



An umpire gets talked to in all kinds of ways—but this Leander fellow was something new!

POWER THE BALL PLATEWARD

by Michael Avallone

UMPIRE Barney Slocum was a nice guy as umps go. Of course, he missed a call now and then, same as the rest of them, but he'd always give the batter a sly, Irish wink to make him feel better about the whole thing. He had quite a rep around the league for not letting a little jockeying bother him.

But this was before he ran into a certain batter in Hawk livery.

Barney was a great plate duster—offer for his trade. Most of the boys in blue brush off home after a terrific slide, or maybe once every three innings—but not Barney. A clean plate when he was calling balls and strikes was a Slocum trademark.

That's exactly what he was doing when this Hawk hitter stepped in. I can tell you all about it because that particular day I was doing the backstopping for the Tigers. But even I wasn't prepared for anything different in major league ball.

The Hawks and Tigers were neck-and-necking it for the Western flag. Neither of the two clubs had been able to discourage the other all year. In this particular game, both of the rival hurlers were handing out horse collars to the opposition. So it stood 0-0 when this character stepped in. It had been a quiet tussle up until then, so Slocum wasn't expecting any surprises. Neither was I.

Anyway, out on the hill, Trimble, the Tiger ace, was taking his high old time getting set after my signal.

This seemed to bother the batter because he turned to Barney and said: "Will you kindly use your oral influence against these shabby tactics of stalling? Please remind that fellow out there to power the ball plateward."

"Huh!"

You couldn't blame Barney. He's been around the majors since Cobb's time and, brother, nobody

talks to him like that. Not even Frick.

"If he continues in this unfortunate procrastination, I shall feel it my duty to step from the batter's box. Also, permit me to remind you of the rule governing the time allowed between delivery of pitches."

Barney must have figured he hadn't heard right because he just gestured impatiently in Trimble's direction. We finally got our signals straight and Trimble came in with his high, hard one.

"*Strrrrr—ike one!*" Barney had a great voice for an ump.

The Hawk hitter looked pained and turned to question the decision. "Really, one would think you had left your eyes at home. You were in grave error on that call."

It was a very hot day and the buzz of the crowd had been in our ears all afternoon so Barney must have figured he hadn't heard him right. He just glared and went into his half-crouch behind my big back. Frankly, I was laughing like hell to myself. Not saying a thing for a change.

Trimble went into his dance again, and his second serve was better than I wanted it to be. It split the dish in half. No ace ever should do that on purpose. He always tries for a piece of the corners. The lousiest hitter alive can murder a pitch like that.

At any rate, the Hawk dope watches the made-to-order sail by and Barney does what any self-respecting ump would do in a spot like that. He calls it strike two. This really got things moving.

"Were you not in the Tiger employ, you would clearly have seen that was a ball."

BARNEY couldn't have missed that and he didn't. "*What's that?*"

"If that is all you have to say, I must confess I am terribly put out!"

Barney had been cursed at, his ancestors defiled and even a hot-tempered rookie had thrown a punch at him once. But, this was something else again.

He got purple in what must have been the world's record. "I'll say you are, funny man. You're out! Out of the game!"

"Oh, I say. This is a drastic step you are taking."

"You better start taking steps, sonny. Right toward the clubhouse!"

"But I haven't completed my turn at bat yet."

"And you aren't going to, either!"

By this time, the whole thing had turned into a vaudeville routine and the crowd was eating it up. The famous calm of Barney Slocum had vanished. He was hopping up and down the foul line as if he'd found a cockroach in his chest protector, waving his arms like a windmill.

Dude Hollis, the Hawk manager, ran over from the dugout to see what the rumpus was about. Maybe to defend his player. "What's eating you, Barney?" he roared.

The badgered ump whirled on him. "Get this cutie out of here. He's through for the afternoon. Too much sun."

"On what grounds? That last one was a mile outside!"

"Mister Hollis, please let's not lose our heads. I'm not heaving him for that. Not by a fastball, I'm not."

The batter couldn't leave well enough alone. He clutched his bat firmly at the end of the handle and made like Napoleon. "I'll not budge from this spot, Manager Hollis, until I have his apology."

"Apology!" screamed the irate Barney. "Get him out of here, Hollis, before I forfeit the game to the Tigers!"

That was enough for any manager, and Hollis was no different than anyone I ever worked for. The good of the team comes first. Even above ballplayers. "Okay, Leander, that does it. Beat it. Tell Warner to grab a bat and fill in for you."

Leander refused to take this sitting or standing. Suddenly, I felt sorry for him. With a name like that, you can take plenty of punishment. He jutted

out his chin at Barney and Hollis and gave them another string of jawbreakers to chew on.

"I leave with the distinct impression, not at all faint, that my presence is not to your liking. May I say that our brief association has been a painful one and I for one, will do all in my power to enable this morbid memory to vanish from my mind forever. Good day. Gentlemen."

With this message delivered—without benefit of some good string music—he stalked off the field, the crowd cheering him every step of the way. There was more than one yell of "*Kill The Ump!*"

Barney Slocum turned to Hollis, who was beginning to edge quietly back to the dugout. "What was *that*, Mr. Hollis?"

The Hawk chief tried to grin but it wouldn't jell.

"If you're wondering how *it* got on a ball field, don't blame me, Barney. Blame that eminent millionaire, Zachary Welles and half the shares of Hawk stock."

The substitute batter, Warner, was getting in but Barney was still putting two and two together. "You mean that Quiz Kid was Old Zach's boy? He couldn't be! Zach never spoke anything but good twenty-five-cent English, bless him."

Brownlee winced. "Yep, he's Leander Welles, late of Oxford. And the only baseball he ever played was something called cricket. But the old boy says Junior can play ball so play he does!"

Barney was amazed and, as Hollis walked dejectedly back to the bench, he put his mask on and adjusted his chest protector. He rubbed up a new ball and handed it to me with the fierce warning: "Say it simple, Eddie. For the rest of the game. If you know what's good for you. Damn me to hell but never, never call me Mister Slocum." I could tell he wasn't kidding. Nice guys never kid you about anything. So I stopped grinning.

Barney cupped his hands to his chin and bellowed in a voice loud enough to be heard in the next league, "Snap it up out there! Let's—*power the ball plateward!*"

He had a swell voice for an ump.

