

Gabe Eubanks

## **Rock and Fire**

Based on a true story.

“Thank you for your years of contributing to KC Elite Academy Baseball. Unfortunately, we will not have room for Tyler to keep playing with our under 11 team. We wish your family and Tyler the best of luck moving forward.”

- KC Elite Academy Baseball

I knew my days of playing baseball were numbered, but I didn't think they would end before I even reached 7th grade. I remember my dad talking to me after dinner, saying he was going to find me another team to play on. He took the news a lot harder than I did.

Sure, I was upset too. I had grown up with the guys from KC Elite, but they started to distance themselves from me the past year. My biggest flaws? I couldn't hit a ball if it was on a tee in front of me. I couldn't catch a pop fly if it was landing directly on top of me. Hell, I couldn't even blow bubbles with my “Big League Chew” like the rest of the guys on that team did. But I really tried my best, and my dad saw that.

I tried to convince him that maybe summer league just wasn't for me. I could join a summer school class, or start mowing lawns to make some money, but he didn't want to hear any of it. After he told me they cut me, we went to the backyard and tossed the baseball back and forth until the sun went down. When we were walking inside, he put his hand on my sweat-dampened shoulder and told me KC Elite made a huge mistake.

Summer league was weird down in Kansas City. You had a wide variety of teams, some were club teams who played together all year, some were groups from their public middle schools, and others were just a rag-tag group of minors who loved the sport. You can guess which one I ended up on.

After dozens of emails without responses, my dad finally got an email back from “The Saint Michael Defenders.” They were a group of guys from a small private middle school in the city, but constantly had player shortages due to the mere size of their school. However, they didn't make it seem like “we'll take what we can get.” They welcomed me to their team, their family, as if I had been playing with them since the days of tee ball.

Coach TJ played in college, so he at least knew what he was talking about. He would never get mad at us, was always chewing sunflower seeds, and said one phrase to every pitcher who ever took the mound: “Rock and Fire.”

Our third baseman was Vince, and was easily our best player. He was younger than most of the team, but was still a head taller than any 11 year old we ever played against. Some days

after practice, he would ask me to stay and pitch to him while his dad was getting our game schedules put together. We got really close that summer.

The Saint Michael Defenders went 0-18 that regular season. We were the only team in our division to go the entire length of the summer without a single win. Vince was the only kid on the team who could consistently hit, but it was never enough to pull out any wins for our team.

At the end of every loss, Coach TJ would huddle us together in the outfield and crouch down on one knee to talk with us. With a cheek full of sunflower seeds and dark red sunglasses that prevented us from knowing who he was looking at, he would go over what happened in the game. Early on in the season, these talks would take a while. We would be out in the grass, getting eaten alive by mosquitoes, for sometimes 30 minutes straight while our parents waited in the bleachers. He would talk to us collectively, never getting upset, but always teaching us on how we could improve from our mistakes. Every game he would say a couple things where I could improve; every game going forward, I never made those mistakes again. Each game that came and passed, the talks got shorter and shorter.

On our last regular season outing that summer, we had a lead against the other team going into the last inning. I was playing right field (a position normally reserved for the worst player in little league), when a pop fly passed over my head. I chased the ball down as fast as I could, scooped it up with my right hand, and heaved it as hard as I could back to the infield. The ball hit the grass before it even made it to the dirt, and by that time, the other team had already scored. We had lost our last regular season game, and it was because I couldn't throw the ball to the infield.

After the game, we huddled together, disappointed by the loss but none more so than I was. Coach TJ told us all that he was proud of how far we had come together as a team. I could feel all my teammates eyes on me, as I braced for the sole advice Coach would be handing out for the night.

“Tyler,” he said, spitting out a chunk of seeds on the grass next to him. “You’ve come the farthest out of anybody on this team, so keep your head up. As far as that last play goes... you just gotta remember one thing.

Rock and Fire.”

