

ILLUSTRATION BY ALEX NABAUM

PUNGE HIT

BY SHAUN ASSAEL

JOHN ODOM DIDN'T ASK TO BE TRADED FOR 10 MAPLE BATS. BUT THAT DIDN'T STOP US FROM LAUGHING AT HIM ALL THE SAME.



AS THE JANUARY SNOW piled high in Salt Lake City, Dan Shwam was thinking about his summer. For more than two decades, the silver-haired schoolteacher had spent the hot-weather months managing in the independent leagues, below even Single-A on baseball's ladder. He expected this year to be no different—he'd soon be shepherding his team to stadiums where a seat still costs less than a movie ticket.

Looking ahead to the 2009 season, Shwam scanned his prospective roster. It held a honky-tonk full of hard-luck tales—the guy with a World Series ring clawing his way back to the Show, the alcoholic struggling to stay on the wagon. But there was one name missing: the player everyone called Batman. Of all of Shwam's memorable players, none had a



story quite like the pitcher who was once a promising prospect in the Giants' farm system. On May 20, 2008, the Laredo Broncos acquired the 26-year-old righthander from the Calgary Vipers in exchange for 10 bats. And while it wasn't the smallest or strangest compensation ever offered for a player—Shwam himself once traded a case of O'Doul's for a first baseman—the press got wind of the deal and quickly turned Batman into one of the most infamous players in all of baseball. And even though the unwanted attention had driven the 6'2" pitcher from the game, Shwam wanted to bring him back. The kid's happy-go-lucky manner was just the thing to lighten up a long bus ride to nowhere.

He called Batman's cell but got no answer.

IF YOU'RE unlucky enough to be identified for a single embarrassing moment, the Internet isn't a kind place. Search engines freeze ephemeral ugliness in their digital high beams. There are no second acts on Google.

In May 2008, John Odom was just an anonymous ballplayer at the tail end of a forgettable career. Having recently been released after five seasons in San Francisco's system, he signed with

the Vipers, a team in the independent Golden League co-owned by *Wheel of Fortune* maestro Pat Sajak. Odom never made it to Calgary, though. Canadian border guards denied him entry after getting a look at his checkered history. Stuck with a pitcher he couldn't get across the border, Vipers president Peter Young called Broncos GM Jose Melendez. "Look, no one is getting rich here," he said. "But I need to trade John Odom." Laredo didn't have any player Young wanted, but he could always use some new bats. Soon the hurler was on his way to Texas, and 10 34-inch maple bats, total value \$665, were headed north.

As Odom drove the 1,800 miles from Montana to the Mexican border, he had no idea how low his value had dropped or how his notoriety had exploded. After a short item on the trade was posted on the league site—*John Odom for 10*

trouble. "Most of those North Springs High kids had too much money and too much time," says Clay Harvison, an area friend of Odom's. "It made John proud that he was good at baseball, and it made his dad proud." But shortly after his 17th birthday, Odom was involved in an argument over beer money in the school parking lot. Retrieving a miniature Braves bat from his car, Odom attacked the kid who had refused to give him back his \$15. The victim needed five stitches to close the gash in his scalp.

Suspended from high school and on probation after pleading guilty to misdemeanor battery, Odom grew his hair long, put down his glove and picked up his guitar. He found comfort at jam-band festivals like Bonnaroo; no one there knew about his past. For the next three years, Odom stayed away from the diamond, eventually moving to Tallahassee, where he glibly talked his way into living quarters in a Florida State frat house even though he wasn't enrolled at the school. Soon after, trouble found him again when cops charged him with a late-night DUI. Later he was caught passing bad checks at a Publix supermarket. It took an attorney hired by his folks to keep him out of jail.

Anchorless without the rhythm of baseball, the 20-year-old wandered over to Tallahassee Community College one June day in 2002 and asked coach Mike McLeod if he could borrow a bucket of balls. He showed up the next day and again the next. On the fifth straight day, the coach peeked into the field house. "I couldn't believe how the ball was coming off his fingers," says McLeod. "It was amazing."

