

# **THESE IRISH EYES AREN'T SMILING**

Jim Fusilli

With Styrofoam coffee on the dashboard and a bear claw on his lap, Denny Dunbar and his hangover rolled out of the motel lot on West Cypress for the 10-minute drive to Al Lopez Field. A bright sun lingered above the sandy horizon on the other side of the state. Dunbar took it as an insult.

Dunbar's day was foretold: He would ride a bus to St. Petersburg with the B squad to play the Cardinals while the regulars stayed put – the Yankees were coming east to Tampa. Yesterday, there was chatter in the clubhouse, mostly from Rose and Morgan, that it would burn the oversized ass of Yankees owner George Steinbrenner if the Reds pounded his team on St. Patrick's Day, Steinbrenner the kind of gasbag who, for one day, would proclaim he bled green. But beneath the bluster was an increasingly bitter truth: The remaining players from the Reds who had won the World Series in 1975 and '76 were steamed that the Yankees were champions now. The Big Red Machine was sputtering to its end. No more Tony Pérez, the bullpen in need of repair and the next generation of Dan Driessen, Ray Knight and Ron Oester eager to make the team their own. As for Dunbar, he was somewhere down the depth chart behind Johnny Bench, the greatest catcher in the game. As he wrote to his mother in Belfast, if he were managing the Reds he'd start Bench too and let him play all 162. (Emma Dunbar understood not a word of what her son wrote. Baseball to her was the thing the Americans did to ruin cricket.)

Dunbar parked his rented Datsun under a sleepy palm tree, tossed the pastry remains into the trash and walked toward the clubhouse in his shorts and flip-flops. He was surprised to find his teammates, similarly dressed, lingering in the lot. He sidled next to Rafael Torres who, like Dunbar, was ticketed to Triple A Indianapolis when the cuts came in a few weeks.

"What's the hold up?" Dunbar asked, forgetting Torres, a shortstop buried behind the All-Star Dave Concepción, had a weak grasp of English.

Torres shrugged. Like every other Latin player in the clubhouse, he struggled with Dunbar's choppy accent.

Dunbar looked around and noticed none of team's stars were waiting in the scrum. Typical, he thought. By the clubhouse door stood Dick Wagner, the Reds' general manager who was popular with the veterans. The architect of the Big Red Machine, he had put ample cash in their pockets, as their shiny new Cadillacs confirmed. When Wagner told the scrubs to form a line, they took his instruction with lamb-like obedience. Dunbar found himself at the line's end, which heightened his increasingly sour mood.

Next to Wagner stood a beaming man in a kelly-green windbreaker over khaki slacks. As the players filed by, he repeatedly extended a hand and smiled. Dunbar saw the man was plump with pride. Maybe he was the winner of some kind of promotion up in Cincinnati – a free trip to Tampa to meet your Reds! George Foster! Cesar Geronimo! Get you picture taken with Sparky Anderson!

By now, a few more players gathered behind Dunbar. A kid pitcher named Soto who had finished the season with the big club starting inching his way past the line.

“Don’t even think about it, ya wab ya,” Dunbar snapped, pressing a thumb against a pounding temple.

Soto looked him up and down.

“Yeah? And what?” said Dunbar, who was built like a bunker and yielded a blue-eyed stare that could stop a bullet.

Soto muttered a phrase in Spanish that caused Torres to snicker. But he went to the back of the line.

Dunbar’s disposition always well short of cheery, his temper was legendary. While barely out of his teens, he set the Southern League single-season record for ejections with six, one of which followed him throwing the ball 400 feet into the bleachers when the umpire failed to call a strike on a pitch that cut the plate in half. A lefthanded batter, Dunbar had impressive if occasional power, but he had yet to hit a ball as far as he’d thrown one that day.

Now, motel coffee roiling in his stomach, Dunbar didn’t reach the clubhouse steps until another 10 minutes has passed.

The man in the kelly-green jacket greeted Torres with a hardy handshake and an attempt at chit chat.

“The boy doesn’t speak a word,” Dunbar said, more than loud enough. “Let’s keep it moving.” Inside, Bromo and aspirin awaited.

