

Yeah, we know winter's coming on. But there'll be spring in your heart, bud, when you read about this peacheroo of a

HOME RUNYON

By Tom Thursday

(as if you didn't know!)

A great ballhawk was Calithumpian Runyon. He'd jump five feet into the air to miss a ball coming his way in the outfield; he'd stand quietly as strikes were called on him, then slug a curve over to the next state and start on a leisurely tour of the bases!

THE GREAT guy came to me with a letter of introduction from his alderman, Uncle Hiram and the president of the chamber of comics. They all said he was extra marvelous with a bat. I needed a lad who could hit a ball in such a manner that it would allow him to remain on first base, at least. What I had in that line I wouldn't wish on the worst team in Patagonia.

The name of the great guy was Calithumpian Runyon. The first tag intrigued me. But when the rest of the Crackers got a snifter of that handle they raised uncultured eyebrows and had fun. Calithumpian was a very modest red-topped lad of 19 and had a freckle on his sober face for every heinie in Berlin.

He came to the Crackers—which I managed, or mismanaged, according to the sports pages you read—fresh from triumphs on the high school team in Red Clay, Georgia. He was, to coin a phrase, the king of home run kings. He could perform miracles with a bat and if any of my regular team could do the same that would be a miracle.

Calithumpian Runyon was with us less than a day when the other bimbos shortened his name to Thumpy. He didn't seem to mind so much until Joe Dook, our star pitcher, began to razz him. Then Thumpy blushed a deep crimson and came to me.

"Mr. Trimm," he said, "I wish the boys would call me Cal, instead of Thumpy."

"Kid," I replied, "forget what they call you. If they could really play ball they would not be in this bib-and-rattle league. You just hit the ball and forget those hickolas."

I asked Thumpy which part of the field he played and he said center was where he felt most at home. But if that was not okay with me, he would



be happy to pitch, catch, play shortstop, right, left field or first, second or third base.

"How about umpiring?" I asked.

"Wal," he drawled, "I reckon that's one place I don't like to play."

I put him in center. And in the first game, against the Blue Wizards, I learned considerable about Calithumpian Runyon. No doubt he may be good at catching a cold, a fly on his nose or even a bus—but he couldn't catch a ball. One of the chief duties of a ballplayer, grandpa always told me, was to catch a ball.

When Ham Tish, shortstop for the Blue Wizards, cracked one over second, Thumpy came in for it like a jeep out of gas. Which means he couldn't run. I noticed that his feet were as flat as Mussolini's head, but I found out later that was not the real reason. Anyway, he held out both hands, as wide apart as California and New York, and the ball whizzed through him to the back fence. In brief, fellow Americans, what should have been an easy putout gave Ham Tish three bags.

Well, you can imagine what the lads called Thumpy. However, he had no comeback and just hung his head and remained quiet. Nor did he try to haul off and give me an alibi.

"What did you play with back home," ragged Ted Lee, our shortstop, "a fireman's net and a scoop shovel?"

Thumpy blushed and said nothing. The guy was as talkative as a parrot with its beak nailed together.

"Listen, kid," I said, "I want to give you a chance, but from the way you muffed that one I am afraid you will use your return ticket to Red Clay, Georgia, in the very near future."

"Sorry, Mr. Trimm," he said. "I guess I am pretty bad at catching."

Thumpy was the fifth man up in the second. Our first two boys got their bases, one from a pass, the other from a single. The single was by Toots McKeen and was his first hit in six weeks. I had to look twice to see if it was the same guy. I still think the ball hit his bat whilst he wasn't looking.

Then Ockie Ploop, our second-sacker, let four go by and that filled the bases. Joe Snoot hit into a double play but made first safely. That left two on. Bud Tuttle let four pass and that made three on again and two out.

Mr. Calithumpian Runyon now at the plate. Me, I am afraid to look. If he hit like he caught—p'tooey! He picked the largest bat he could find

and stood like a wax figure. The guy was positively rigid. He didn't make a motion and not once did he wiggle the timber in his hands.

He paid no attention to the first ball. Strike. He paid less attention to the second. Strike two. The boys looked there amazement. There were two perfect, center-of-the-plate pitches, and Brother Runyon doesn't even twitch a muscle. I began to wonder if I had picked a ballplayer or a joke.

