



Thursday, July 17

Amazingly, I am writing this from home. I never thought I'd see the day. After the flight got switched this morning, I had to pass through Baltimore with Kevin Santiago and Michael Sandle. We were supposed to arrive home at 7:00 this morning but instead, the plane landed just after 2:00. Still, it could have been worse. The rest of our front office didn't get on the same flight. They didn't leave until 5:30 this evening.

The change in flight threw off some of my plans for today and expedited my return to work. We've got a huge weekend coming up with much to do before we get there, and I have very little time to spare, but I needed to take a few moments at least to reflect on the road trip that was.

I spent so much of this season dreading this trip but now that it's over, I think I can admit that it wasn't that bad. There is no question that I wore down at the end of it. The last few days in Mississippi were tough and I'm even more exhausted after the three fun but wearying days in upstate New York. Not for the first time, I have been mulling over whether the trip addendum was really worth it. I have no doubt that it was; I got to see so many people from around the league, see a new stadium, visit the Hall of Fame and feel like I was a real part of a big league event. Just the same, the chance to have taken the last few days off is really tempting right now. Just as soon as I get my time machine.

Technically, our road trip isn't over. We still have to go to Joliet tomorrow to wrap it up, but for all intents and purposes, this is the end of the line for me. In some ways, this trip seemed to fly by. In others, it dragged on forever. Being home just doesn't feel right after all that time away but I also can't believe it's already been close to three weeks since I last sat on this couch. Today's return home felt so far away when I was packing up to leave.

The end of the all-star break is always a good time for reflection. There's a little bit of melancholy in this feeling that I have to return to regular work tomorrow after three days in baseball fantasy land. But that's what this job is. The regular work is what I signed up for in the first place. We've got an 11-game home stand starting Saturday and that might be just as difficult as this road trip was (though I won't be blogging about it; I promise!).

The bottom line is, whether you're at home for 11 games or three games and whether you're on the road for 12 games and nearly 50 hours on the bus or a quick weekend jaunt to Joliet or Schaumburg, this season is a grind. I might be tired now, but there's no reset day where I can sleep all morning and start my body clock over, so I better get used to it. It's constant from now until the end of August, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Thank you for coming along with me on this journey. Including our daily trips to and from the ballparks among other sights, the trip ended up at over 5,000 miles, so it's been good to have the company.

Total Miles Traveled: 5,055

Wednesday, July 16

Most years, the All-Star Game is split up into two days, the home run derby (and usually some other event) on Tuesday and the game on Wednesday. This year, Tri-City decided to hold them both today. I respect the decision but I didn't realize until I was here how much I missed being in the ballpark both nights. It feels a bit weird that I've been here as part of this baseball festival for three days and this is the first time I'm actually inside the stadium.

Prior to today, I had never seen Tri-City's Joseph L. Bruno Stadium before, so that may have contributed to my being antsy before getting there. I rather liked the ballpark. There isn't anything particularly impressive about it but I think they do well to create group areas and fun spot in the park and the whole place is surrounded by trees, which I love. It gives the place a very open air kind of feel.



The only problem tonight is that the temperature was about 75 degrees. That turned out to be an issue this morning as well. The ValleyCats bussed us out to Saratoga to take in some horse racing. The event was fun but entirely outdoors and on a hot, steamy day like this, any event grows old fast.

That's the simple and unfortunate fact of the Frontier League All-Star Game. For an outdoor event in the middle of July, your success and failure are completely dependent on the weather. Last year in Québec City, it was gorgeous. Two years ago, when we hosted, it was dreadfully rainy. More often, like today, the problem is heat.

I still had a good time at the game. I bought an ice cream cone, so I was happy. I spent just a few minutes on the home run derby broadcast but that was enough to quench my thirst for being on-air. I was getting jumpy after missing the last two days.

This afternoon, I got a notification that my flight home had been canceled, so this road trip may truly never end. It actually didn't turn out too badly. I was pushed back seven hours and am going to have to miss some obligations back in Chicago, but at least I don't have to get up at three in the morning. A wild night is surely ahead!

Total Miles Traveled: 4,168

Tuesday, July 15

We had our morning free today, so I took a ride into Saratoga with Schaumburg broadcaster Tim Calderwood and Karen and Johnny from our front office. We visited the historic site of the Battle of Saratoga, which turned out to actually be two battles. The battles were key to the turnaround in momentum of the Revolutionary War. American victories at Saratoga brought aid from the French and, in a very roundabout way led to me existing here today.

There is a very cool monument at the site, dedicated to one of the key American players in the battle. But the inscription only refers to the general as "the most brilliant soldier of the Continental Army. The general in question was Benedict Arnold, and after his betrayal, the erectors of the monument refused to put his name anywhere on it.



The rest of the battle site was interesting, though also very hot and tiring as we took the three-mile walk around Freeman's Farm and tried to visualize the important American victory. It was a long morning, but it was only part one of our day's schedule.