Wagner was in too good a mood to quibble. “Denny Dunbar,” he said to the man in green.

“Good to meet you, Denny. Max Koch. Koch Sporting Goods. Number one in Ohio. When you’re in town, stop by.”

“Unless you’re opening a shop in Indianapolis, that would be a no.”

“Good one, Denny,” said Wagner, moving on to the next Red in line.

As soon as Dunbar entered the clubhouse, he saw the reason for the delay. At each locker was a new Cincinnati home uniform including cap and stirrups. But not in the familiar color the team had worn since 1881. Red had been replaced with eye-popping green: the cap, the logo, the numbers on the front and back, and so on. Green.

Said Bench as he held up the uniform on its hanger: "Did we get traded to Oakland?"

With bemused disbelief, Tom Seaver said, "Happy St. Paddy's Day."

Dunbar's gear was in a far corner where the non-roster players changed. Halfway there, he bellowed so loudly his teammates startled. "I am not wearing that shite!"

After a second or two of silence, the clubhouse commotion resumed.

Dunbar sat in front of his locker and folded his arms across his chest. Behind him was his green uniform and a pair of green shin guards. He radiated with fury.

"What's your problem?" asked Jimbo Cotton, who Dunbar knew too well from chasing his wild pitches to the backstop.

"Leave me be, Jim."

Benny Hook, the last of the hippies, peered over Cotton's shoulder. He stroked his chin in thought.

Now Ken Griffey sauntered over in his uniform pants, a green-sleeved T and shower shoes. Alongside him was his nine-year-old son the men called Junior.

Dunbar scanned the sea of faces staring down at him.

"You ain't Irish?" asked Cotton.

"You can bet your black ass I'm Irish," Dunbar said, springing out of his seat. He pointed to the uniform. "But I ain't that kind of bloody Irish."

Griffey whispered to his son. "Better tell Big Al."

Junior scooted away.

"It's an idjit's idea of a joke, I'll tell ya," Dunbar continued.

Cotton shook his head as he returned to his locker.

"Take some advice," Griffey said, "don't ruin this for Dick. A guy like you doesn't need the GM kneeling on his neck."

"Let me be."

"Suit yourself," Griffey shrugged as he went to find his son.

Cigarette behind his ear, Al Olchick waddled over to Dunbar's locker. Olchick was the Reds' bullpen coach. He was slated to manager the B squad in St. Pete's.

"Bus in 45," he said, towering over Dunbar. "In full uni."

"I'm not wearing it."

"Sure you are. Johnny is staying here and Werner is backing him up. You're starting with Correll behind you. You're getting at least three ABs. So..."

"That's fine. But I'm not wearing that uniform. I'll wear red, but not that."

He gestured to the clubhouse boy. Aspirin and bubbles.

"You're hung over," said Olchick who, at 6' 3" and 235, was a rock solid as when he caught for the New York Giants in the 1950s. "All that green bothers your eyes?"

"Not wearing it," Dunbar replied.

The clubhouse boy returned with a glassful of fizz and two aspirins. Dunbar swallowed it all in seconds and then let out a huge burp.

"Regs say all players must be in the same uniforms. You know that," Olchick said.

"Unless the B squad is in red, we won't be."

"You can't be the only guy, DD."

"Maybe somebody should've asked."

"Dick wanted it to be a surprise. First team to wear green on St. Patrick's Day."

Dunbar scoffed.

Olchick looked at the ticking wall clock. "What exactly is your problem? I would've thought that you, of all people, would've been—"

"Me of all people! If you had thought, you would've known, Al."

"Known what? It's green and you're Irish. What the hell..."

Dunbar stood. Olchick was the only man in the clubhouse who was taller and wider than the 23-year-old catcher.

"You Americans. You don't know your own goddamned history so I shouldn't be surprised you don't know ours."

Olchick frowned in confusion.

"I'm from the North of Ireland. The green... It's not us."

"Yeah? And?"