Odom cut his hair, shelved his earrings and found a new family: the TCC Eagles. On the field he was a natural. When a Giants scout stopped by to check on another player, he couldn't take his eyes off the sophomore who did not appear on any scouting reports. "John had a couple of pitches that were major league stuff," says the scout, Paul Turco. The Giants took Odom in the 44th round of the 2003 draft, then gave him \$5,000 and a plane ticket to Oregon to see how his stuff would play in short-season A-ball.

His start with the Salem-Keizer Volcanoes was rough—a 5.01 ERA in 2004, then Tommy John surgery and a short stint with the Augusta GreenJackets in 2005—but Odom fell hard for the lakeside town. He talked to the kids who hung out along the dug-out roof and volunteered for community events. The locals, who loved their Volcanoes, took a quick shine to their pitcher. The team even created an "Odom-eter" for the scoreboard, with the needle moving for every one of his strikeouts.

Fully recovered from his surgery in 2006 and flaunting a tattoo above his elbow scar that read "Pain Equals Wisdom" in Latin, Odom gave the Giants organization the season it was waiting to see. He worked 73.2 innings for Salem-Keizer, finishing with a 3.05 ERA, and the Volcanoes were



TIA OWENS-POWERS/AP IMAGES

Northwest League champs. In the victory parade, he waved to the residents who lined Keizer's main street. That day, as John Odom sat in the back of the flatbed that chauffeured him through town, his life looked pretty good.

"We were expecting him to move up to Single-A, and if he had a solid year there, we were looking at

SUDDEN EXPOSURE: A quick Google search for "John Odom" these days turns up more than 300,000 results.

Double-A," says Bert Bradley, the Giants' coordinator of minor league pitching. "At that point, he'd be on his way."

Odom's breakout season earned him an invite to spring training in Arizona the following year, where he could make a further case for promotion. Not long after he arrived in Scottsdale, though, he dislocated his left shoulder when he collided with a baserunner, and once again he was looking at a long rehab while his peers moved on.

Depressed and lonely during his convalescence, Odom became reckless.

He drank heavily and missed meetings. One day, team officials discovered that he'd skipped rehab in favor of a session with an exotic dancer at his apartment. "Just one more thing that put him behind the eight ball," says Bradley.

The Giants paid for Odom to enter detox. But he was 25, and fresher arms were vying for his spot in

the organization. Still, the team was willing to give him one more shot. Odom nearly hit a batter with his first pitch of 2008's spring training. His second landed on the wrong side of the outfield wall. Shortly after, Bradley asked Odom into his office to say this was it, the organization was letting him go. When Bradley went to hug his pitcher, he saw tears in the young man's eyes.

Two months later, after a brief stop at the Canadian border and some quick-think bartering, Odom was pitching again. Although his stint in the minors was never exactly plush, the independent leagues offered a significantly more spartan situation. The bus rides were bumpier, the equipment grungier, the pay smaller—a Bronco was lucky to make \$1,000 a month. During a call to an old friend, a one-time Braves draft pick named Matt Dale, Odom said players had to share water bottles. "And the water is cloudy," he griped.

Then again, he was the most famous man in Laredo; his new team made sure of it. Each time Odom took the mound, the *Batman* theme blared from the stadium's speakers. When ESPN's *First Take* called to set up an on-air interview, the team issued a press release. "I'm just happy to get back to playing baseball," the local celebrity told the camera. A few days later, in his debut against the

Edinburg Coyotes, he threw respectably, allowing one run in two innings in a 9-5 loss.

As the attention grew, though, Odom began to feel like a one-man freak show whose sole purpose was to sell tickets. “They punked John,” says Harvison, “and it made him feel like an idiot.” Wherever Odom went, fans pointed, reporters flocked. The spotlight never dimmed. To make matters worse, he couldn’t re-create his early pitching success. In one start against the Amarillo Dillas, he gave up eight runs in three innings. “Go back to the Batcave!” the crowd jeered. As Shwam walked to the mound to yank him, Odom tried to act cavalierly. On his way to the showers, he mugged his way past the first baseman, asking, “What did you think of my performance, dude?”

