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Chief Bender's Burden
The Silent Struggle of a Baseball Star
by Tom Swift
University of Nebraska Press

Chapter One. The baseball sailed into Wally Schang's mitt in a blur. One pitch. Then a second. Pop. Pop. Sixty and a half feet away, a lanky man reached back, rotated his hips, and whipped his right arm forward. The catcher quickly returned the ball, rocked, and prepared to receive another. Pop. As he delivered his pitches, Charles Albert Bender's body remained closed, his arm hidden, until the last moment, and by the time he reached the release point he was coming over the top. Pop. Thin calves masked the strength in the long legs with which he leveraged his power. On the follow-through, his glove trailed behind his back like the tail end of an airplane and his throwing hand looked like it was pulling down a window shade. Pop. Bender kicked so high—the signature aspect of his motion—that as he strode toward the plate a batter could see the bottom of his left foot. On this occasion, however, there was no batter. On October 8, 1914, one day before the start of the World Series, Bender and his teammates were in Shibe Park, preparing.

Pop.

The anticipation in Philadelphia, throughout the city's pubs, barbershops, factories, and department stores, was palpable. The Philadelphia Athletics had raced out to a comfortable margin in the American League pennant race, and their fourth league title in five seasons was clinched early. Unthreatened after June, the Athletics won by 8½ games over the

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Boston Red Sox, and no other team was closer than 19 games out. Perhaps because the regular season was anticlimactic, or possibly because the Athletics were on such a historic run, whatever the reason, Philadelphia fans were revved for this party as though they were about to celebrate another successful Revolution.

Demand for tickets was greater for this Series than any previous October. Reserved seats went on sale earlier in the week, and Joseph Banks, a plump eighteen-year-old in a bow tie, was the first in line. Banks plopped down a wood block twenty-six hours before tickets went on sale at Gimbels department store. Eventually, the crowd behind his makeshift seat was so thick along Ninth Street that business owners complained and asked that the line be shifted over to Ludlow, down an alley between Gimbels and Leary's bookstore. Most were men and boys in hats and ties. Two boys, Abe Heisman and Ed Hill, stood immediately behind Banks. Their enviable places in line would later fetch far more than they ever earned in allowance. About five hours after tickets went on sale more than five thousand had been sold. By midafternoon a sign was posted announcing that the supply had been exhausted. Thousands turned away in disgust. A number of scalpers, or speculators as they were called, had gobbled up tickets. Several were arrested in the days before the game. Scandal.

As Bender popped Schang's mitt, the ticket hysteria continued. Fans lined up outside Shibe Park with the hope they could obtain bleacher seats. Sales would start at ten o'clock the next morning. By midnight the line would be almost four blocks long. Through the night thousands waited outside the park for the gate to open. Several times the crowd almost overflowed, and dozens of Philadelphia's finest struggled to maintain order. Prominent sportswriter James Isaminger lamented the only problem on Philadelphians' minds: "Shibe Park should have been built of rubber," he said, "so it could be stretched out for this World's Series."

This was a well-constructed team. In 1905 the Athletics had reached the World Series, but that club had peaked. Manager Connie Mack, with control over personnel, began a rebuilding process. By the end of the decade the American League's resident genius had collected a number of young, malleable players that he molded into a balanced and bright baseball team. The Athletics had the league's most dynamic offense, a solid group of outfielders, a deep pitching staff that included seven ten-

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game winners, and one of the game's premiere position players, second baseman Eddie Collins. Collins and third baseman Frank Baker were the best players in the league at their respective positions. When joined with Jack Barry, a fine shortstop, and first baseman Stuffy McInnis, who had such a soft mitt and quick feet he broke into the big leagues as a shortstop, the quartet became famous, dubbed by one writer as "The $100,000 Infield."

Bender's presence was no small element in the confident brew Philadelphians were sipping. By this time Philadelphia was aware that the Athletics had the preeminent World Series figure on their side. Newspaper inches often were filled with speculation about pitching assignments for such big games, but there wasn't doubt as to which man Mack would send to the mound for Game 1. "Bender, when it comes to pitching an individual game, has no equals," sportswriter F. C. Lane said in *Baseball Magazine*. "In a short series like the World's Champions' contests, no pitcher in the business can excel Bender." The day of the game, the *Philadelphia North American* ran a picture of Bender in mid-windup. The caption was concise: "Greatest money pitcher in baseball."