I had long been looking forward to this afternoon's trip to the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown but a lost bus driver turned a 90-minute ride into two and a half hours. We arrived just minutes before the research center closed – unfortunate for me because I had been hoping to troll the archives. I did at least get a chance to meet the head librarian, who had helped me research a project last year. I grilled her on the archives until well after her quitting time, when she was long past the point of wanting to answer my annoying questions.

One of the key elements of this year's all-star festivities was the annual banquet being held in the plaque room at the Hall. On paper, that seemed majestic but in practice it didn't work at all. There weren't enough seats for everyone, so lowly commoners like me were relegated to standing in the back room. Because of long, uncomfortable lines for food, I still haven't eaten. Along with the rest of our office, I couldn't hear any of the program, so we left early and took to wandering the streets of Cooperstown instead. It's quite a lovely little village. I've only ever thought of Cooperstown as a vessel for the Hall of Fame, so it seems funny to me that there actually is a community of people going about their daily lives there. Today, there was a concert in the park by the lake, but just our luck, it wrapped up right before we got there.

The Baseball Hall of Fame remains the gold standard for all museums of its kind. I had visited Cooperstown once before, with my family when I was 16. Today, it absolutely blew me away how exact the building and the city's Main Street were to my memories. Even on a frustrating day in which I arrived late, didn't eat dinner and couldn't hear a word at the banquet, it's hard not to go home happy. I just spent a chunk of my day at the Hall of Fame.

Total Miles Traveled: 4,099

Monday, July 14

A thousand times over the last few weeks I've asked myself if it's really worth it to attend the Frontier League All-Star Game. The obvious answer is no. I could've been home just after noon today and had the next four days off. Instead, I continued on my travels, flying to Albany to spend the next three days in upstate New York.

One look at the Troy, New York sunset over the Hudson River and I've decided I made the right choice.



Our lone all-star, Michael Sandle, and I landed in Chicago early this morning after flying from Memphis. Home was tantalizingly close. I could have so easily just left the airport and been in my bed by about 12:30 in the afternoon, but instead I carried on, day 15 of the road trip. We met with the rest of our front office and flew to New York where, after checking into the hotel, I slept for the first time in two days, grabbing about a two-hour nap before the all-star festivities began.

Tonight was the welcome reception in downtown Troy. The all-stars were introduced to the crowd, as evidenced by this terrible picture.



The first night of the all-star event is always a good chance to catch up with people from around the Frontier League and to figure out who made the trip this year. There was also a concert, though, no offense to the band, I didn't really see any of it. I slipped away at some point to do some solo exploring of the city of Troy, the hometown of Cubs legend Johnny Evers (which I knew) and also Uncle Sam himself (which I did not).

It's fair to say that at this point of the trip, I'm exhausted, but tomorrow, the all-star events begin in earnest with a visit to the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. Time to get some real sleep to make sure I'm ready for it.

Total Miles Traveled: 3,960

Sunday, July 13

We've reached an end of sorts. As I write this, the ThunderBolts team bus is barreling towards Chicago, ending the longest road trip this franchise has ever been on. I am not on that bus. About three hours into what will ultimately be a 12-hour trip, Michael Sandle and I were dropped off at the Memphis International Airport. We are on our way to the Frontier League All-Star Game. He's going because he was selected to participate in the game. I'm going just because I feel like it, I guess. Nobody selected me, but I selected the option of not sitting on that bus for another nine hours.

The Bolts fell to 4-8 on the road trip tonight. It's technically got one more game because the season's second half opens in Joliet on Friday before that series transitions back to Crestwood. For all intents and purposes, though, this is the close of it. After starting by getting swept in New Jersey, they won three in a row at Brockton and entered this series riding high. Mississippi has proven to be a tough place to play, though. The red hot Mud Monsters took five of six games.

Today's finale was delayed by rain for over an hour and a half. A small shower that was supposedly just passing through ended up lingering and keeping us from starting on time. The delay actually worked out well for me. We were planning on getting to the airport four hours before our flight but ended up arriving a lot later, so not much wait time.

What little time we do still have to kill at the airport, I am spending by writing this, so time well spent, I hope. As of now, I've gotten about an hour of sleep tonight and I don't plan on getting much, if any, more, so tomorrow's post from upstate New York may not be entirely coherent.

I'm not sure this one was either.

Total Miles Traveled: 2,765

Saturday, July 12

The Mississippi Mud Monsters have their own team theme song that they've been playing during batting practice the last few days. When I commented on it, Tom Martin – trainer extraordinaire – pointed out that it was definitely produced by AI. I've had an ongoing debate all season with Kevin Santiago, who thinks that AI is great for everything, so he's in favor of its production of terrible team songs. With that in mind, I asked ChatGPT to write a song about the ThunderBolts. Here is at least part of the result:

Out in Crestwood where the lights shine bright,
There's a ballfield dancing under Friday night,
Where the grass is green and the dreams take flight,
And the ThunderBolts bring the fight.

