

Dark Arts and The Gift

“Beer, cold beer! First call on ice cold beer!” he yelled to the crowd. Spring Training in Arizona had become Larry’s favorite time of year, both because of the weather and because it commenced the short season of his career as a beer vendor at the baseball stadium.

Larry had other jobs to supplement his one-month income in Arizona, but these did not provide the same allure as MLB baseball, its tradition, the fans, and seeing new ballplayer prospects. The other jobs also did not involve using the gift.

By the end of Spring Training, Larry had gotten to know the players’ family members, scouts, journalists, and sports agents, not on a first-name basis, but by where they sat and whether they were likely to buy beer. He understood how tickets were distributed in the Cactus League stadiums to accommodate those who paid for attendance and those who received complimentary tickets.

“Fastball,” he yelled over his shoulder as he carried his load of beer and ice up the steps in the 101 section of the stadium. The next pitch was a fastball.

“Good guess,” said a man sitting in an aisle seat next to Larry. Larry stopped and looked around at the players on the other side of the safety net, then at the middle-aged man, whom he recognized as a regular.

“It wasn’t a guess,” Larry protested and started to walk up the stairs.

“Then what was it?” the man continued. Larry stopped beside the man and dropped down on one knee to balance the tray of beverages on the other.

“I just knew what the catcher signaled to the pitcher. Want a beer?”

“You mean a guess,” the man suggested.

“Want a beer?”

“Sure, I’ll buy if you can guess the next pitch,” the man said.

The left-handed pitcher put his foot on the rubber and looked in for a sign from the catcher. The right-handed batter dug in and raised his bat. Larry was still facing away from the game.

“Slider inside,” Larry said quietly to the man and waited for the sound of the ball colliding with the catcher’s mitt. The pitch was a slider inside, and the batter swung and missed.

Larry pulled the tab on a beer, handed the man a beer, and said, “That will be nine dollars, please.”

The man looked at Larry, handed him a twenty-dollar bill, and said, “Keep the change.” Larry did, thanked the customer, and started to get up.

“How often can you do that?” the man asked, gesturing with his freshly opened beer can toward the pitcher.

Larry stopped and said, “Not often. I don’t think about it most of the time.”

“How often are you right?” the man persisted as Larry stepped up one level.

“Every time, because it is not a guess,” Larry responded as he walked away.

Larry stopped hawking beer after the seventh inning and took his tray back to the concession area, where he unloaded the unsold beer and dumped the ice in a large sink. He took the cash from his vendor wallet to settle his account with the vendor supervisor. It had been a good day, and Larry figured he had made about \$250 in tips. As he left the concession area, the man who paid with a twenty-dollar bill was standing outside talking to other people whom Larry recognized as scouts and sports agents. The man walked over to Larry and handed him a business card. Larry looked at the card, which said ‘Mark O’Dell’, and indicated he was associated with the Seattle Mariners. Nothing unusual there, except his team had been under-performing in Spring Training. Larry nodded at the man and waited to see what was on his mind.

“What is your name?” Mark O’Dell asked.

“Larry The Beer Guy Pickering,” Larry said with a smile.

“You got a minute, Larry?”

“Depends on what you want,” he responded.

“Can you watch a few pitches for me?” O’Dell asked. “They are trying out a pitcher who has been in rehab at the field next door, and I can get us in to watch.”

“Sure,” Larry said as he looked around at the crowd that was passing by. The men O’Dell had been talking with had moved on. They walked around the stadium perimeter and came to a gate where a security guard was standing, and the guard opened the gate when O’Dell showed the guard a pass. Larry heard the familiar snap of balls against leather mitts and saw coaches with radar guns to measure the speed of the pitches. There was no batter at the plate.

As the two men stood behind a practice cage watching the pitches, O’Dell turned to Larry and said, “Can you tell me what the next pitch is going to be?”

“Sure, if the pitcher is getting a sign from the catcher. But, right now, they are not using signs,” Larry replied.

O’Dell looked at Larry and then at the pitcher. “How do you know that?” he asked.

Larry shrugged and said, “Because I don’t hear a sign.”

O'Dell walked over to the batting cage and spoke to one of the coaches standing outside the cage. The coach said something to the catcher between pitches.

"Changeup outside," Larry said when O'Dell returned. The pitch was as Larry predicted.

"How did you do that?" O'Dell asked as he turned to face Larry. "Are you reading the pitcher's setup or is it based on where the catcher places himself relative to the plate?"