The opponent, the Boston Braves, was further reason for optimism. The Braves had a starless pitching staff and a pedestrian lineup. The National League had lost the past four World Series and didn't appear to have any dominant teams. The American League was fashioning a superior brand of baseball, and no team played it better than the one with the blue "A" stitched into their white and blue pin-striped wool uniforms. Conventional wisdom said the only team that could beat the Athletics was the Athletics. Early in the season newspapers gave reports of inflated egos, and Charles Bender's confidence at this point was evident. According to a story published in the *Boston Daily Globe* written by Boston manager George Stallings three months after the fact, in the final game of the regular season, with the Braves scouting the Athletics from the stands, Bender walked up to Johnny Evers, Boston's diminutive on-field leader, who was sitting in the last row of the grandstand. Bender tapped Evers on the shoulder and Johnny looked around.

"Oh," Bender said. "I thought you were a gambler that I was looking for. There he is down there. I see him now."

Bender walked over to the person he said he was seeking, a stout man,

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Stallings said, that had "no more resemblance to Johnny than a billboard has to a calling card." Evers said he didn't think Bender actually laid down money. Rather, he was just being brash.

Philadelphia had won so much so often that overconfidence was certainly possible. There was also rare turmoil in the clubhouse, as the Federal League was in the field that season and actively courting Athletics stars. The team divided along monetary lines: some players believed they deserved more money than Connie Mack was willing to pay and others remained loyal to Mack, accepting the line about limited means. Tension had built over the course of the year. But the Athletics had managed the situation throughout the six-month season and there was no reason to believe they couldn't play through a seven-game series. The A's had dispatched the Chicago Cubs in 1910, and the New York Giants in 1911 and 1913. In other words, Philadelphia had been there before and beaten more-heralded teams, outplayed more-talented lineups, outwitted more-respected managers. Boston was a lucky winner in a weak league. On the surface, this wasn't a Series. It was a coronation.

"Perhaps before the series ends," Isaminger said, "Boston fans will believe that Connie Mack has an infernal machine."

They called him Chief. Of course. Nearly every man of Native descent who stepped onto a ball field during the first half of the century was called Chief. The moniker, some have likened it to calling a black man "boy," was a tidy way for whites to place a race of people under their thumb. As scholar Jeffrey Powers-Beck said, the tag was a means to "appropriate" Bender in the "manner of the cigar-store Indian or the Wild West Show Indian." Historian John P. Rossi called the epithet "a perfect reflection of the naïveté and racism of the age." Bender resented the constant bigotry. "I do not want my name to be presented to the public as an Indian, but as a pitcher," he said almost a decade before. The newspapermen didn't listen.

There was scarcely a time when Bender was written about when his race was not prominently mentioned. Bender didn't win games. He scalped opponents. Bender wasn't a talented pitcher with an impressive repertoire. He pitched in his best Indian way. Bender wasn't a player with guile. He was Mack's wily redskin. The prejudiced descriptions were

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almost unyielding. Consider a lead sentence following Bender's effort in Game 4 of the 1911 World Series: "Charles Albert Bender, a child of the forest, pitched the Athletics to victory . . ." After Bender's sterling performance in the 1905 World Series, *Sporting Life* writer Charles Zuber said that "Bender, according to reports, is a typical representative of his race, being just sufficiently below the white man's standard to be coddled into doing anything that his manager might suggest, and to the proper exercise of this influence on the part of manager Connie Mack much of the Indian's success as a twirler is due. Like the Negro on the stage, who . . . will work himself to death if you jolly him, the Indian can be 'conned' into taking up any sort of burden."

Bender was often portrayed as a caricature and was the subject of myriad cartoons—many exhibits of narrow-mindedness. After he threw one of the most dominating games of the early years of the American League, Bender was depicted wielding a tomahawk and wearing a headdress as though he was a happy warrior. Other examples made him appear as a predator. During his rookie season, as the Athletics were traveling by train en route to St. Louis, Bender's wallet was apparently stolen. The wallet contained one hundred dollars, no chunk of change for a nineteen-year-old in 1903. Although he was the victim, newspaper cartoonist Charles Nelan portrayed Bender, then a somber young Ojibwe man trying to fit in, as a redskin on the warpath. With white passengers looking on in horror, as though Bender might soon take their heads, he was depicted on all fours—looking for his "wampum belt" in an incident writer Charles Dryden said "entailed no end of trouble" as "all hands were routed from sweet dreams"—with facial features so distorted he looked something less than human. Never mind that Bender likely had more education than the average person who held the very newspaper in which such coverage appeared.