From the dugout to the bleachers high,
You can hear the roar like a stormy sky,
South Side heat, with a Midwest pride,
We're rollin' with the Bolts tonight!

Well, I stand corrected. This is clearly a superior songwriter. I don't even know the melody but I can tell this is a sure hit. It goes on, but you get the idea.

There's a miniature golf course right next to the hotel here. It closes at ten during the week, which doesn't do us much good, but on Friday and Saturday, it stays open until midnight. I still almost didn't make it. Tonight's game was enough to test anyone's endurance. Over three and a half hours, six ThunderBolts pitchers used, about half the team got injured and the Mud Monsters scored three late runs to take the game 7-4.

Just yesterday, I mentioned that the team seemed reinvigorated as I wore down. Today, I think everyone wore down right around the same time. It was a good thing the game ended when it did because I don't think we would have had enough players to go any further. It was a tough one.

I had planned to go putting with Kevin and Tom after the game, but Tom was at the hospital with one of the injured players and Kevin seemed exhausted from the game, so I figured it'd be better to proceed without him.

The course was not a good one. The green carpeting was being pulled off of half the holes and several of the battered greens had two holes for no reason I could discern. Still, I was playing mini golf at 11:30 at night after a road game, so without question, this is living the dream, regardless of the quality of the course. Also, I got to see Allisons Falls, not quite as impressive as the Great Falls of the Passaic last week, but the best waterfall I've seen since.



We've got one more in Mississippi before the team heads back to Chicago tomorrow night. Then I'm back to the East Coast.

Total Miles Traveled: 2,560

Friday, July 11

Four days in Mississippi and I'm already online booking my next trip here. See you in September, Starkville!

I have to admit, this road trip is starting to wear me down just a little. It's weird; despite all the travel early in the trip, I remained fresh, engaged, excited. Now, we've been planted for the better part of a week and this is when I start to get tired. It didn't help that I couldn't sleep last night. My hotel room is next door to the laundry room and the dryers were malfunctioning last night. They all started beeping simultaneously and did that for the next ten hours or so.

Probably another reason for my fatigue is that work projects have piled up. I think that physically doing the work isn't as draining as the fact that I'm holing myself up in my room most of the time and not interacting with the world.

Last week in Massachusetts, I got to spend time at the carnival and pay a visit to the Middleborough history museum. (I got there four minutes before it closed, but that's better than four minutes after, anyway.)

As much as I love baseball season, the work outside of broadcasting the game does tend to get repetitive. To avoid it becoming tedious, I do what I can to experience summer when I'm on the road. I often think that the reason I fell for baseball in the first place was the simple accidental fact that it is a summer game. I don't think I've ever been as genuinely happy in

my life than I was as a kid in summertime, when I had no school, no responsibilities, nothing to get up for in the morning. When I'd lose track of what day it was because it didn't matter. The only thing I had to do each day was enjoy myself as much as possible. Since baseball was always in the background of those summers, I think my obsessive watching of the game now is, more than anything, an effort to recapture that childhood glee.

Days like last week's in Massachusetts do a lot more to help me do that than days like today in my hotel room, making schedules and editing videos.

While I start to tire, the players seem invigorated. They scored 13 runs tonight in their best offensive performance since May. Daryl Ruiz had five hits, Garrett Broussard reached base four times, Dakota Kotowski hit a three-run homer. It was a fun offensive game. Not so much on the pitching side. Mississippi walked ten times and scored ten runs, which made for a three and a half hour game.

The newest reason I love the Frontier League is pregame clogging performances. I've now seen two of them in the last month. Where else can you go to see a clogging display but the ballpark?



Total Miles Traveled: 2,560

Thursday, July 10

I've slipped into a life of quiet domesticity, it occurred to me this afternoon as I folded my laundry while listening to the Gateway Grizzlies on the radio. The hustle and bustle, the thrill of discovering new places, the interminably long bus rides; those all seem like relics of the past now. I haven't begun speaking with a southern accent yet (emphasis on yet) but otherwise, I think I fit in pretty well here by now.

For all practical purposes, the hotel in Mississippi is perfect for a baseball road trip. There's a movie theater next to the hotel and loads of restaurant options in the area. The hotel itself is an extended stay suite, so it's got its own kitchen, complete with a stove and dishwasher (dishes for the washer too). Housekeeping is only available on request and no one on staff really pays us any heed, so it's been easy to turn myself in to a shut in. (It doesn't take much.)

I promise I'm not complaining; everything is perfect on paper, but the one thing this place doesn't have is the thing I value the most on road trips – walkable areas. It's very hard to walk anywhere around here. There aren't any sidewalks. That makes me feel just a little bit trapped. I can walk easily to any of the places I need to go, but my options for exploring are very limited, which is unfortunate for a long stay.

