

Short Story 200*: The On-Deck Circle

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Marc Aramini — 22 Apr 2015, 15:47

THE ON DECK CIRCLE

"The On Deck Circle" first appeared in the Autumn 2008 edition of *Postscripts Magazine*. It has never been collected.

SUMMARY

In a future where sensationalism is the only thing that keeps ratings, a new sport which was once a television hit involving cruise ships and boating uses the rules of baseball, but has been slipping in the ratings because of its low scoring nature and the absence of dramatic home runs. The minds behind the show get aging retired baseball stars like Pittsburgh Pirate player Scooter Scarlata to bat for them, assuming their previous sports experience will produce more dramatic entertainment.

In this sport, the batter on the deck of a ship throws a kind of bat at an approaching boat. If a hit is made and remains undeflected by the crew of the boat, the batter jumps with his team overboard and boards the "ball", where he or she will then attempt to navigate it to a scoring position on land past the defending yachts and cruise ships.

The game begins at night as the fog is starting to close in, so that the live audience can experience it during prime time TV (normally 8 to 10 pm, and the Caribbean is on Eastern Standard Time). An attractive blond girl who speaks with a lisp named Lisa Locklin goes up to bat before Scooter. The pitching ship, the *M.S. Charlotte Amalie*, prepares the next boat to be "pitched". The assistant director says that Lisa is "window dressing — You can't have a hit show without sex." When Scooter tries to claim that the World Series didn't need sex to appeal to its audience, he is shut down. The director only cares about ratings, and they are slipping because the game is too difficult to get hits. The director commands Scooter to score, saying that the pitches will be predetermined, a slider, a change-up, and then the pitch of Scooter's choice. Scarlata wants a fastball. He is introduced to the "ball boy", a man named Jack Keech who has worked on all the boats serving as balls, having extensive speed boat experience. After the hit, the director wants Scarlata to take the wheel of the ball for a shot and then relinquish control to Keech to steer the ball.

Spitting at the rail, but wishing that it would hit the director's face, Scooter complains that he has been called a singles hitter all his life even though he hit for the cycle in '46. (See Cultural Allusions below). He then asks Keech if he has ever been to the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown and if Keech saw his picture, then admits he isn't in it at all because he didn't hit enough home runs. Reinforcing the idea that if the ball boat is caught in the infield then the ship *Sunrise* for which Scooter bats will be declared out, the director demands a home run, which means that the ball boat or a member of his team must touch land beyond the "fence" and past the blocking ships.

The bat Scooter uses is papier-mache, with a firework in the tip. He tosses the bat from his batter's box at the approaching ship, first missing by a few yards and then having his bat deflected by the crew of the oncoming ball. He sends his bat directly at the third boat, the "fast ball", as it passes the water highlighted gold to represent the plate, and the bat explodes in glittering confetti to signify the hit. His team jumps into the Caribbean and, though he has not swum for years before the three days practice he was afforded in the lead up to the event, Scooter also dives into the water, "knowing that some two hundred million watched."

As he is helped aboard the boat, he comments, "I been picked up by a ball a lot — only this is the only time it's happened after I got a hit." (A ball is a pitch which does not enter the strike zone and is not swung at by the player, indicating that Scooter probably doesn't usually swing at things outside his range — 4 balls will grant the player a "walk" to first base. If the player swings and misses, even if the ball is not in range, it is a strike.) Scooter takes the wheel of the ball and accelerates it recklessly, refusing to relinquish control to Keech. He heads for the third base line as he watches several of the ships closing in towards where they expected him to pilot the boat at the infield. When Keech declares that they have lost two or three people, Scooter responds that they have life jackets and that the "Umpire'll pick 'em up." Lisa Locklin takes his arm and he asks if she has ever seen a ball split short and third. He knows that the larger ships will be afraid of running into each other and darts between them, saying, "I never hit lots of homers! Only this is the first hit I could steer!"

Keech attacks him to regain the wheel as Scooter accelerates dangerously between the larger ships, and Scooter knees and punches him, then heads directly toward the infield ship *Martinique* as the cruise ships playing field positions collide behind them. The boat serving as the ball dashes under the glove the *Martinique* shoots at them.

