

FUNERAL FOR A FRIEND

By Elson Armstrong, Jr.
I received the sad news this past Tuesday from Winston-Salem that it was all over. Death had come not with a bang but a whimper. It was totally expected. It was just a matter of time for the patient had been "sick" for the past two months. In a way it was a relief. Why should someone continue to suffer like that?

With "his" passing came time to reflect on the good times. What a difference a year makes! Just last year this time, the patient had seemed hooked on the supernatural as everything "he" touched seemed to turn to gold. But now, in the late waning days of August, "he" died after a summer of pain and heartbreak. The patient that I keep referring to was actually a collective of patients — the 1981 Durham Bulls.

Yes, the 10-9 loss at Winston-Salem last Tuesday mathematically eliminated the Bulls from this year's Carolina League pennant race, but they had been kayoed out of the main action as long as two

months before. Murphy's Law was in prime form for this club: "Anything that can go wrong will go wrong". It was bad enough to bring tears to baseball fans who had already been disillusioned by the antics in the major leagues this season.

The Durham Bulls, who had started this season where they left off in 1980, exit this season a beaten and battered bunch of young men.

A club that once laughed when they were behind 8-0 because they knew that in a flash they would tie the score, in the end was having trouble holding on to 6-1 leads in the ninth inning!

A team that used to show flashes of big league brilliance was reduced to a squad that could hardly turn little league plays!

A team that was virtually injury free in 1980, at times appeared to be a walking MASH unit!

For the first time since minor league ball returned to Durham, the home fans found cause to boo their heroes and nobody,

including the manager and players, blamed them.

Yeah, the breaks definitely didn't fall Durham's way this season.

Consider this: The Bulls lost the first half pennant by one game (to Kinston) and they played one less game (due to rainouts) than the champion Eagles.

The Bulls had a chance to tie on the last day of the first half if they swept a double header (at home), but they only managed a split. In the game that they lost, they left the potential tying winning runs in scoring position as the game ended.

In the second half, the Bulls quickly took the lead in the Southern Division, but things quickly went to pot.

It all seemed to fall apart one hot July night when with the game tied and two out bottom of the ninth. The Bulls seemed destined for victory but catcher Steve Stieb ignored a "stop

sign" at third and was thrown out at the plate. The Bulls lost that one in extra innings and things were not quite the same at the old ball park after that.

The crowds still turned out (over 136,000 for the season at press time) but the magic was gone. It was a tragic scene. The Bulls constantly began to lose home stands. Players got injured (Brad Komminsk was even injured when he turned an ankle in the dugout when he stepped on a cup!). The relief pitching became a joke, the bats went silent, and the fans could only hang their heads.

Manager "Dirty" Al Gallagher tried all the baseball superstitions — to no avail. The season was a crop out!

The Durham fans deserve an award. Even in the worst of times, they led the league in attendance for the second year in a row. The booing in time became sympathetic cheers. They didn't believe in kicking the team when it was down.

There are some good

memories of this season. Brad Komminsk's run for the league triple crown; a ten-game winning streak in May; the time the Bulls were featured on the ABC program "Nightline"; the time the Chicken paid us a visit; rubbing shoulders with Hank Aaron at the League All-Star game; working with a great bunch of media people for the second straight year; and, watching the antics of the colorful Durham Bulls' fans.

Yep, it's time to bury this fateful season and look toward the future, but before we close out, it's time to thank "Dirty" Al Gallagher and his family for two memorable years in our city. We hope they've enjoyed Durham as much as Durham has enjoyed having them here.

To the Bulls players, I say, keep your chin up! The sun will shine again. And, despite it all, you have given this city many sunshine days over the past two years. We'll see some of you next year. For those moving on, good luck!



Stargell Gets VFW Award

Pittsburgh Pirates' Willie Stargell is given the Hall of Fame award by the Veterans of Foreign Wars at their convention in Philadelphia last week. UPI Photo

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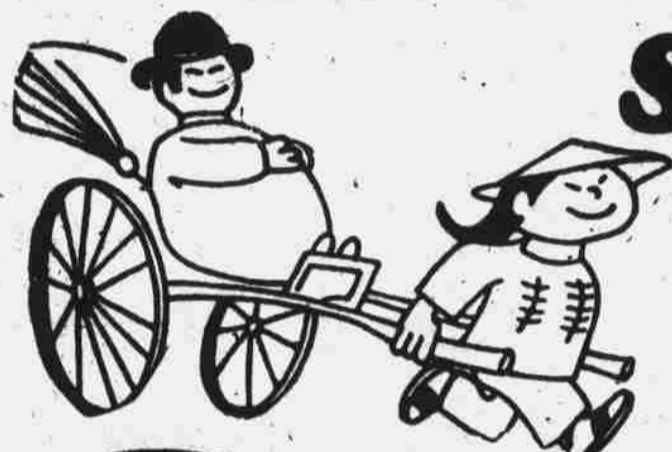
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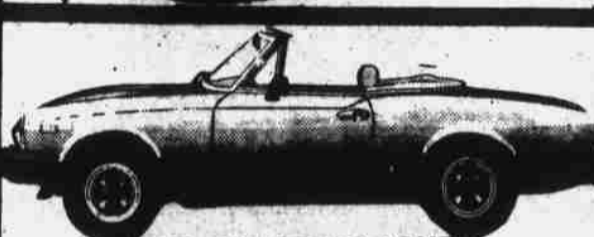
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