The Mud Monsters do a really good job of leaning into their branding. I think measuring the outfield distances in fathoms instead of feet might be going a little overboard, but otherwise, their devotion to the swamp theme is pretty impressive. What they might not know is that Chicago is also a swamp, so the taunts from their PA guy are slightly misplaced. Their PA guy, by the way, has been introducing the visiting team the last few nights as the “dy City ThunderBolts,” because they took the “Win.” It's kind of funny but I think it's even funnier that there are probably virtually no fans who get the joke.

From what I've been told by a few locals, this place really was totally swampland just a few decades ago. The entire development, from ballpark to hotels to shopping center, is brand new within the last 20 years, so I guess I should just be grateful there's anywhere to go at all. Anything is better than sinking into the marshes.

Total Miles Traveled: 2,559

Wednesday, July 9

My mother always told me if I just put myself out there a little, I'd make more friends.

Actually, I don't know if my mother did ever tell me that; it might have been somebody else's mother. Or maybe it was some TV mom. Anyway, it doesn't matter, the point is that after somewhat lamenting the sterility of the press box experience yesterday, I made lots of new friends today. To be clear, I wasn't unimpressed by the friendliness of the staff last night; it was just odd to be in such a big press box and not see much of anyone else. Last week in New Jersey, I was sitting outside broadcasting and could have had a conversation with fans during the game. This week, I feel sealed off from everything, which I suppose has its positives and negatives.

A few weeks ago, I got an email from a Mud Monsters fan who told me he's had season tickets to the local minor league team – whichever team was here at the time – for the last 50 years. After reading my book, he asked if I wanted to go out to lunch with him and a group of season ticket holders who apparently meet up to talk baseball every week. That sounded right up my alley.

It was a great group, and I learned a lot about Mississippi baseball from them. Turns out, Mississippi doesn't have a Major League team (who knew?), but college baseball is enormous here. Ole Miss, Mississippi St. and Southern Miss all finished in the top 15 nationally in average attendance this season and the success of those teams might cut into the Mud Monsters fanbase a little bit.

Despite not having a big league team here, one of the gentlemen at lunch told me he'd been to 55 Major League parks. Pretty impressive. I'm guessing it wasn't all in one year.

Back at the stadium, I had a nice conversation with a longtime employee of the press box, who said that despite being used to hosting an affiliate, he's willing to buy in to this newfangled Partner League ball. He gave me a hat, so I'm willing to buy in too.

The highlight of tonight was the bizarre skies over the stadium. For a good half hour, rain clouds lingered over left field, while right was apparently clear.



Eventually, rain did fill the whole ballpark, but at least we got a good rainbow out of it.



The problem is that when looking at the sky is the highlight of your night, it doesn't speak particularly well about the game itself. These Mud Monsters are really starting to play well. They've won seven of eight and we'll be seeing their top three pitchers the next three nights. (Gulp)

Total Miles Traveled: 2,558

Tuesday, July 8

We reached the baseball halfway point of the trip on Sunday, but today I've reached mine. Back home in nine days. I can tell I've grown accustomed to life on the road because today's four-and-a-half-hour bus ride into Pearl, Mississippi felt like a breeze. After 18 hours on the bus the last two days, this trip hardly seemed worth getting up for.

One of the things that I've sadistically grown to love is the look of terror on the faces of the cashiers at some fast food restaurant in the middle of nowhere when the bus pulls in. A spot that typically probably gets no more than a slow trickle of customers has to suddenly take orders and make food for 25 ballplayers who stroll in off the street. Me, I can't take the lines. I don't want to be in the front or the back, so I tend to avoid the whole thing, but that panicked look still sticks with me on my way by.

We pulled up to the stadium today at about 12:30, plenty of time to drop off the laundry before batting practice, so the crisis of the dirty uniforms has been put to rest. Sorry to worry you about that.

One of the things that has struck me after five years of not traveling has been the ease with which I've slipped back into visiting old parks. When I go somewhere like Florence or Evansville, walking to the press box and getting myself set up comes so naturally that it's almost surreal to think I haven't been there in more than half a decade. This trip has been different in that each stop has been a brand new experience for me, so I resort to my old rule: when you don't know where to go, just keep walking up. If you make it to the highest point in the ballpark, you'll usually find the press box.

When I walked to the top of Trustmark Park, I found probably the nicest press box in the league, not surprising because this is most likely the nicest stadium in the league. It ought to be, considering it housed Double A baseball just last year. The view from the top is impressive...



...but I have to admit that working here tonight was a bit of a weird experience for me. When I arrived, I was the only one in the press box and nobody else came in for the next hour. Eventually, someone popped in to say hi and show me where the drinks were, and that's about the only interaction I had all night. By the time I left, I had probably exchanged fewer than 50 words with another person. I said plenty of words into the void, but that's a different thing entirely.

