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Handling Death From a Foul Ball

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Abstract: Life, Death, and Mercy in Minor League America (Ecco), Price discussed Coolbaugh, Sanchez and minor league baseball.

Links: [Obtain full text from Shapiro Library](#)

Full text: On July 22, 2007, in North Little Rock, Ark., Tino Sanchez, playing for the Class AA Tulsa Drillers, hit a foul ball that struck the first-base coach Mike Coolbaugh in the neck. The ball crushed an artery and killed him. S. L. Price, a senior writer for Sports Illustrated, traced the lives of Coolbaugh and Sanchez, their working-class struggles, their disappointments and how their paths converged in a random moment. With the publication this month of "Heart of the Game: Life, Death, and Mercy in Minor League America" (Ecco), Price discussed Coolbaugh, Sanchez and minor league baseball. The entire interview is at nytimes.com/bats. IHSAN TAYLOR Q. How would you describe Coolbaugh's and Sanchez's baseball careers?

A. Mike was a minor league star, a team M.V.P.; he hit 258 professional homers and made many All-Star teams. He made it to the majors with Milwaukee and St. Louis, played 44 games, even got the storybook homer in the bigs with his wife and parents in the stands.

Tino was a true minor league journeyman, never really rising above Double-A. But, unlike Mike, the game changed him at his core. He went from a selfish, somewhat hot-headed utilityman to a player who took responsibility for all his failures and shortcomings. He learned to respect the game, and that's one reason he so fully carries the burden of being responsible for Mike's death.

Q. You saw Tino Sanchez's first game with the Tulsa Drillers after the accident -- and his tearful talk with Mike Coolbaugh's sister and sister-in-law. What was that like?

A. Astonishing. Tino hadn't known that Mike's brother, Scott, was coaching the Frisco RoughRiders that night, not until he saw him take up his position in the first-base coach's box with the name COOLBAUGH stitched across the back. I had spoken with Scott that day and knew that they hadn't spoken, and when Tino subbed in to play first base in the eighth inning -- with the two men just feet away from each other, both wanting to speak and comfort each other, both constrained by baseball's code from doing so -- I realized I was witnessing the most emotionally loaded moment I had ever seen as a sportswriter.

I walked down to the clubhouse and passed Tino talking to two women. The two women came bearing a message -- and bringing it, too, from Mike's mom -- that they didn't blame Tino, that they were there for him. That combination -- Scott and Tino at first, Tino and the women on the field after -- moved this story to a depth that was almost unbearable, yet they all pushed on, struggled to accommodate one another.

Q. How are some of the players you spoke with coming to terms with Mike Coolbaugh's death?

A. I was in Little Rock last month, speaking about the book to a group, and a woman held up her hand and said: "I'm the mother of the guy who was on deck that night. When I told him I was coming here, he started to cry." I know that, for players who were there, that night is something that will never be forgotten, and internally, guys are still flinching whenever a foul ball flies into a crowd or hits someone.

Photograph

S. L. Price Recalled His Most Emotional Moment As a Writer.

Subject: Fatalities; Nonfiction; Professional baseball -- Tulsa Drillers; Sports injuries; Books -- Heart of the Game: Life, Death, and Mercy in Minor League America;

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