"I heard the sign," Larry replied.

"Can you do something for me?" O'Dell demanded. "Turn around, facing away from the batting cage, and tell me what the next pitch will be."

Larry turned around and waited as O'Dell walked around to face Larry. "Fastball inside, relative to a right-handed batter," Larry said quietly. O'Dell looked over Larry's shoulder at the pitch, and it was a fastball thrown over the inside part of the plate.

"What happens when a pitcher shakes off a sign?" O'Dell asked.

"I only hear disagreement until the pitcher accepts the last sign from the catcher. When the pitcher does not accept a signal or call from the catcher, I don't hear anything. That is why I say I don't always hear the signs."

"Do you hear the signal the catcher gets from the third-base coach?" O'Dell continued.

"Yeah, but it is more like background noise to me. I ignore it until there is an agreement between the pitcher and catcher," Larry answered.

The process continued for a few more pitches until Larry looked at his watch and announced, "I need to get going, Mr. O'Dell. Maybe I'll see you at the game tomorrow?"

O'Dell would have preferred to spend more time with Larry, but said nothing. He reached into his pocket and handed Larry another twenty-dollar bill.

"What is that for?" Larry asked as he took the money.

"Another tip," said O'Dell. "See you tomorrow."

O'Dell watched Larry leave and then walked over to the hitting coach, who was behind the batting cage watching the workout.

"Lou, you got a minute?" O'Dell asked the man.

"What's up?" the coach responded as they walked away from the batting cage.

"I want to talk about sign stealing," O'Dell said. "When is it legal to steal signs, and when is it legal to tell the batter what pitch is coming?"

The coach looked at O'Dell and said, "The Dark Arts, huh."

“No, I’m asking about the legal side of the Dark Arts. Baseball has practiced sign stealing for decades, but until the Astros' 2017 scandal, it had been mostly legal. Is it legal to have a club member steal signs from the dugout and tell the manager what is coming?”

“Not possible, let alone legal,” the coach responded.

“Just suppose it is possible. No electronics involved, just a person in the club who knows the signs. Say we could do that; is it legal?”

“Can’t be done, but nice try,” the coach concluded and went back to watching pitching practice.

O’Dell was in the same seat for the game the next day. When he heard Larry’s voice hawking beer over in the next section, he pulled two twenty-dollar bills out of his pocket.

“Cold beer, Mr. O’Dell?” Larry asked as he walked down the aisle.

O’Dell held up the two twenties and said, “Larry, this is Lou, our batting coach. Can you tell Lou what the next pitch will be?”

Without looking up from the tray of beer, he said, “Curveball outside,” and opened two beers.

O’Dell and Lou watched as the curveball came over the outside part of the plate and was called a strike.

“Keep the change,” O’Dell said. “What other signs do you hear other than between catcher and pitcher?”

Larry knelt down on the step beside O’Dell and said, “I can usually tell when the runner at first is going to steal second. But as you know, that is a bit complicated,” he added.

“Because the sign is not an instruction, but permission to run when the runner sees the right opportunity, is that what you mean?”

“Yeah, the third-base coach gives the sign, but then there is a sign to the batter, and the runner on first has to decide whether to run or wait for another opportunity,” Larry replied.

The crowd applauded as the batter walked on the next pitch. The next batter came to the plate, and before the windup, the pitcher turned and threw to first, but the runner safely dove back to first base.

Larry continued to talk with the two men, and in mid-sentence, he said, “pitchout.” The men looked up as the runner on first started running to second, and the catcher stepped out from behind the plate, caught the pitchout before the runner took four steps. The catcher threw to the second baseman, and the runner was tagged out.

Two days later, O'Dell called the high school baseball coach and introduced himself over the phone. In preparation for the call, O'Dell noted that the coach played baseball at his alma mater, Texas A&M. They chatted about baseball, a couple of players who went to the minor leagues out of the school, and the Aggie baseball program. It was an easy conversation between members of the baseball fraternity.

Finally, O'Dell said, "Coach, I want to talk about one of your former players."

"Former players. You aren't calling about some of the boys I have now?" he asked with a note of disappointment.

"No, that is not my department," O'Dell advised. "I'm looking at Larry Pickering."

"You've got to be kidding me! Pickering graduated several years ago. Why would MLB be looking at him?" the coach asked.

"We are not looking at him as a player," O'Dell responded. "Tell me about him. Did you notice anything unusual about him when he played for you?"