Then, blow me down or even up, if a screwy thing didn't happen!

THE THIRD pitch was very low and at least two feet to the left of the plate. It was a guaranteed hundred percent ball. But Thumpy thought it was ideal. He stepped out and swung. And I do mean swung!

Boom! Which means Thumpy's bat caught the ball near the end and from what I read of tracer bullets they had nothing on that ball for speed. It zoomed toward Capella, Saturn and Orion. Over the ballpark fence was not enough. It also went over a seven-story building outside of the park. What ever became of it nobody knows.

Of course everybody expected Thumpy to drop his bat and race like Hades to first and then around the circuit. But you didn't know Thumpy. No, sir—or ma'am—that bird was in absolutely no hurry to go away from home plate.

"Run, you dope!" yelled someone in the bleachers. "Come on, mucilage legs—get going!"

Leisurely, Thumpy stuck his shirt back into his pants, adjusted his cap, laid the bat down carefully, then started for first base like he was after a train that would not leave for at least two hours. Before he had reached first the men on second and third had been home for some time.

Thumpy finally tagged first and stopped. Shading his eyes he looked toward center field. Evidently finding everything okay he took another hitch in his belt and jogged toward second.

"Hey," yelled some wit, "come on home before the sun goes down!"

On second Thumpy took another hitch in his belt, again slanted toward center field, and then ambled toward third. You would think he was helping the government conserve shoe leather. Arriving at third the Senor Don Runyon removed a few specks from his uniform, and adjusted his cap. After which he took a third gander at center field, found everything okay, then came home like an

aged snail.

Reaching home he touched the plate very meticulously and walked toward the dugout.

"Yoo hoo!" yelled a fan. "How was everything in Egypt?"

"What's the matter?" I snapped. "Can't you run either?"

"I never waste my strength when it ain't necessary, Mr. Trimm," he drawled. "The main idear was to get home safe. Wal, I got home safe."

"Suppose," I said, "you had just hit a single, instead of a home run? You would have been out ten minutes before you reached first!"

"You won't have to worry about that, Mr. Trimm."

"Look," I said, "I'm supposed to be the manager of this trick ball club and you are supposed to obey orders. Answer my question!"

"I guess yuh didn't unnerstand me, Mr. Trimm. You see, the reason you won't have to worry about that is because I never hit singles."

That's one for Hirohito!

In the fourth Thumpy has another chance to catch a line fly that was right in his crawl. But—does he catch it? Echo: he does not! It goes right through him and the player wins himself a homer on a hit that should have, at the most, been a mere single. This second error steams up the boys and they begin looking for a tree on which to test the strength of Thumpy's neck.

"Why can't you catch easy balls like that?" I demanded.

"Wal, I guess mebbe I misjudge them, Mr. Trimm. Yup; I guess mebbe that is the reason."

Meantime Roy Chaney, pitching for the Blue Wizards, tightened up and fanned the next two batters on six pitched balls. Then came Thumpy, nobody's gift to center field. The first ball split the plate. Thumpy stood there like it never happened. The second was wild and although it was almost in the next county Thumpy took a swing at it. When he missed, he seemed greatly surprised. The third pitch was wide and to the right. It would have gone at least a foot in Thumpy's rear.

Thumpy thought it was perfect. He stepped back and—whang!—it went over the fence. Thumpy adjusted his pants and cap, dropped the bat slowly on the grass, and jogged toward first, second, third and—it seemed an hour later—home. And I ask you, wouldn't a guy like that drive you balmy in the bean?

Well, to amputate a long story, during the game Thumpy knocked three homers out of four times at bat, the fourth being a mere triple. Even the triple would have been an easy homer if he had shifted his legs from first to second gear. We win—11 to 8.

DURING the next three weeks Thumpy muffs about everything in the shape of a ball that comes near him. His teammates begin to draw straws to see which one will drop him off a bridge. True, Thumpy wins most of our games with his astounding hitting but his constant muffing of the balls began to unnerve our lads. And the more they began to fidget the worse they played and I knew something drastic had to be done.

