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Who robbed Max Scherzer?

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—On Saturday, Washington Nationals Max Scherzer, one of the best pitchers in major league baseball, threw a no-hitter against the Pittsburgh Pirates at his home field.

It was the 289th no-hitter ever pitched in the big leagues.

Of the 28 batters Scherzer faced, none got a hit.

One Pirate, however, was hit by a pitch—with two out in the ninth inning, with the count at two balls and two strikes, with the Nationals leading and with Scherzer roaring toward a perfect game and gunning fastballs where he wanted them at more than 95 mph.

A perfect game is one in which a pitcher (or pitchers) gains a victory over a minimum of nine innings during which all 27 opposing batters fail to reach base in any manner.

A perfect game requires perfect pitching and fielding as well as errorless umpiring.

Only 23 perfect games have been recorded in the history of major league baseball's more than 200,000 games played. (In each game, two opportunities exist for a perfect game.) Since 1900, the odds of throwing one are one in 18,192.

Scherzer, a 30-year-old righty, is having his best season. At the end of this game, his Earned Run Average was 1.76 per nine innings pitched against a career 3.44. His ERA is the second lowest among 2015's starting pitchers. In 102 innings so far, he has hit only three of the 394 batters he's faced.

The Pirates, a good-hitting team, rolled into Washington on an eight-game winning streak. They lost the first game of the series.

In Saturday's muggy heat, Scherzer was controlling the game and growing stronger. He had struck out 10 of the 26 Pirate batters. More than 70 percent of the pitches he threw were strikes.

In his previous start against Milwaukee, Scherzer had fanned 16 and finished with a one-hitter as he worked a perfect game into the seventh inning. The lone hit in these back-to-back complete games was a bloop single just beyond his second baseman's glove.

José Tabata was pinch-hitting for the Pirates with two outs in the ninth inning.

At that moment, the 26-year-old, right-handed batter had a total of 11 hits in 2015, with no doubles, no triples, no homers and no walks. He was batting a very respectable .306, with 11 singles. His job was to get on base.

The Nationals were leading 6-0. Scherzer needed one more strike, one more out, for a perfect game and the win.

Tabata was battling Scherzer. He had fouled off five pitches, leaving the count at 2-2.

Then Scherzer threw an 86-mph slider that was inside, that is between the strike zone directly over home plate and the batter. It came in pretty straight and then started to drop.

Tabata was wearing an elbow guard on his left arm to protect against being hit there by wild pitches.

On an earlier pitch thrown to about the same location, Tabata had easily moved back and out of the way.

On this 2-2 pitch, Tabata didn't move either his feet or his body to avoid the ball. I could have avoided Scherzer's inside slider, and I'm as light-footed as the Statue of Liberty.

Instead, with his feet planted, Tabata dropped his elbow about two inches to a point below his waist and directly in line with Scherzer's sinking pitch so that it struck his elbow guard, not his bare arm.

Tabata was awarded first base. Scherzer got the next Pirate to fly out to left field.

Tabata ended Scherzer's chance at a perfect game. Scherzer might have gotten Tabata out for a perfect 27 up, 27 down. No one can say. There's no guarantee in baseball.

Baseball's rule 6.08 (b) (2) says that a hit batter is entitled to first base "...unless...[he] makes no attempt to avoid being touched by the ball" that he's not attempting to hit. If the pitch is outside the strike zone when it hits the batter, it is to be called a ball "...if he makes no attempt to avoid being touched."

I think Tabata's calculation was simple. This unhittable inside pitch will be called a ball, leaving me with a full count. Scherzer will try as hard as he can to get me out to preserve his perfect game. If I let this hanging slider nick me, I'll almost certainly be given first base. I'm wearing elbow armor; it won't hurt too much. My chances of getting a hit against Scherzer are only about one in three. My job is to get on base.

The umpire should have called Scherzer's pitch a ball, leaving the count at three balls and two strikes. That's the right application of the rule, because Tabata made no attempt to avoid an easily avoided inside pitch that hit him.