The coach chuckled and thought for a minute. "Nice kid, but not a remarkable player. Nothing remarkable, which is why he never went anyplace after his senior year," the coach said.

"How was his batting? Did he seem to know what pitches were coming at him?" O'Dell asked.

"OK, I know what you are saying about unusual. Pickering talked about reading signs. It was the darndest thing. I couldn't get it out of his head. In his second year, I finally told him to stop. We were playing against a cross-town rival, and from the bench, Pickering was yelling to our hitters which pitch was coming. I didn't pay any attention because I was focused on the game. Anyway, in the ninth inning, we are at bat with two outs, and Pickering yells 'pitchout' just before the catcher steps out from the plate, the pitcher throws to him. Our runner at first never moves and our batter just stands there for called ball two. Our players believed Pickering."

"Their coach comes running out of the dugout and starts yelling at the plate umpire, pointing at our team and Pickering in particular. After the dust settles around home plate, the umpire comes over to me and says the coach thinks we are stealing signs. I had to put a stop to it," the coach advised.

"How was his hitting?" O'Dell asked after he stopped laughing.

"Yeah, he could put the ball in play better than most, but the ball never went very far. And, he wasn't much of a base runner. If there was a man on first, you could count on him to hit into a double play."

“Thanks, Coach,” O’Dell said. “Go Aggies!”

The next day, O’Dell and Coach Lou met with the Mariners' General Manager to discuss something that had probably never been discussed in MLB history: the legality and efficacy of adding someone to the club who practiced in the Dark Arts, and what to do with that information. The conversation started out strained because the topic was still touchy after the Astros' cheating scandal.

“This is how careers are destroyed,” the GM said to the two men.

“Look, I’ve watched this guy myself,” Coach Lou said. “I can’t explain it, but I don’t think it is illegal. There is no equipment involved. You need to meet the guy and watch him yourself.”

“Let me get this straight,” the GM demanded. “You two are telling me you found a beer hawker who just happens to be in our stadium, and who just happens to read minds, and knows what a pitcher is going to throw before the windup. Do I have that right?”

“When you say it like that, it sounds strange, but that is what we are saying,” O’Dell answered.

“And how much is this psychic going to cost me? And what will we call him – director of paranormal sports phenomena?” the GM inquired.

The following week, the GM called the concessions manager and arranged for Larry Pickering to come to the GM’s office to receive payment and compensation for the tips from that day. When Larry arrived at work, Mark O’Dell and Coach Lou were there to meet him and explained what was planned for the day. The three men walked up to the owners’ box, and O’Dell introduced Larry to the GM.

“Larry, just tell us what the signs are for the first couple of innings for us,” O’Dell instructed.

Over the two innings, Larry predicted the pitches for both teams as the GM listened. The predictions were compared with reports called to the owners’ box by a pitching coach from the Mariners' dugout. After the first half of the first inning, the GM shook his head and smiled at O’Dell and Coach Lou. In the second inning, they had Larry turn away from the field, and he continued to predict the pitches.

“Larry, I understand you played high school baseball. Why weren’t you a phenomenal batter? You knew what the pitcher was going to throw, so why didn’t you have a .350 or above batting average?” the GM asked.

“Knowing what pitch is coming at you only helps if you have the skill to deal with it. I didn’t have the talent to hit a fastball, even knowing it was going to be a fastball inside or

outside,” Larry advised. “Not many balls in the strike zone got by me, but they usually ended up as weak grounders.”

“Look, I need to know what this involves,” the GM said. “These men want me to make you an offer that involves more money than all the beer that will be sold in this stadium today. Our team will have to answer questions from the commissioner’s office and the sports press. Larry, I need to know how you do this.”

“Sir, I understand the question. It is something I’ve lived with since I was a kid. I only have one word to explain it to you,” Larry said.

“What word?” the GM asked.

“Magic.”

“You want me to hire a magician?” the GM replied.

“No sir, I’m not asking for anything. You came to me; I didn’t come to you. The magic chose me; I didn’t choose the magic. It only goes so far, and I cannot predict where this is going for you, for me, the Mariners, or baseball. The only thing I can predict is that if you don’t want me on your team, you will spend the rest of your career wondering what would have happened if you had me in your dugout. You have a choice, I don’t. I’ll continue to hear signs whether I’m selling beer or sitting in your dugout.”

The GM stood up, shook Larry’s hand, and turned to his two employees. “You two got us into this, now figure out how we quickly communicate information we get by magic to mere mortals who are standing at the plate with a bat in their hands,” he demanded as he left the room.