The incident was indicative. The press assumed Indians were stony and oblivious. The press thought the taunts and slurs had no effect on Bender. The press was wrong.

Baseball players of the time represented an ethnic mishmash, but the game was as racist as the public that supported it. African Americans, of course, were banned. American Indians were allowed on the field, but they were expected to withstand racially charged ridicule as part of

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a day's work. Bench jockeying was as much a part of the era as the sacrifice bunt, and the banter was not sanitized for political correctness. Back to the reservation! Grab heap much wampum! Nig! Often when Bender pitched, baseball fans wore out their lungs with renditions of Indian battle cries and war whoops. He often looked at such displays with a still face. Sometimes, as the mockery continued, he grinned. Or, after a particularly effective inning, he would make a half-circle coming out of the box and yell, "Foreigners! Foreigners!"

But some incidents could not be finessed with wit. In 1907 the Athletics were playing in Washington, and the swarthy Bender walked into a café run by an intolerant owner. Dressed well, he quietly asked for a beverage. The proprietor, standing near, remarked softly, "Screw, dig—you ought to know better."

Bender looked surprised. "I ordered a seltzer lemonade."

"Get out now. Go quietly. You're not allowed."

Bender was confused. He repeated his order.

"If you insist on trouble, all right." The proprietor gave a signal. Two waiters rushed over and then a bartender joined them. By the time the owner was done ranting several others had crowded around. Five minutes later Bender was tossed onto Pennsylvania Avenue, his clothes messed up. He brushed himself and walked away.

Many other whites saw Indians as exotic novelties, and Bender was their noble savage. It became en vogue to nickname teams the Braves or Indians. The club Bender was about to face was one example. As Powers-Beck pointed out, teams all over the country began calling themselves Indians and recruiting American Indian players as gate attractions. In describing such teams' fortunes the press had easy, colorful verbs, and readers gobbled them by the spoonful.

Children who loved to "play Indian"—*How to Play Indian: Directions for Organizing a Tribe of Indians and Making Their Teepees in True Indian Style* was published some dozen years before—often approached Bender when he was in public and greeted him by mimicking Indian gestures. Bender didn't become angry with them, but supposedly he always signed his name on their baseballs and bats as Charles or Charley. Over time he acknowledged the nickname was indelibly linked to his baseball fame. He was called Chief so often—and so often with affection—that he allowed

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the name to be etched into his tombstone. Marie, his wife, too, identified herself as "Mrs. Chief Bender." But whether on the field doing his job . . . in his home reading a newspaper . . . on his way to the market . . . at nearly every point at which Charles Bender engaged the world he was viewed through a lens filtered by prejudice.

Perhaps the unrelenting duress is what caused Bender's face to often seem devoid of life. In several surviving photographs his stare advances the notion that he knows something you don't—and that something isn't good. Maybe, though, the empty looks were offered to cameras simply because of an aversion to having his picture taken. "One day an intrepid sharpshooter defied the Chief's warning," William E. Brandt wrote in a 1930 edition of the *Saturday Evening Post*. "Chief, who was warming up at the time, gave his control a little practice by bouncing a ball against the camera's eye, thus ending picture taking for the day."

Contemporaries called Bender among the brightest players in baseball. This was because of the way he approached hitters, often breaking from convention, using whatever he could think of—including a pitch he may have invented—to get them out. Bender's demeanor also had something to do with the impression others formed. Especially in the early years of his career, he was seen more often than he was heard. His mouth moved deliberately beneath his long straight nose. His words were few but they were articulate. His height—six-foot-two-inches carried erect, like a military man, but with ease, like a diplomat—commanded respect. Plus, with his stern expression and focused eyes, he was one of those guys who just looked smart.

He always seemed in control, and that was part of his game, too. Billy Evans, a prominent umpire during Bender's career and later a baseball executive, called Bender "a master workman" who "knows how to pitch." Evans said Bender "takes advantage of every weakness, and once a player shows him a weak spot he is marked for life by the crafty Indian." Bender cared more than most that his pitches found a piece of home; perhaps that was because he knew more than most how much the rest of life is outside human control.