Mississippi's broadcaster is our former number two, Jeffrey Nelson, and he's broadcasting remotely, so it makes some sense that the press box isn't as collegial as it would be elsewhere, but it still feels odd.

Game one of the series went to the Mud Monsters, but it was, I thought, a really good baseball game and consequently, a fun broadcast. Flip the score and I'd love five more just like it this week.

The hotel in Mississippi is less than a mile from the ballpark, so we won't be adding too much to the odometer all week. Time to kick my feet up and get comfortable!

Total Miles Traveled: 2,557

Monday, July 7

Ever since the schedule came out, this was the day to dread. Yes, a two-week road trip is long for any team in any situation, but it was the bus ride from Massachusetts to Mississippi that set this one apart and made it truly sadistic.

So how are we holding up after the big travel day?

Fine, just fine. I guess I can't speak for anyone else on the bus, but the day was essentially painless for me.

Bus regulations demand at least an eight-hour gap between long rides, so since we didn't get in to Virginia until after 4 am yesterday, we had an easy morning with a 12:30 departure this afternoon.

Much of my next six hours involved battling with a spotty Internet connection while trying to get as much work done as possible. Our big news today was that Michael Sandle was named the team's all-star representative. He, of course, found out last night, when Toby Hall made the announcement in front of the bus. The whole process is becoming old hat for Sandle. He was also mistakenly announced to the bus as an all-star on day one of the trip last Monday. I refuse to take responsibility for that mishap.

After Toby made that announcement last night, he bid the team farewell. He will not be with us the rest of the week because he's returning to Chicago to act as Bobby Jenks's surrogate at the White Sox' 20th anniversary World Series celebration. That means that we are a lost and leaderless pack of rogues. Chaos reigned on the bus today and surely will for the next six days.

Actually, it was a relatively quiet day. Today's trip carried us north to south throughout all of Virginia and Tennessee and into northern Alabama. The seascapes of yesterday gave way to the tree-lined hills of the Appalachians today. All in all, a surprisingly pleasant and picturesque drive.

Four more hours till we reach the summit. Once we arrive in Mississippi tomorrow, we can put down some roots and settle in for our weeklong stay. The jury's out on how many of us will choose not to return home and become full time Mississippians.

Total Miles Traveled: 2,267

Sunday, July 6

Back to the grind...

I woke up this morning in Middleborough, Massachusetts and I'm going to bed in Winchester, Virginia. We pulled in just after 4:00 in the morning, so I guess it's actually Monday now. Today's our last day in the Eastern time zone, which makes it feel like we're

getting close to home, but then I remember that I'm flying back to New York for the final four days of the trip, so there really is no getting closer.

From a baseball perspective, the road trip has reached its halfway point. We're six games in and right back where we started record-wise, 15 games below .500. The three-game series at New Jersey was a disappointment, but the weekend in Brockton was probably the best baseball the Bolts have played all year. It was heartening to see the dramatic win yesterday and today's game was another strong performance, two runs late to break a tie and knock out the Rox.

It's always easier getting on the bus and gearing up for a long trip after a win, and this *is* a long trip. If we were to make it in a straight shot, it would be about 21 hours by bus, but fortunately, this leg of the journey has been broken up into three days, so we tackled only the first eight hours tonight. There was a time that eight hours was our longest road trip. Those were the days...

The plan is to stop in Alabama tomorrow night and roll in to Pearl, Mississippi early afternoon on Tuesday ahead of a 6:30 game. As Tom, our trainer, pointed out when we got on the bus tonight, that doesn't leave much time for the team's dirty uniforms to be washed before first pitch. Stay tuned. (Fun fact: the reason baseball teams traditionally wear gray [or grey in Canada] uniforms on the road is because dirt doesn't show up as clearly on them. In the early days of the game, teams didn't have the ability to wash their uniforms on the road, so they got dirtier and dirtier on long trips.)

The scenery through Massachusetts and Rhode Island was nice this evening before it got too dark to notice anything out the bus windows. I do love a good bridge, though, and there were plenty of those on the dark ride through Connecticut. I expressed this admiration for bridges on the bus with the lament that I had never seen probably the coolest bridge in the country – the Mackinac Bridge in Michigan. Kevin Santiago thinks I should just drive myself there after the season. Maybe.

Tomorrow's trip should take us through mountains, national parks and Civil War battle sites. Should be something to keep me interested on a long day of travel.

Total Miles Traveled: 1,643

Saturday, July 5

The road trip took a hard left turn today when we learned that Bobby Jenks had died in Portugal. It was less than two hours before first pitch that the news came in and it left a lot of people reeling. The players still had to get ready for the game, as did I. The Brockton Rox did an incredible job of readjusting their own schedules, just before the start of the game, to make sure that there was a fitting pregame tribute. My broadcast was very difficult, both emotionally and technically, but the show must go on, so I did the best I could and hope it turned out OK. The whole evening was such a whirlwind that I didn't get a chance to reflect on what working with Bobby meant to me until now.