But impatience had begun to seep in. “People are like, ‘I’d kill myself’ and stuff,” he told one reporter. “I’m like, ‘God, dude, that’s all you think life is about, sports?’ You get to know me, I’m a lot deeper. There’s a lot more to me than baseball.”

In fact, his father was seriously ill, and it pained Odom that his old man was seeing him portrayed as a punch line. “He had come to love his life when baseball was in it,” says his pal Dale. “Then the bat thing happened, and he realized people were laughing at him. After that, he slammed the door.”



On May 30, 2008, Ripley Entertainment purchased the famous maple bats from the Calgary Vipers for \$10,000. It was also announced that

THE GOODS: “He had major league stuff,” said a Giants scout who stumbled upon Odom while checking out another prospect.

there would be a special Ripley’s Believe It or Not! night at Calgary’s Foothills Stadium, and afterward the bats would be put on display, along with a wax likeness of Odom, in an exhibit at Ripley’s museums. The flesh-and-blood Odom had had enough. Teammates noticed the talk of the bat trade was wearing on him. And after a six-hour bus ride from San Angelo to Laredo on June 11, he told Shwam, “I’m leaving. I have some personal stuff to deal with back home.” Over the previous two weeks, he’d pitched just 10 innings, compiling a messy 10.00 ERA. He was done. And still the search engines churned and the blogs posted.

When Odom moved back home to Sandy Springs, an affluent Atlanta suburb, nothing fell easily into place. He followed his accountant dad’s footsteps and got a desk job at an H&R Block, but that didn’t last. Late in the summer, freshly unemployed, he moved into a yellow ranch house at the end of a well-manicured street with a new bunch of friends. When Dale visited in August, he

got a creepy vibe. Heroin was making a comeback in the area. “John seemed kind of messed up,” Dale says. “I left hoping he wasn’t using.”

In truth, Odom was fighting a battle to put the infamous trade behind him. He played guitar in local coffee shops and kept up the appearance of nonchalance, but reminders of his humiliation were at every turn. In December, an AP columnist in a year-end wrap-up wrote “indignities come in all forms” and that Odom had “found a classification all his own.” Again, those words made their way around the web. “I’m still in shock

from this phenomenon,” the pitcher was quoted as saying. “I don’t know how to describe it.”

SITTING AT home in Salt Lake City, Shwam felt for the kid, he really did. He knew how hard it was to adjust to life after baseball. And though he couldn’t promise Odom an easy go of it should the kid agree to play for him again in 2009, he was prepared to say it would be no circus this time around. But when Shwam dialed Odom’s cell phone, he got only voice mail, and it was full. He tried again the next day, and the day after. Same result. When a baseball writer called for a where-is-Odom-now story, the coach mentioned the calls. “I hope everything is okay,” he said.

Shwam couldn’t know that on Nov. 5, weeks before the year-end AP column hit the wires, medics had found a

lifeless Odom on the floor of his house. According to the autopsy report, a mix of booze, heroin and crystal meth was in his system, along with benzylpiperazine, an Ecstasylike stimulant.

Odom’s family laid their son and brother to rest quietly and privately, with no announcement to let friends know he was gone. In fact, it took until March for his death to surface in the media, for John Odom to make his way around the web again. To this day the family refuses all interview requests—they’ve had their fill of search engines.

Still, people can’t help but talk about John Odom. “If you think about it, he was amazing,” says Dale, now a pitching coach at the East Cobb baseball complex where Odom played as a kid. “He didn’t play baseball between the ages of 17 and 20. Then, out of nowhere, he came back and made it. Who does that?” As for the men involved in the trade, they have their regrets. Vipers GM Young says he never intended to create an albatross, he was just trying to get buzz for his team. And Shwam vows to never again trade a player for merchandise.

Dale shakes his head, thinking one more time about his lost friend. “I’ve had people ask if I’ve heard the story about the guy who was traded for 10 bats,” he says. “I tell them he was a friend of mine—and that he had a hell of a curveball.”



THE SCARS: Above a reminder of Odom’s Tommy John surgery was a tattoo that read, in Latin, *Poena Par Sapientia*—“Pain Equals Wisdom.”

TIA OWENS-POWERS/AP IMAGES

TIA OWENS-POWERS/AP IMAGES