Keech makes one more attempt to regain the wheel as Scooter aims at a rocky shore behind a line of breakers and fails, and Scooter thinks:

*A home run! He had hit a home run. What did the Hall of Fame matter now? Yet he would be in the Hall of Fame. He would be there because he would have to be there. He would have to be there because every visitor would want to know where he was. *

It seems to Scooter that the water is sinking below him, and that far below, he can see his teammates stumbling ashore and his own body rolling in the surf. Yet he hears cheers. He goes higher, "until the circle of the horizon was visible on every side. Had he not waited in circles like this before?" He sees figures coming for him:

and they shone, filled with a white radiance brighter than their spotless uniforms. They were coming, and he knew them — he, who had studied their photographs so often: Ernie Banks and Pee Wee Reese. Both waved, and the cheers were louder than ever, cheering that felt as if it would never end.

COMMENTARY:

The on-deck circle is where batters wait for their opportunity to bat in baseball. Wolfe has here playfully taken the term quite literally and created a situation where Scooter is both waiting on deck and also seems to have been symbolically holding out for the chance to justify his sports career and perhaps his entire life, somewhat bitter over his identification as a "singles hitter": an excellent player with frequent hits who will never be in the hall of fame because his career did not have the noteworthy home runs of a "slugger", which the audience craves. He is given one last chance to achieve it by throwing all caution to the wind: his reckless abandon once he

controls the ship/ball allows him to gamble everything on a sensational end which seems to cost him his life but which ironically, at least from his point of view, ensures his place in the Baseball Hall of Fame, overturning his reputation as a reliable but unspectacular player. Certainly this kills him, but the belief that this infamous home run will necessitate his induction into the Hall is firmly entrenched in Scooter's soul. The glory he feels is both transcendently religious and at the same time clearly the triumphant fantasy of anyone who has yearned for glory through sports: the adulation of the crowd and a warm welcome from those who are like heroes and gods, finally accepting someone who perhaps feels unworthy to their own ranks of greatness.

Wolfe claims he got the idea for the story while on the cruise ship **MS Zuiderdam**, imagining other ships in the night and seeing the bright spark of fireworks in the distance. The story is interesting in its association of sports glory with a more religious immortality, but seems to gloss over the moral culpability of Scooter in risking other lives to attain his own enshrinement.

CULTURAL ALLUSIONS

The mention of other mid-20th century baseball players like Pee Wee Reese and Ernie Banks cement that if Wolfe is a fan of any sport, it is baseball. The pitcher ship, the **M.S. Charlotte Amalie**, is named after the capital of the US Virgin Islands (which in turn was named after the 17th century consort to King Christian V of Denmark). Charlotte Amalie has a large harbor and once served as a pirate headquarters, and is still one of the busiest ports for Caribbean cruise ships. **Island Princess** is the name of a Cruise Ship, and **Palm Coast ** is a town in Florida which was hit quite hard by a hurricane circa 2004, which might have brought it to Wolfe's attention. **Martinique** is a French Island in the Caribbean.

Pee Wee Reese (1918-1999) is famous for not only his baseball achievements but in the breaking of the color barrier in the sport when Jackie Robinson took Reese's short stop position with the Dodgers (which occurred while Reese was serving in the military). A sculpture of Reese putting his arm around Robinson to stop harassment from a crowd can be found at a Brooklyn Park. His number on the team was 1. (Wolfe was born in New York City, though whether this has anything to do with using a Dodgers player in the story is certainly up for debate).

Ernie Banks (1931-2015) (whose nickname was Mr. Sunshine) played for the Chicago Cubs (for which Wolfe would obviously have an affinity). He was the first black player on the team. Throughout the 1950s he had a reputation as a slugger, the type of player that Scarlata is clearly not.

Scarlata is introduced as #18, having played for the White Sox, the Braves, and the "world champion" Pittsburgh Pirates. While the Pirates have had some success with World Series in the past, from 1992 to 2012 they had 20 straight losing seasons, the longest streak in American sports history. Clearly the theme of the underdog and the downtrodden returning to the top is inherent in Wolfe's choice for Scarlata's team. (The numbers on baseball uniforms rotate constantly, and there seems little reason that Wolfe would have selected #18 save that at one point a player named Gene Tenace wore the number for the Pittsburgh Pirates, though this is pure speculation).