It was useless trying to teach Thumpy to catch the ball. He simply couldn't do it and that was that. I tried everything I knew outside of homicide but no dice. The real trouble of course never occurred to me, and who called me a sap? Okay, brother—you're right!

Came the showdown. We were playing the neck-and-neck team of Royal Oak and needed the game to lead the league. Up to the last half of the ninth, which was theirs, the score was even—3 to 3. Thumpy had accounted for two of the runs via homers and his triple has sent in the third. Outside of that our Rip Van Winkles couldn't hit the Royal Oak pitcher with a Grant tank.

There's two out and two on, first and second. The next guy was passed, the first walk of the game. Up came Pete Chopp, the best slugsman on the team. Pete smacked the first pitch for a beeline straight toward Thumpy. My heart went blank and my liver went with it. Of all places, the drive had to go toward Thumpy! He didn't have to move a hair part of an inch to grab it, but did he jail it? Brother, you just know he didn't!

The ball whizzed through his paws like army bombers in the Coral Sea. After missing the ball Thumpy just sat down on the ground and chewed a blade of grass. He appeared calm and likewise collected. Our boys started out to tear him apart but I stopped them.

"Listen, boss," howled Ockie Ploop, "if you don't tie the can to that dope's tail I'm through!"

"And that goes for all of us!" added the other lads. That, I knew, was mutiny off the Bounty and on the ball field. Trying to run a dissatisfied ball club successfully was the same as asking Hitler to

hop into a booby hatch, where the crackpot belongs.

Just then Hank Kroom, manager of the Royal Oaks, came into our dressing room.

"You boys had a little hard luck," purred Hank, and will you look who's telling us! "That was the most perfect muff I ever seen. You would think I had paid the guy to do it, wouldn't you?"

"If I didn't know Thumpy so well," I said, "I certainly would!"

Hank hemmed and likewise hawed for a few moments, then wrinkled a pair of bird's nest eyebrows.

"What d'yer suppose ails the boy?" finally asked Hank.

"If I only knew," I replied, "I'd have the world's greatest ballplayer. The lad is a better hitter than even Babe Ruth in his prime. I know he has all the personality of a dried barracuda but so long as the lad hits, that's the pay off."

"I have a hunch that I know what's the matter with him," said Hank, confidentially.

"Shoot," I said, "you're faded."

"Nope," said Hank. "Why should I help a player on a rival team?"

He had something there.

"Then what?" I asked.

"I might buy him. If the price is right."

"Cash or promise?"

All the boys pricked up their extra large ears, hoping the deal would go through.

"For the love of Jake, sell him!" woofed Toots McKeen.

"That goes for all of us!" added another. "If you can get fifteen cents, grab it!" snorted Ockie Ploop.

Well, I was in a pickle, as Heinz remarked. If I kept Thumpy I knew the revolt in India would have nothing on the riots I might expect from the enraged lads. Still, it was hard to let go a very remarkable batsman.

"What price Thumpy?" I asked Hank.

"Fifty bucks is too much, but I will take a gamble that my hunch is okay."

"Make it a hundred and I'll wrap him up."

"Listen to the guy!" fumed Hank. "He gets a man for gratis and also for nothing and he wants I should slip him a hundred!"

"Sell' im! Sell 'im! Sell' im!" chanted the boys.

Sold—to Hank Kroom for fifty bucks.

LATER that evening I ran into Thumpy carrying a battered suitcase to the train.

"Well, bye bye, Mr. Trimm," he said. "Sorry I wasn't so good. Mebbe I will be better playing for Mr. Kroom. But you have been very good to me, Mr. Trimm, and I'm gonna miss you very much."

You can't get sore at a guy like that. He had none of the usual smart-aleck stuff in his makeup and I never heard him complain about anything. In all the razzing he took from the boys and the fans he never once lost his temper. Only once he said, "Wal, I guess they are right."

I took Thumpy by the hand. I really liked the boy.

"Kid," I said, "I wish you plenty of luck. I know I should kick myself right in the sit-spot for letting you go to that bandit, Hank Kroom, but you know how the boys feel. You know how it is."

"Sure," he said, "I know how it is, Mr. Trimm."