2023 was a difficult year for me with the ThunderBolts and I'd be lying if I said I was looking forward to the start of 2024. You never know what you're going to get when you bring in a

former Major League player to manage the team. Not all of them know exactly what they're getting into at this level of baseball. But from day one, it was clear that Bobby was the right man for the job. He wasn't intimidated by the non-big league standards we had in Crestwood and he never shied away from doing the extra work. As the season wore on, he celebrated the good news and took the bad news in stride; he was obviously a strong leader in the clubhouse, and I always got the impression that the players appreciated that too.

On the last day of the season I felt the need to pull him aside and thank him for everything. It wasn't that he had done anything special, but in the simple ability to come to work every day to do his job without complaining and expect the same from everyone else, he made my life easier. He always respected the work that I did for the organization and as a former big league all-star, I never once got the impression that he looked down on me or anyone else. We were all working towards the same goals. Simply by being a professional and a friend, he helped me become excited again to show up to the ballpark every day. It wasn't all sunshine and roses. He wasn't, for example, easy to corral for media responsibilities – and there were more media requests with him than with all our other managers combined – but all in all, it was an absolute and undeniable joy working with Bobby every day last year.

Once the offseason hit, his excitement for the 2025 season made it easy for me to be excited too. He tried to start signing players before last year's playoffs were even over and more than once, I had to convince him to slow down and wait for the league schedule to play out. But he seemed to eat, breathe and sleep ThunderBolts baseball. He was obsessed with building a winner.

After he moved to Portugal in the fall, we stayed in touch. He would call me sometimes in his evenings just to talk about the upcoming season – which new players he had signed up, who was coming back, who wasn't. We must have had the same conversation half a dozen times but I was probably the only person who cared about Windy City on-field personnel as much as he did, so it was good to give him someone to talk to.

We talked about more than the ThunderBolts too. He told me all about his adjustment to life in Portugal and his new daily routines. We talked about his family and his health. (Even before the cancer diagnosis, he had gone through a rough fall.) Oftentimes, I felt like he just needed someone to lend him an ear, especially because he didn't speak the same language as most of the people he lived near. I was always happy to listen. Even when things weren't going well, he always stayed positive. Talking with Bobby was a fun reminder that baseball season was right around the corner.

After he got really sick in the winter, I figured our conversations would die down, and they did. His cancer treatments kept him out of commission a lot of the time, but every now and then, he would go through a good stretch and check in. He wanted to know how the team was looking in his absence. The phone calls were never as straight forward after cancer entered the picture. Some days he sounded tired or weak, others he sounded loopy from the pain meds. He never shied away from discussing his health and there were times I could hear the pain in his voice when he recounted the details of a recent doctor visit or a bad day at home. Mostly, though, he still wanted to talk baseball. No matter how much pain he was in, he wanted to hear the latest on who looked good defensively and which pitchers were throwing strikes. He stayed involved with the ThunderBolts as long as he could before his illness took over during the last month or so.

The last time I talked to him was earlier this week, from the hotel in New Jersey. I had been reaching out every now and then, but had grown used to not getting a response. After he got sick, I never expected one. This week, though, I was shocked when he called me right back and sounded as close to himself as I had heard in months. We talked for a little while about the team and exchanged our news but I didn't want to keep him for too long. At the end of the conversation, we promised we'd talk again soon.

We've all known for a while that this would be the end result of Bobby's cancer battle. There's not much coming back from a stage 4 diagnosis, but of all the times to receive this news, I wasn't expecting it today. He sounded so full of life just a few days ago.

The ThunderBolts won the game today and it was a nice moment for a team that needed one. It would have been easy for the guys who knew Bobby to come out flat, but they played with passion and purpose and turned in one of the more dramatic victories of the season. It was well-deserved.

Tomorrow, we're back on the road and the season will continue as planned. The road trip – the games and the bus rides – will go on as though nothing is out of the ordinary, and that's probably a good thing. But there's no denying the impact that Bobby Jenks has had on that clubhouse, on that dugout and on that bus, and even though he hasn't been around in person this summer, he will be severely missed.

Friday, July 4

For our series against Brockton, we're staying at a hotel in Middleborough, Massachusetts, about a 25-minute drive from the ballpark. The hotel can charitably be described as a tad unkempt, so I was all too eager to get my game prep done early and do some exploring in Middleborough (or is it Middleboro? Even the town itself doesn't seem to know).

I was glad to get out. Just a 15-minute walk from the hotel, I came upon a wonderfully stereotypical New England small town main street. It looked like it was pulled straight out of a Thomas Kinkade painting, complete with a white steepled church and a Victorian era town hall. The only thing it was missing was people. It's a holiday, so understandably a lot of the businesses are closed but if any street seemed primed for a 4th of July parade, this was it. (Afterward, I looked it up and found that there actually was a parade. I just missed it by a few hours.) There are few things I love more than a walkable main street through a town center, but upon further reflection, I think what I actually love is the image I have of those main streets from TV and movies. I'm not sure the impression that's in my head exists in real life anymore. In any case, I hope this business district is doing well and that the slow pace today is just because of the holiday.