At one point, Scarlata identifies himself as a singles hitter, one who does not consistently hit home runs but instead is accurate in hitting the ball. He also claims that in "forty-six" (probably 2046 judging from how little culture seems to have changed) he hit a "cycle", achieving a single, double, triple, and home run in one game. This is one of the most elusive achievements in baseball, meaning that the runner hit and went to first base, hit and ran to second, hit and ran to third, and also hit and ran all the way in a single game, and this is something which has occurred only hundreds of times in the history of the sport. Home run hitters, who might be

bigger and slower than a man named “scooter”, implying speed, might have difficulty actually running to third base without being called out after a non-home run hit., thus there is the sense that Scarlata relied on consistent skill rather than explosive power. He asks if the director has been to Cooperstown at the Baseball Hall of Fame and seen his number and jersey — of course, Scarlata isn't there because he lacked the sensational career of a slugger even though he accomplished one of baseball's most elusive achievements. He also hints that he was awarded four Gold Glove awards, a recognition for superior fielding. Thus, he seems to be proficient at offense and defense but lacked the ability to hit home runs, and therefore will not be found in the Hall of Fame.

It is interesting that both of the players mentioned, though one of them was white, were influential players in terms of breaking the color barrier which existed in baseball. It seems that perhaps there is some kind of barrier being broken by Scooter in his daring bid at immortality.

RELIGIOUS ALLUSIONS

Just as at the culmination of Wolfe's much earlier “Tracking Song”, the dying or dead Scooter experiences a kind of extracorporeal vision of blinding whiteness, where the angels take the form of the heroes he had in life, their white uniforms saturated with bright glory and the cheers continuing unending. Through a risk, he knows that he has redeemed his already great baseball career and that the sensationalism will insure his own immortality. Very few of Wolfe's characters are afforded this kind of clear vision of victory, one which seems to be a very common ending for writers of a spiritual slant, though here the psuedo-apotheosis of Scooter's point of view is given an extremely secular and sports-oriented slant. While risking the lives of his team may have been a morally culpable gambit for his own fame, there does not seem to be remonstrance in the clear vision of glory Scooter receives.

NAMES

Scooter Scarlata: Scooter implies one who moves quickly. Scooter was also an animated baseball that Fox Sports used to explain different types of pitches from 2004 to 2006 — one who met with rather poor reception from some audience members. Scarlatta, which obviously means “scarlet”, is an old Italian name which would have been traditionally used by a dyer or as a nickname for someone who wore red often or had red hair.

Lisa Locklin: Lisa can mean “devoted to God”, or, if derived from Elizabeth, can imply that “God is satisfaction”. Locklin is probably derived from the Scottish Lachlan, or “land of lakes”.

Jack Keech: The name Jack can mean “God is gracious” and Keech implies someone who is quick or active, similar to Scooter's nickname. The Wolfe-Wiki notes that the name Jack Ketch was a common nickname for a hangman.

CONNECTION WITH OTHER WORKS

Wolfe has not written many stories about sports, though he does have a boxer in *There Are Doors,*but the disaffected attitude of Scooter for his lack of recognition despite his accomplishments might be a more common strain. Turning a game into a high stakes venture is even more obvious in “Bloodsport” and “To the Seventh”. The most striking feature is of course the previously mentioned vision of glory which resonates so strongly with the ending of “Tracking Song” as the protagonist lies dying or dead and perceives the welcome he has longed for. (Severian, Latro, and Silk actually seemed denied this comforting vision of triumph).

The literal rendition of a specific term seems to be a very common title strategy employed at

this point in his career, with stories such as "Prize Crew", "Pulp Cover", or "The Gunner's Mate". The obsession with the ocean and its symbolic oblivion can just as easily be observed in *The Urth of the New Sun, Pirate Freedom,* and "Comber". It might make a worthwhile project to see if the vast reaches of space and the transformations it enacts upon Wolfe's characters are significantly different from his use of the ocean and the symbolic deluge. At a brief glance, it does seem that Wolfe views the abyss of space quite differently than the empty expanse of the ocean.

RESOURCES

"The On-Deck Circle". Wolfe-Wiki. 29 November, 2010. Web. 20 April 2015.
<http://www.wolfewiki.com/pmwiki/pmwiki.php?n=Stories.TheOn-DeckCircle>