It was several weeks before I saw Thumpy again. He was with the Royal Oaks, of course, and what do you know? He's actually playing shortstop! This gave our boys a large laugh. Thumpy playing about the most difficult position on a ball team!

"This should be like Christmas," said Ockie Ploop. "All we have to do is hit 'em to Thumpy and he will play Santa Claus."

Curious, I cornered Hank Kroom. I'm puzzled how a guy who can't even catch easy flies in center field is now playing shortstop.

"I see you are a magician," I said. "Or are you kidding yourself?"

"You mean about Thumpy Runyon playing short?"

"I don't mean Jimmy Doolittle playing Tokyo," I said. "How come?"

"Wait and see. I told you I had a hunch about Thumpy and—well, wait and see."

"Has he been playing since he left here?"

"Just a little secret training, that's all. This is his first real game. I thought it would be nice to give you and the boys a chance to see him in action first. I'm sure you will appreciate it."

I didn't like his smug tone. He talked like a guy who had a secret weapon.

"Play ball!" barked the umpire.

We start the game. Our first two men fan trying to send a hit into Thumpy's direction. Then Toots McKeen hit a scorcher. It went toward Thumpy like a .45 bullet.

Then—well, then Thumpy pulled the funniest stunt I have ever seen on a ball field! Quicker than the well-known flash Thumpy jerked a pair of lorgnettes out of his shirt pocket. You know, a pair of glasses with a crutch, the kind Lady Chumley-Chumley Castor Earl uses at the opera to see what Madame De Buxom is wearing this evening—

Holding the lorgnettes with his left hand, he leaped three feet toward the right and snipped the ball with his right. One of the greatest one-hand catches I've seen since Hal Chase played first for the Yankees ages ago. He whips the ball over to first and the pitch was perfect.

"Gee," said Toots. "Jumpin' gee!"

"What got into that guy?" demanded Ockie Ploop. "He never showed anything like that with us!"

Then the whole trouble with Thumpy dawned on me. And am I a dope! All the kid needed was a pair of glasses! But—why didn't he tell me? Also, why didn't he wear the regular kind, instead of those funny lorgnettes?

Meantime, Thumpy came to bat. The first two cut the plate. As usual, Thumpy didn't like them. Each time the ball left the pitcher, Thumpy would extract his lorgnette, hold it to his eyes with his left hand, then, when the ball passed, replace it in his shirt pocket. Did the fans howl! Naturally, they thought he was just putting on an act for their amusement.

The third ball sizzled a foot behind him. Out came the lorgnette again and, as the ball was halfway, he dropped them in the sand and swung. Well, you know Thumpy. The ball shot over the fence and Thumpy leisurely stooped and retrieved his lorgnette. Then he adjusted his belt, arranged his cap, and went for first. But this time he darted like he was being chased by a whole regiment of the Gestapo. The boy could really run!

HANK KROOM walked up, smiling very broadly.

"I think Thumpy will make a pretty fair catcher," said Hank. "I always play my hunches."

"Just a moment, Hank," I said. "I don't get it. How come Thumpy didn't wear glasses when he was with me?"

"That's a sour story," grinned Hank. "Did I have trouble! It took me two weeks before I could get him near an oculist."

"Why?"

"It seems that Thumpy is in love with some dame who laughed her head off when he wore glasses before. This made him very self-conscious and he threw the glasses in the ash can. This made him practically blind. How he ever hit a ball was a mystery to me until he gave me the lowdown."

"Continue," I begged.

"He developed very acute hearing," went on Hank. "The kid could actually hear the ball coming long before he could see it. Then he would swing more or less blindly, but nine times out of ten he would connect."

"How come he didn't hear the ball coming when he was playing center field for me?"

"Too far away," explained Hank.

Well, before the game was over all Thumpy did was field one hundred percent, knock three homers and a triple and practically win the game by himself. But the way he used them lorgnettes was a scream!

All this was a year ago. And do you recall that screaming and cheering that came out of your radio during the World's Series? That was caused by Cal Runyon, formerly Thumpy, belting another over the fence at the Yankee Stadium.

And I sold the guy for fifty bucks!

Is there an alienist in the house?

THE END