Today I got my first glimpse at Campanelli Stadium, the home of the Brockton Rox. The ballpark was built in 2002 but it looks and feels older. I mostly mean that in a good way. It could use a bit of sprucing up, but the stadium has an indescribably classic minor league feel to it that you don't get at every Frontier League park. I was immediately quite taken with the stadium and I wasn't the only one. Kevin Santiago looked as in his element today as I probably did that first day at Hinchliffe.

The game was a gem. Buddie Pindel had a vintage six-inning, one-run performance, Oscar Serratos homered for the third straight game and the Bolts won 6-1, all in under two and a half hours. The crowd wasn't huge, but the fans who were here were really into the game. The atmosphere was great and I thought the Rox put on a tremendous show. It didn't hurt that the weather was gorgeous, maybe the nicest night of the year so far.

After the game, Toby Hall got on the bus, turned to me and asked, "Wouldn't it be nice if they were all like this?"

It sure would, but that's not baseball. Every season has its ups and downs and for the ThunderBolts of recent vintage, more downs typically than ups. But every once in a while it's nice to be reminded that even when a season hasn't gone the way you hoped, it's still possible to have a perfect night.



Total Miles Traveled: 1,079

Thursday, July 3

Getaway day. Everybody had to clear out of their hotel rooms by 11:00, so we packed up the bus early and took another trip to the mall. This time I was on it. It was as big as advertised and, impressively, jam-packed with people. Mall walking has long been one of my favorite getaway day activities (exciting, isn't it?) but over the years I've seen the population of these shopping centers dwindle. It's heartening to see such good business being done here.

Hinchliffe Stadium is right next to the Great Falls of the Passaic River, one of the biggest waterfalls in the country. When we pulled up to the stadium today, it was hot and uncomfortable and I had work to do, but I'd be pretty upset with myself if I spent three days this close to the falls and didn't get a good look, so I took a 20-minute detour to walk to the overlook. It was worth it. So often, I get locked into my routine – hotel to ballpark then back again – that I ignore that there's a whole world outside the gates of the stadium. In this case, right outside.



Apparently, these falls are the entire reason for Paterson's existence. Alexander Hamilton, long before he was a Broadway star, designated the area as the U.S.'s first planned industrial city as a result of the power created by the water here. Appropriately, there is a statue of Hamilton next to the overlook.

Rain delayed the start of the game by an hour, which gave me extra time to prepare, so I didn't miss that 20 minutes I spent at the falls after all. Or maybe I did. This was definitely one of my worst broadcasts of the year. I'd like to blame my vantage point down the line or the fact the game itself was a dud, but I think I was just off my game.

On the positive side, the rain we got before first pitch cooled the temperature by about 20 degrees so for once I wasn't a sweaty mess getting on the bus after the game. We've got about four and a half hours to Brockton, MA and I'm off to sleep...hopefully.

Total Miles Traveled: 812

Wednesday, July 2

When we pulled up to Hinchliffe Stadium yesterday, I was blown away. The stadium was built in 1932 as a Negro League park and played witness to stars like Satchel Paige, Larry Doby and Josh Gibson, some of the biggest names ever to play the game, so I knew going in that I was going to love the history of the place. But I was caught off guard by how impressed I was with the structure itself. The facility had fallen into disuse decades ago before the city of Paterson cleaned it up and reopened it in 2023. The renovation looks fantastic.



I walked around with a goofy grin on my face, more tourist than worker, wanting to see every inch of the park, but since we were rained out yesterday, I didn't get the full experience until today. For the last two years, I've heard horror stories about the setup for visiting broadcasters. Matt Sosler, who handles media here in New Jersey, does a great job of making you feel welcome, but it's true that the setup isn't ideal. You're positioned down the left field line outside the press box with just a tent for cover.



It's really not so bad in principle, but you can ignore that tent. It did little to keep the rain off me yesterday and even less to block out the sun today. For the entire first game of the doubleheader, I couldn't see any of the action. The sun was directly in my eyes. At one point, I missed an entire at bat. I probably shouldn't admit that; it's pretty embarrassing. But it was already on the air, so who am I fooling? In retrospect, maybe I should have brought sunglasses. One generous fan named Ed offered to let me use his, but I declined. (I accepted his offer later of a Josh Gibson foul ball. That is, the ThunderBolts' Josh Gibson, at least the second guy with that name to play here.) On top of the sun being in my eyes, it also made things pretty hot. I think I was more drenched by sweat tonight than I was by the rainstorm yesterday.

