have heard eloquent statements and trite-sounding quotes.

With all of this background, one moment stands all alone as the most incredible thing I have ever seen on an athletic field or court.

The ballpark is gone as are many of the people who participated in or witnessed the event. Although the game was broadcast on a local radio station, and some black and white photos were taken, to the best of my knowledge, no motion pictures were shot. It was at the dawn of the video tape era, so there was probably no visual record made except for the photos.

It is the second week of September, 1957. I am 12 years old. The place is Jack Russell Stadium in Clearwater, Florida. The Amateur Softball Association Men's World Softball Tournament has come down to its final night. There are 7,000 very loud people in the stands. This is not slowpitch, or "lob ball" as we called it. This is men's fastpitch, with pitchers who fire the ball at literally blinding speed. The pitches rise and drop and do strange things during their brief 46,' 6" journey to the plate.

The ASA now has about 70 different national tournaments, offering titles in all kinds of divisions. There is fastpitch, slowpitch, and modified. But in 1957, there was no Class A or B, fastpitch, just one title for men and another for women. It was in the days before many other countries discovered softball, hence the name "World Tournament." In later years, this event would be termed, the "National." Thirty-nine years would pass before the sport made it to the

Olympics. On this night, and in this place, the real bat and ball champion of Planet Earth would be decided.

The tournament was played with a double-elimination format. The 20+ teams played until every squad except one had lost two games.

On one side that night were the young challengers, the Sealmasters of Aurora, Illinois. They were very good, and in future years would win this annual event four times. Aurora had one loss in the tournament and would need to win twice to take home the crown. The heart and soul of the Seals was a big, strong, right-handed pitcher named Harvey Sterkel, nicknamed "The Horse." Aurora had other outstanding players, such as outfielder Ned Wickersham and catcher Leroy Hess.

In the other dugout were the defending champs, the Clearwater Bombers. The team had already won crowns in 1950, 1954, and 1956. They had finished in the runner-up spot in 1949, 1951, 1953, and 1955. Some said the Bombers were too old to defend their title. The crowd had come out to see a great matchup. Clearwater had rolled through the tournament undefeated and needed only one win. They had not been scored on in their march to the finals and the previous night had handed Aurora its one loss.

The hometown club had some amazing athletes and they played well together. An unbelievable number, six of the starting nine Clearwater players, would one day be named to the ASA Hall of Fame when their playing days were ended. They had Doug Mason at third, Nolan Whitlock at short, Jerry Curtis at second, Bob Sprentall in left, and Bob Forbes in right. The other starters, centerfielder Jim Ellis, first baseman Joe Lewis, and catcher Ed Riddell, were also very good.

And doing the pitching was Herb Dudley. Experts can argue and discuss till the cows come home, but I saw all of the greatest pitchers as they played with or against Clearwater, and Herb Dudley was the greatest softball pitcher who ever lived. End of discussion.

Herb had struck out 55 men in a 21-inning World Tournament game in 1949. He came back after a ten-minute rest and struck out 12 more. That's 67 strikeouts in one night. He had racked up many other great performances since throwing Clearwater's first pitch in 1940. Herb had no nickname. He was just called Herb or Herbert.

So the stage was set: challenger against champ, new star against veteran, visitors vs. home favorite. The teams matched play for play, pitch for pitch. Shortstop Whitlock, third baseman Mason, and leftfielder Sprentall made plays which could really not be described. It was one of those times people wished for film or video.

The game went 18 innings. Clearwater won by a 1-0 score but there were really no losers. And no, with the fielding gems, hitting, and pitching, it was not a boring 18 innings.

The time came to hand out the awards. Team trophies were passed out and All-World players named. Dudley was called to the microphone to accept a special pitching award. Herb stepped up, with his cap in his hand, and bowed his head. He did not praise himself, or his teammates, or the city, or the fans. He thanked God for giving him the strength to pitch the game.

He led the crowd in prayer. I saw it. I heard it. The 7,000 stood silent. The expression, “not a dry eye in the house,” was literally true. After the simple prayer, Herb walked back to the dugout.

Herb is gone now. He was a part of my life for more than 60 years. And if they play softball in heaven, he is in the pitching circle with the number 13 on his back, rocking and firing.

And just as he did here on earth, he never gets tired.