“And? Asking me to wear this is like asking Morgan and Driessen and Foster and Griffey and Cotton to wear the Confederate flag. You don’t ask the colored guys to celebrate slavery, do you?”

Jimbo Cotton was listening. “How’s that, DD?” He ambled over from his locker, his uni top unbuttoned.

“Mind your own, Jimbo,” Dunbar said.

“What this got to do with slavery?”

Dunbar sighed. “I’m telling Al why I’m not wearing the green.”

“You are, though,” Olchick said.

“Like hell I am.”

Cotton insisted. “What about slavery?”

Benny Hook edged over. Traded to the Reds from the Tigers over the winter, Hook bristled against the team’s personal-grooming policies. He had kept his diamond sideburns long and his curly auburn hair spilled from under his cap down to his collar. But what played in Detroit wasn’t going to play in Cincinnati, not under Wagner and Anderson.

“You know, he makes a point, Al,” Hook said.

Half the clubhouse heard Cotton say slavery. Some of the black players, including Griffey and Foster, tuned in.

Hook went on. “It’s not the Confederate flag, of course. But let’s face it, we’ve got some of the best known, most admired African-American players in the league on a team that on the border of Kentucky.”

“So?” said Olchick.

“Big slave population in Kentucky prior to the Civil War.”

Little Junior Griffey spoke up. “Abraham Lincoln was from Kentucky.”

“That’s right. But so was Jefferson Davis,” Hook replied. “Slave trade along the Mississippi...”

Dunbar looked at the crowd around his locker. “What are you on about? I ain’t talking about the Civil goddamned War! It’s the American flag up on the centerfield pole, ain’t it?”

He slapped the back of his hand against the newly painted shin guards. “This green is worse than the Confederate flag, seeing as we’re at war right now. My people are being killed for our loyalty to the Crown. Jesus, don’t Dick know nothing?”

“I’ve seen Confederate flags in the parking lot at Riverfront,” Hook said, mentioning the Reds home stadium in Cincinnati.

“Would you shut your damn pie hole, Benny,” Dunbar demanded. “Al, this green says Cincinnati thinks there’s one Ireland. There’s not.”

“Several Confederate cemeteries in Ohio,” Hook added.

“What do you want, Hook? We should dig them up? Burying them in Mississippi?” Olchick asked, temperature rising.

“Enemy combatants.”

Dunbar stood. “Look, I’m not wearing the uni. Period. And I’ll tell you, if you fine me, you can explain it to the papers and TV. Maybe the people of Ohio could use a little lesson about what’s going on in Ireland.” He burped again, his hangover refusing to go gentle.

“What color do you want?” Cotton asked earnestly.

“I expected red. You know, the Cincinnati *Reds*. But if you’re going go mucking around with the uniforms to make some kind of political thing of it, I say orange. Bright orange.”

“Orange?” asked Olchick.

“Ever look at the flag of Ireland, Al?” said Dunbar.

“Yeah. Green with a golden harp.”

“Fuck no, Al. Jaysus. The flag of Ireland got three colors – hence, the tricolor. Green, white and orange. We’re represented by the orange.”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

Hook said, “The Protestants.”

“Oh, now it’s a goddamned religious thing,” Olchick moaned.

“You know,” Hook said, “African-Americans, by and large, are Protestants. Baptist, Methodist...”

“Pentecostal,” Jimbo Cotton added, tapping his chest.

The gaggle parted as Johnny Bench walked over. He was in the new uniform, which looked ridiculous on the greatest Reds player – *Reds* player – in the team’s 96-year history. But the uni took on a sense of propriety on Bench that it lacked on a hanger: The green stirrups, the green belt above his tree-trunks, the green sleeves of his T shirt under his top, and the green logo seemed a bit less than a mistake at the factory. Bench had put a nice little bend in the bill of his green cap.

All of which did not placate Dunbar.

“DD,” said Bench, his tone reflecting his training for a post-career announcing gig, “we get you. We’re with you. Thing is, I’m not catching nine today. Got it?”

Bench was Dunbar’s American hero. As such, he was difficult to deny. “Let Correll catch nine at the B game,” Dunbar said. “You’ll be relieved by Werner as planned.”