When I saw the pitch and the replays, I kept saying, "That stinks." Did Tabata do something wrong?

No.

The error belongs to Mike Muchlinski, a second-year umpire, who should have called it a ball rather than give Tabata first base. If he couldn't see Tabata's lean in to the pitch because the catcher's mitt obscured his view, he should have asked the other three umpires for help. Or they should have intervened.

The underlying problem seems to be that umpires rarely deny a hit batter first base when he does not try to avoid a pitch, and even when he deliberately moves into a pitch to get on cheaply. This absence of rule-enforcement now seems to be part of baseball's culture.

It's like the custom of calling a runner out at second when the defensive player is more or less around the bag and not necessarily on it when he catches the throw for the force out. I've seen runners called out when the second baseman catches a throw from the shortstop a yard from the base.

One of the few enforcements of Rule 6.08 (b) (2) occurred on May 31, 1968 when Giant Dick Dietz was hit by a pitch he did not try to

avoid. It was thrown by Dodger Don Drysdale with the bases loaded in the ninth and the Dodgers up 3-0. Had Dietz gone to first, it would have forced in a run, thus ending Drysdale's streak of 44 scoreless innings. The home-plate umpire, Harry Wendelstet, did not give Dietz first base, and Drysdale went on to rack up another 14 scoreless innings.

A baseball game is filled with umpires making judgment calls—ball or strike, fair or foul, safe or out and catch or no catch to name the most frequent opportunities.

This “hit-batsman” was not a judgment call. It was a call about enforcing a rule or not. Shouldn't umps apply all the rules all the time?

For whatever reason, a consensus seems to have developed to not enforce Rule 6.08 (b) (2). That consensus robbed Max Scherzer of his *chance at* completing a perfect game.

Scherzer took responsibility for the inside slider to Tabata. He said: “...I just didn't finish the pitch. It backed up on me and clipped him.”

But Scherzer understood what Tabata had done: “I don't blame him for doing it. I mean, heck, I'd probably do the same thing. ...he did what he need to do. So kudos to him, actually.”

Tabata said that he didn't come to the plate with the intention of getting to first base by getting hit. This is plausible.

It seems likely that Tabata took advantage of an opportunity. Sometimes, your instincts in a split second lead you to do something that you might not otherwise do if you had more time to consider it.

If Tabata knew the umpire would enforce the rule, I think his instinct would have been to avoid getting hit, because he could gain nothing. But Tabata knew that it was highly likely that the rule would not be enforced. And even if it were, he would be no worse off than a 3-2 count. He had everything to gain and nothing to lose by taking that pitch on his elbow pad.

Why didn't the Nationals object to Muchlinski's refusal to enforce Rule 6.08 (b) (2)? Scherzer didn't. His teammates didn't. Manager Matt Williams didn't. Back in May, Williams had argued with a home plate

umpire over a called first strike on Bryce Harper, a dispute for which he and Harper were ejected.

Williams said after the game that he had not challenged Muchlinski's call, because he did not want to disrupt Scherzer's rhythm. Maybe so. But why wouldn't Williams want to give his pitcher a little rest in the last of the ninth by squabbling over a missed call? Beats me.

I don't see the point of quietly accepting an umpire failing to enforce a rule when so much was at stake. Why keep quiet when you're your teammate, your player, gets robbed?

Maybe, a gentleman's agreement is the explanation.

You have to admire Max Scherzer, as much for his response to this awkward situation as for his skill and dedication to his craft. He said he felt good about gaining a no-hitter rather than bad about losing a perfect game over a blown call. He didn't whine; he didn't blame; he didn't tarnish his accomplishment. Scherzer upheld the game; Muchlinski did not.

And this leads to the question, So what?

I admit that in any ranking of recent injustices, Scherzer's lost chance isn't high on the list.

But it's important, I think, to commemorate each little injustice that stands uncorrected.

If we let the little ones slide, it gets ever easier to ignore the big ones that really matter.