

GUS Earns an Assist

By Martin Bunn



HAM CARR braked his old red sedan to a smooth stop on the Model Garage's shop floor and stepped out nimbly. "Hi, there, my friend," he hailed Gus Wilson. "Got time to give this old bus the once-over?"

"Sorry, Ham," Gus said, shaking his head. "Not today. I've promised this job I'm on, and I won't have it finished until quitting time. But Stan Hicks will be back soon. He can check if that suits you."

"Sure, that will be O.K.," Ham agreed readily. "The old gal's running all right, so I guess there's nothing wrong except what you'd expect from old age and a hard life. But I've got to drive her fast for a couple of hundred miles tomorrow, and I want to be sure she can take it. Going to the ball game in Millville?"

"I'll be there," Gus grinned. "Even if I weren't a fan myself, I'd have to on account of Stan. Since he's been playing right field for the Stags he doesn't think or talk anything but baseball. He's just killing time working for me until some big-league scout comes along and signs him."

Ham is promoter and manager for our town's crack semipro club. "Stan's no big-league prospect," he admitted, "but he's always in there trying—and he sure loves baseball. I wish some of my other players were that way—Buzz Bentz, for instance."

"What's the matter with Buzz?" Gus demanded. "He's won every game he's pitched

this season. What more do you want?"

"There's nothing wrong with Buzz's pitching," Ham agreed. "It's his attitude that gets my goat. The Reds were after him when he was pitching college ball, but he wouldn't even talk to them—wanted to be a chemist! Now that he's in the National plant he doesn't mind picking up 25 iron men from me once a week, provided it doesn't interfere with his test tubes. But he doesn't have his heart in the game."

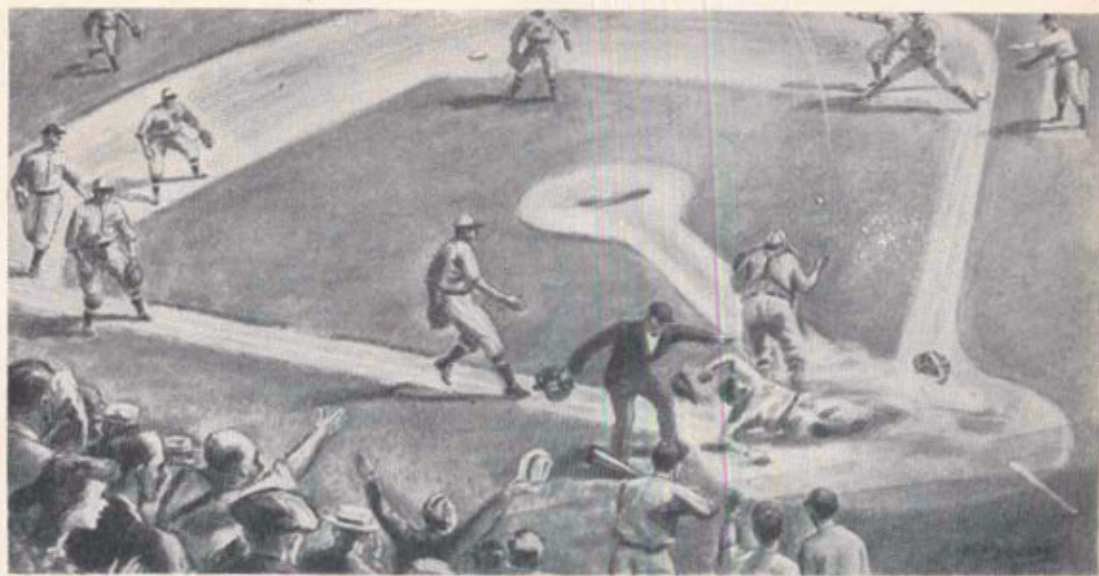
"What do you care," Gus retorted, "as long as he's good for a win every start?"

"He's driving me nuts," Ham complained. "Right now, the day before the big Millville game, what do you think he's doing? Taking care of his arm, practicing his drop?"

The manager stomped in disgust. "Naw!" he answered himself. "He's winding up his vacation from the plant—teaching a short summer course in chemistry at the college in Madison. I'll bet he hasn't had a baseball in his hand the entire two weeks. And he won't leave a minute before the noon whistle closes his last class tomorrow. I've got to be there with my car to rush him to Millville. That's why I want it checked."

Gus did a little quick figuring. "You can't make it," he decided. "It's 140 miles from Madison to Millville. You haven't a chance of doing it in two hours and a half."

"I don't expect to," Ham winked wisely. "But that's all right. Lank Jimson can hold Millville for three or four innings. He's good,



but he's got no stamina. Before he tires, I'll have Buzz there to relieve him. Get it?"

"So that's it," Gus laughed. "Well, here's Stan. Tell him about your car, Ham."

GUS had planned to start for Millville by two o'clock. But when he got back to the shop from lunch at half past one, a new customer came in with a car that wasn't running right despite an expensive engine job down in the city. It was a tough nut trouble-shooting job, and Gus got so interested in it that he forgot all about the ball game. When at last he had found the cause of the trouble and pointed it out to the customer, he glanced at the shop clock and saw that it was past three.

"Holy cat!" he whistled. "I've missed most of the game. Stan will never forgive me if I'm not there for the last inning. Bring your car in Monday, mister, and I'll finish the job then. I'm doing a fade-out for Millville."

He was quick at washing up and changing from his coveralls, but it was going on four when he left the shop and pushing the hour—with almost 20 miles to Millville—when he drove through the intersection at which the Madison road joins the highway.