Vince walked out with me after the game. When we were walking to the cars, a familiar older man approached the two of us. Immediately seeing his blue uniform, I walked swiftly away to my dad’s car waiting for me in the parking lot. I got in the car and looked up at my dad, who was watching the scene unfold before him.

My old coach was now talking to Vince, our star player. Without Coach TJ present, my old coach was inviting Vince to an opportunity that few players would pass up: an opportunity to

join the 18-0 KC Elite Academy before the postseason, basically *ensuring* the highly sought after summer league trophy to him with the new team.

Vince looked at the man for a second, in silence.

Then he turned to look at my car, me and my dad both sitting and watching.

He turned back to the man, shook his head no, and walked away.

The post season tournament rolled around the next week; we had no expectations for it. Coach told us that these were just like any other games, but if we lost one, then our season was over. Every practice leading up to the tournament, we fine-tuned the many lessons Coach TJ had taught us throughout the season. We were playing better than we had ever played before.

Our first game rolled around, and we strung together our first win. Vince played better than he had all season. I was still striking out, but was at least contributing defensively. The occasional ground ball would be hit my way, and I would manage to throw it just hard enough to hit our “cut-off man” in the infield, who would lob it to Vince on third base for an easy tag. For the first time in my life, I contributed to a win for my baseball team. Coach TJ’s post-game huddle was the shortest it had been all season. He was as proud of us as we were of ourselves, grinning ear to ear as we walked back to our parents’ cars.

The second and third games mirrored the first. After winning the postseason semifinal, the Saint Michael Defenders were 3-18, ending the seasons to 3 other teams who were ranked much higher than we were. To say we were the underdogs would be an understatement; we were the worst team in the state before the tournament, but nonetheless were on our way to the championship.

Our post game huddle was similarly short after the semifinal. My stomach dropped when Coach told us the news on who we would be facing for the championship. The 3-18 Saint Michael Defenders would be playing the 21-0 KC Elite Academy for the summer league trophy.

My dad walked me from the parking lot to the field the next day, hand on my shoulder. We passed my old teammates and coaches on the way to our dugout, never once glancing at the familiar pristine blue uniforms the top team in the state was wearing. Dad wished me good luck, then I joined the rest of my team for our warmups.

The entirety of the championship was back and forth between our two teams. Vince continued his streak of hits, but they would answer with an equally talented lineup of sluggers. We were the away team due to their unrivaled record in the regular season.

When it came down to the last inning, we had a one run lead on the KC Elite Academy. The score was 8 to 7, the Saint Michael Defenders had miraculously held onto a lead in the bottom of the 7th with only one out to go before the championship trophy was ours. However, they had two runners on base, a scoring position with their best batter walking up to the plate. I

was still playing right field. Our pitcher was throwing fastballs the entire game, but they were finally picking up on his speed by stringing together a couple hits later on into the championship.

The first pitch was a fastball, right down the middle. The umpire called strike so loud, I could hear him perfectly from my “ready stance” in the outfield.

The second pitch was similar, but their batter went for it. He barely missed foul, but the ball sailed off into my direction.

The third pitch was a hit, flying above my head but stopping in the outfield. It was the same hit as the game I had lost for our team before the tournament.

I ran to the ball, scooped it up in my right hand, but before I threw it, I heard Coach TJ yell.

Rock and Fire.

The ball sailed past our cut-off man, and straight to the glove of Vince for an easy tag out. I had just thrown the ball harder and farther than ever before, perfectly to our third baseman for the game-winning out.

The rest of my team followed Vince as he sprinted to my spot in the outfield, tackling me and starting a dog pile of Defenders like we had just won the World Series.

I could hear my dad yelling for joy in the stands, all the way from the bottom of the mass of ecstatic 11 year olds above me.

My baseball career ended a few years after that season. The KC Elite Academy disbanded the next year. Vince continued to play the game, cementing himself as one of Kansas City’s best baseball prospects in years. Coach TJ continued coaching, renaming his club to “Rock and Fire.”