His face's default setting was serious. But by 1914 Bender had forged a more demonstrative and playful identity. His trademark smile was never

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wider than when he was trying to work out of jam. Perhaps as a way to endear himself, or maybe just because he liked to make others smile, too, he would needle people. According to the *Philadelphia Press*, after throwing warmups to catcher Ira Thomas at Shibe Park during an afternoon in which he was scheduled to pitch, he went to the dressing room, put on a double-breasted suit and a fuzzy, soft felt hat, and took up a crooked-handled cane. In this outfit he boarded a car at Twenty-second Street and Lehigh Avenue on its way downtown.

He placed his crooked stick carefully between his knees, then passed one gloved hand first above and then below the other. When the car stopped before it was about to turn onto Arch Street, he moved his hands back and forth, a dozen quick, deceptive movements while maintaining a wild smile.

"Is that man crazy over there?" whispered a woman to the person in the next seat.

"Don't know," the person replied, smiling, "but it looks that way to me."

Bender's costume and his gyrations had everyone thinking he was nuts, everyone except a friend who had boarded the car with him. As Bender detrained at Twelfth and Arch he turned around and grinned, while his friend announced, "That's Chief Bender!"

The game was scheduled for two o'clock the next day, at which time Bender would step onto the small hill at the center of the diamond and simultaneously stand on a pinnacle of sorts. Baseball wasn't just popular; it was part of being an American. Though the country was not highly educated—most people lived on farms and few graduated from high school—fans enjoyed the intellectual stimulation baseball provided. Games started in the afternoon. Men in the crowd smoked cigars and cigarettes. Players wore flannel uniforms with no names or numbers, and mitts that fit snugly around their hands. During this so-called Deadball Era fans were offered their first whiff of ballpark hotdogs and first sang "Take Me Out to the Ball Game." A one-handed catch was something to see. When a ball landed in the stands, fans tossed it back. The men on the field were special, but they were not out of reach.

The first decade of Bender's career coincided with an explosion in

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baseball attendance. Americans ate box scores for breakfast; even those rarely, if ever, afforded the chance to see a game looked for every scrap of news about favorite teams and players. And by the start of the 1914 World Series that was an easier task than it ever had been. As social historian Patty Loew has shown, advances in telegraphy efficiently connected newspaper offices around the country. The incorporation of the Associated Press in 1900 and United Press International in 1907, coupled with increased advertising revenue and faster presses, allowed editors to expand baseball coverage. Readers consumed these bigger, better newspapers—most cities had more than one—under electric lights, a new luxury. Increasingly, baseball stars became national celebrities.

An American Indian wasn't supposed to reach this point. Bender had obliterated the stereotypes, dispelled the misplaced bromides: Indians are lazy. Indians are not competitive. It wouldn't have been difficult to find other men and women defying the warped ideas about what could be done by a man of Bender's pigmentation, though it would have taken some work to find one doing so on such a grand stage. Even American Indian people who had never seen him pitch were inspired by Bender's success. He had effectively turned over the actuarial tables.

As he threw to Schang, Bender couldn't have foreseen what would soon happen. When things are going your way you don't think the world will ever turn. But there is a limit to how long a man can carry the burden of race on his shoulders. By this time it was clear that the institutions and mores of the day, white created and controlled, had forced Charles Bender to straddle a blunt color line. He knew two different worlds but didn't sit comfortably in either one, and such dissonance exacts a toll. It's possible to see with the distance time provides, but at that moment Bender couldn't have known his life quest, seemingly in hand, would soon slip through his fingers. He may have thought he had that universal need most never have to look for—his place in the world, his home—but that was a mirage.

Mack had ordered his players to rest for several days after clinching the pennant, but the manager always allowed Bender to prepare for games as he pleased. At this point in his career—Bender had turned thirty that spring—Mack conceded his pitcher knew best how to ready himself. A few days before the Series, Mack gave him three innings in a game

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against the New York Highlanders and Bender allowed only one hit and looked strong. He was coming off a regular season during which he had won fourteen straight games. He had more than twice as many shutouts (seven) as he had losses (three). During the previous five regular seasons he had gone a combined 91-31. Charles Albert Bender was the go-to pitcher on the best team assembled. He was at the height of his powers. On the eve of the World Series he was primed as no other pitcher at the time could have been.

Pop.

Bender had thrown to Schang for fifteen minutes by the time he delivered his final preparatory pitch. He then threw the ball to the ground. Before heading into the clubhouse to have his arm massaged by the team trainer, Bender smiled at Philadelphia Athletics captain Ira Thomas. He was ready.

"I'm right," he said.

At some point in the next twenty-four hours that self-assessment would change.

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