A couple of miles beyond, Gus saw a familiar red sedan standing on the shoulder, and when he got closer he recognized the man who was pacing impatiently up and down beside it with his eyes on his wrist watch—Ham Carr. Just as Gus was pulling

up behind the sedan, Ham jumped into the old bus and drove off in a swirl of dust.

Wondering why Ham was so late and what he had been waiting for, Gus kept close behind. In 10 minutes the car slackened speed, pulled to the side of the road, and stopped. Gus stopped behind it and jumped out. So did Ham, his eyes again on his watch.

"What's the matter?" Gus shouted.

"My bus has gone nuts, and I'm going nuts, too—that's what's the matter," Ham sputtered. "Those Millville murderers must have slugged Lank Jimson off the mound by now. This is awful!"

"What's wrong with the car?" Gus asked.

Ham kept his eyes on his watch. "It's gone nuts, I tell you," he repeated bitterly. "For 10 minutes it runs swell; then it won't run at all for five. Then it will run swell again for 10 minutes. It's been doing that all the way from Madison. This is driving me crazy! And look at that Buzz Bentz—he's asleep. What an attitude!"

Gus peered into the sedan. Buzz, in his baseball uniform, was slumbering peacefully on the rear seat. Gus shook him.

"Wake up—wake up!" he said. "Get out and get into my car. Leave your bus here, Ham, until after the game. Maybe we can still get there before it's over."

Gus is always known as a careful driver, but when he has to make time in his old well-kept coupe, there's nobody on the road

who can beat him. As they drove up to the players' gate under the old grandstand, a thunderous roar let them know that the game was still on. They ran through the deserted dressing room and onto the field.

An anxious glance at the scoreboard told them that the Stags were ahead 4 to 2 and that there were two men out in the last half of the ninth. But on the diamond, there was a man on third and another on second. Lank Jimson, weary and shaky, was set for the pitch. He didn't see Buzz arrive, and he didn't see Ham signaling frantically for him to throw wide.

Crack! Ash met horsehide, and a hard-hit Texas leaguer went out over the infield between first and second. It reached Stan Hicks in right field on its stinging first bounce. The grease monkey threw almost as he caught the ball—with one clean motion. It was a beautiful throw straight for home plate. In that split second allowed him, Stan realized he would never catch the batter at first, and he threw home in a prayerful effort to keep the tying run from scoring. It worked. The man on third slid home with yards to spare, but the second runner was held on third though the batter stretched his hit to a double.

Then Lank, his shoulders slumped with fatigue, went slowly to the showers. Buzz walked briskly to the mound amid the howls of the stands and with Ham's final plea in his ears. "Get in there and *pitch!*" Ham had whispered hoarsely. "There's an extra 20 bucks in it if you fan this guy."

This guy was Hank Watson, Millville's heaviest slugger, and the Stags' lead had been clipped to one small run. The tying run was on third, the winning on second.

Hank stood back nonchalantly, exuding confidence, as Buzz wound up deliberately and put his first warm-up pitch straight through the center of the plate into Bill Greely's waiting mitt. The roar from the stands gave way to tense silence. Only Buzz—and Hank—seemed unconcerned. There was a second pitch, a third, fourth, and finally a fifth.

Then Hank stepped into the batter's box, heaving aside two bats as he did so and retaining his old reliable favorite. He dug the spike on the ball of his left shoe into the earth and brought his bat slowly back on his right side. Bill signaled, and Buzz nodded assent. He fingered the ball behind his gloved hand, glanced swiftly at the runners on third and second, and threw. "Strike

one," called the umpire. The stands kept strangely still.

Hank let the next three pass without moving a muscle—they were balls. The next he fouled over the stand just inside the third-base line. Three and two.

Even as Buzz's arm flashed on the next pitch, the runners on second and third were in motion. Hank stepped forward, intending to meet the ball before it could break, and swung with all his weight.

That was all. For Buzz broke his drop a little faster than usual, and Hank missed by inches. Millville's section of the stand groaned, and ours went wild. Buzz, calm and cool, walked off the field.

WHEN a semblance of quiet had been restored in the Stags' dressing room some 30 minutes later, Gus hunted out Buzz and Ham.

"Great pitch," he told Buzz as he clapped him on the back. "What did you put on that ball, anyway? But let's get going back to Ham's car. The highway ought to be pretty well cleared, and we can make a road test."

When they reached Ham's parked car, Gus wanted to know whether it gave any warning before it pulled its crazy stops.

"It sputters a little," Ham revealed.

Gus raised the hood. "Drive with this up," he instructed Ham, "and stop quick as soon as you notice the sputter."

At the end of nine minutes, Ham braked. Gus, coming up behind, went over to the sedan. As it gave its last cough, he heard the whiplike snap of a high-tension spark.

"This is anticlimax after the excitement of that ball game," Gus laughed. He pointed to the high-voltage lead that runs from the coil to the center of the distributor cap, which on Ham's car was close to the manifold. "See where the insulation has worn off?" he asked. "When that comes in contact with the manifold it causes a short."

"But how . . ." Ham started.

"Copper wire expands, lengthens in this case, with heat," Gus explained. "When the wire is cool it's almost straight, but when it stretches out it curves and touches the manifold. That causes your trouble. We'll tape up the bare spot and put in a new lead Monday. Even if Stan didn't notice it when he checked your car, he played good ball."

"So did you," Ham grinned. "If you hadn't come along when you did, Gus, Buzz would never have got there in time. In my scorebook you get credit for an assist." END