Since I'm already loading up on complaining, the Bolts got swept in the doubleheader, so it was a tough evening all around.

At least I had a good lunch. The team took an afternoon bus to the local mall – apparently a huge, impressive mall, though I haven't made the trip personally yet. I skipped the bus because I wanted to do some exploring here in Fair Lawn, New Jersey (Population 34,927). Every road trip, I make an effort to get to know the city a little bit and for lunch, try someplace local. It becomes really easy sometimes to fall back on Chick Fil-A or Subway, but today, I found myself at Benny's Luncheonette. Established in 1988, it's the type of hole in the wall diner that plays Patsy Cline and Elvis on the juke box. I figured I should give it a try because (1.) I like Patsy Cline, (2.) I was really hungry, and (3.) It was the only restaurant I could find on my walk through Fair Lawn. And, hey, they're under new management, so I had to at least give the new crew a shot. Well, I can't speak for the old bosses, but the new ones make a fine chicken sandwich.



One more day in Jersey, then it's off to Massachusetts. Hopefully we get out of here on a win.

Total Miles Traveled: 806

Tuesday, July 1

Unsurprisingly, the first two days of our trip have been dominated by bus rides. It's hard to say that a 14-and-a-half-hour trip was easy, but yesterday's journey to New Jersey was about as expected. Aside from a huge traffic jam near Altoona that held us up for a little under an hour, the trip went off without a hitch. A Will Ferrell movie marathon – interrupted only by a showing of the 2010 classic "Boathouse Detectives" starring Windy City's own Cam Phelts – got us most of the way to New Jersey.

Halfway through the trip, I became a millionaire... or maybe just mildly richer. We played ID roulette, wherein everybody throws an ID into a pillowcase for a dollar. They get picked out one by one and the last ID standing gets all the loot. I was determined not to play, in part because I didn't want to win. Also, my wallet was buried in my backpack. Kyle Harbison was quite insistent, though. They needed to sweeten the pot. It only makes sense that with all my experience of losing, I finally end up winning the thing I don't want to. I've got to figure out a beneficent way to spend that dough.

It was a more demanding than usual news Monday for me, so I stayed busy most of the ride. The important thing, though, was to spend as much time reading as possible. I used a considerable amount of luggage space to bring five books along with me, so the pressure's on to get through them all.

Today, we got our first look at Hinchliffe Stadium about which more tomorrow. It was also our first glimpse of the city of Paterson, New Jersey. Paterson, my hasty Internet research tells me, was once a thriving industrial mecca. Today, the shell of that once great town is still visible but with a distinct layer of grime over it.

The bus ride to the stadium was complicated by a road closure not far from the field. Our driver suggested we simply move the “Road Closed” sign and drive right on by, probably not the best idea considering there was a police officer sitting literally three feet away from us. He sent us on another route and after fighting through more traffic than seemed reasonable on a Tuesday afternoon, we eventually made it to the historic ballpark.

As it turned out, there was no need to rush. The game was a washout and for good reason. As I write this at 10:00, three and a half hours after scheduled first pitch, the rain hasn’t let up yet. That means a doubleheader tomorrow. Oh well, Happy Canada Day to all and to all a good night!

Total Miles Traveled: 795

Monday, June 30

This morning, I left my house to go to Ozinga Field. It’s the same trip that I make just about every morning. Only this time, I won’t be returning home for nearly three weeks.

Over the next 18 days, I am going to see 13 Frontier League baseball games in four stadiums across four states and two time zones with stops at six different hotels. I’ll be travelling more than 2,600 miles by bus, plus another 1,200 by plane. And that’s not including the bus rides to and from the park each day (though I will count those on my daily odometer). By the time I make it home, we will be well past the midway point of the Frontier League season, I will have been part of (by some measures) the longest road trip in league history and all my plants will have long since died (maybe I should have asked someone to water them).

When I was 16, my parents wanted to take a family trip out west to visit the national parks. But after we crunched the numbers and realized just how expensive it would be to take a family of seven that far, the plans were rearranged. Instead, we took a trip out east to visit the National (and American) *League* parks. Over the course of just over a week, I got to see four big league ballparks that I had never seen before with an impromptu visit to Cooperstown in the middle of it all for good measure.

I look back on that trip now, thrown together in haste, as one of the best memories of my adolescence and I found myself thinking about it a lot as this massive road trip loomed. Since I first saw the schedule last offseason, I’ve been dreading these first three weeks of July but that’s only because I’ve been looking at them all wrong. Yes, an 18-day trip in the middle of the season feels a bit burdensome, but a chance to see four minor league ballparks that I’ve never seen before? Maybe with a visit to Cooperstown in the middle of it all for good measure? Sign me up!

And so, as we journey east then further east then south then east again, I’ve decided to chronicle my voyage into madness so at least when it’s over, there will be a record of when I snapped. Thanks for coming along for the ride, all 3,800 miles of it.