“Problem with that,” Hook began, “is if—”

“Would you once and for all stifle it, Benny?” Dunbar barked. “For Christ’s sakes. All the time talking and saying nothing.”

Bench pondered, resulting in a ripple of suspense. He had genuine gravitas as well as the respect of the clubhouse. It was absurd that Anderson had named Pete Rose the team captain.

“DD, are you here to play baseball or politics?”

Dunbar held up a hand. “I am not wearing that uniform.”

“But if was orange...” Bench offered.

“Too late for that, I’d say,” Dunbar muttered as he sat.

Bench turned to Olchick. “Al, you need to see Dick. This kind of trouble we don’t need.”

“Pick a side, Johnny,” Dunbar shouted as Bench walked away.

Griffey grimaced. So did Foster.

The All-Star catcher stopped. As he turned, he said, “Did. The Reds. We’ve got a pennant to chase.”

“Whoa,” whispered Hook, shaking his head. “Johnny just John Wayned the shit out of you, DD.”

“Fuck you too,” Dunbar replied.

Without ceremony, Dunbar began to remove his personal items from the locker shelf—comb and brush, Right Guard spray deodorant, Lifebuoy soap, Dentyne gum and so on. Into his duffel also went his photo of Ballysillan church, the evening sun a glow on its proud brownstone, that he’d taped to the locker wall. It served as a reminder that one day he intended to find his way home, bringing with him a sense of achievement that would impress those who thought him arrogant and without shame.



The Reds pounded the Yankees 9-2 on the back of a Driessen home run and seven runs off Goose Gossage. To the delight of the Cincinnati veterans, Steinbrenner stewed among a group of well-heeled friends in the stands. After the game, he commented on the green uniforms.

“They matched my complexion after seeing the inadequacies of the team that is supposed to be world champions.”

Said Pete Rose later over beers, “You can always count on ol’ George to sell out his own.”

The next morning, Dick Wagner drove to a diner in St. Petersburg to have breakfast with Hank Peters, his counterpart with the Baltimore Orioles. Hank was a savvy guy who worked his way up from the minors. His team had a solid core – ex-Red Lee May, Kenny Singleton, 21-year-old Eddie Murray, four quality starting pitchers and Earl Weaver as manager – but they finished behind the Yankees. Wagner thought they were on a downhill slide.

Over a second cup of coffee, Wagner said, “I was looking down your roster. Your catching... Are you committed to Dempsey?”

“You like him?”

“We’re set,” Wagner replied. “Your three other catchers, they bat righty too.”

“You’re offering Dunbar,” Peters said with a nod.

“He’s buried.”

“And...?”

“Johnny doesn’t like him.”

“Fair enough. Throw in Morgan.”

Wagner laughed. In ’75 and ’76, Morgan was the National League’s Most Valuable Player.

“You like that lefty we got from Detroit? Hook?”

“Tippy Martinez is our lefty,” Smith said. “Besides, I hear Hook’s got a million-dollar arm and a ten-cent head.”

“Put him some place where he can grow a mustache and he’ll be fine.”

Smith pondered. A catcher who bats left and a lefty reliever with a 12-to-6 curveball. “What are you looking for?”

“I wouldn’t mind getting Lee back home. You’ve got Murray— Unless you want to move Murray.”

“Dick, I wouldn’t move Murray for Bench,” Peters said. “But let’s keep talking.” He crumpled his paper napkin. “You want to watch the workout? Say hi to Earl?”

“Sure,” said Wagner as he stood. He liked Weaver. If you caught him in the right mood, he was a riot.

They drove the few blocks to the ballpark in Peters’s car, chatting this and that, sharing a laugh at Steinbrenner’s expense. Then, surrounded by the scent of freshly mown grass, they settled in the mid-morning sun to watch the Orioles pitchers running through drills – fire a fastball toward home, then race to the bag to take a throw from the first basemen.

“Guys are looking good,” Wagner said, admiring the players in their bright orange tops, orange bills on their caps and orange piping along the thigh.