

The Big Day by Jack Ritchie



There was no question about it, I was more nervous now than I'd ever been before a game. "When do we go out?"

Big Jim Davis looked at his watch. "In ten minutes. Take it easy."

"How's the crowd?"

"Full house. Forty-two thousand people in the stands today."

Forty-two thousand people were in the ballpark to watch a big league baseball game. And it wasn't the first day of the season either. It was now September and the pennant races were beginning to tighten up.

But it was the first day in the big leagues for me and I was wondering how I would do out there. This was my big chance. Would I be good enough or would I somehow blow it?

Big Jim sensed how I felt. "You'll do all right, kid. Just keep your mind on the game and don't let anyone rattle you."

Big Jim Davis was a veteran of ten years in the big leagues, never missing a game. A real pro, he was a good man to have on your side. Nothing seems to bother him. He's the kind of guy who makes it easier for the rest of us and we all respect him.

Forty-two thousand people out there and that was only the frosting on the cake. The game was being televised and that meant millions of people across the country would also be watching. Staring at the screen. Staring at me.

My throat was dry again, so I walked over to the locker room fountain and took another long drink.

My parents would be before the TV set at home. And my sister too. Actually Mom and Sis never really cared much about baseball – Dad is the real fan – but they would be watching the game today.

I was still young. A rookie. I suppose I'd come up as fast as anybody, but looking back now it seemed like a long, long road stretching into the past.

When I was just a little kid, I would stand on the sidelines watching my father on the playing field and wishing I were out there too. I would follow every ball, every play.

I think Dad could have made it to the top himself. He was that good. But I guess he just never got the breaks. Or maybe other things came first with him, like being with me while I was growing up.

No, Dad hadn't made it to the big leagues, but I knew he was reliving his life in me – following my career and maybe thinking about how it might have been just a little different.

From the beginning my life was built around the game of baseball, but I could never get really serious about it until after I graduated from high school and was free to do what I wanted with my time. And when you're serious about getting anywhere, you've got to work hard at it full time. You've got to get to know the game forwards and backwards.

There's a lot more to baseball than most people think or see. It isn't all hitting and fielding. There's the mental part, too, and you've got to approach the game with the right attitude.

You've got to learn to take the good days with the bad, knowing that you've always done the best you can and believing that what you're doing is important to the scheme of things.

Even in the off-season, I've never let myself get soft or stale. I always kept in shape and watched my diet. I would jog at least three miles every day because I was determined to be in tip-top shape when my big chance came.

Yes, I began right there at the bottom. First the sandlots, then the semi-pros, and then the minors. Places like Des Moines, Appleton, Wisconsin Rapids. I would spend the lonely nights in small town hotel rooms dreaming about the future I knew would come.

I had been in Wausau when the telegram came. There had been a collision at first base on a close play and when the dust had settled, Robertson lay on the ground with a busted ankle. He was out for the season and they wanted me to report to Baltimore right away.

I had just enough time to pack my suitcase, phone my parents to tell them the news, and then catch a plane to Chicago and from there on to Baltimore.

Now I went to the locker room mirror and stared at myself again.

Yes, I was here. I had finally made it. I had always thought that I was as good as anybody in the game – I had that confidence you needed – but still, right now I was worried. I took a deep breath. Well, I had come a long way and now it was too late to have any reservations or doubts.

Big Jim looked at his watch again. "Time to earn our money."

I swallowed hard and followed him out the tunnel under the stadium and into the sunlight of the ballpark.

After the national anthem was played, I took my position at first base, and the game began.

I was hoping that nothing would come my way – at least not so soon – and it didn't until the third inning.

Evans hit one deep to the shortstop who bobbled the ball for a second before making the throw. It was a close play, but Evans was safe at first.

O'Brien, the first baseman, turned on me with fire in his eyes and the Orioles' manager stormed out of the dugout.

I folded my arms across my chest and put on my best scowl. Let them come. I wouldn't back down an inch. I call them as I see them.

This was my first day and my first play, but now I was a big league umpire.

Telling About The Story. Complete each of the following statements by putting an x in the box next to the correct answer. Each statement tells something about the story.

1. The person who tells this story is: a baseball player the manager of a baseball team
 an umpire a retired player
2. Big Jim Davis was a man who had ten years experience in the big leagues a first baseman the owner of a team
3. The umpire's first play took place right after the playing of the national anthem in the third inning at the end of the game
4. The umpire stated that his dad never really cared much for baseball was also a big league umpire never made it to the big leagues

New Vocabulary Words. Answer the following vocabulary questions by putting an x in the box next to the correct response.

1. The umpire got his chance because of an injury which occurred at first base. Define the use of the word *collision*.
 discussion crash change play
2. The new umpire considered himself a rookie. What is the meaning of the word *rookie*?
 beginner old-timer champion partner
3. According to a character in the story. Baseball is more than hitting and fielding. You must approach the game with the right attitude. Which phrase best defines the word *attitude*?
 skills and abilities your way of thinking, acting, or feeling
 teamwork or cooperation your appearance or manner of dress
4. "There's a lot more to baseball than most people think or see," says the narrator. "There's the mental part too..." What is the meaning of the word *mental*? having to do with the mind
 having to do with the body having to do with money or wealth having to do with family

Identifying Story Elements. Each of the following questions tests your understanding of story elements. Put an x in the box next to each correct answer.

1. What happened last in the *plot* of the story? The Oriole's manager stormed out of the dugout.
 Robertson broke his ankle. The umpire took his position at first base.
2. Which sentence best describes how the main *character* felt? He was no longer in tip-top shape.
 He was very relaxed. He was confident but nervous. He was disinterested.
3. What was the *setting* of The Big Day?
 A big league ball park in Baltimore a minor league stadium in DesMoines
 a hotel room in Wausau the main character's living room

4. Which sentence best describes the *style* of the story? It contains a great deal of dialogue.
 The narrator seems to be having a conversation with the reader. It uses very colorful, poetic language.

Thinking About The Story. Each of the following questions requires you to *think critically* about the selection. Put an *x* in the box next to the correct answer.

1. Probably, the umpire was nervous because:

- it was his first big league game millions of people were watching
 both of the above neither of the above

2. From what we learn in the story, it seems that: it is easy to become a big league umpire

- being a big league umpire is always fun it takes hard work to become a big league umpire

3. We might expect the Oriole's manager to give this umpire a particularly difficult time because:

- he wanted to test him the runner definitely was safe
 he thought he could get the umpire to change his decision

4. The next-to-last paragraph of the story suggests that the umpire will: not be bullied

- never make a mistake during his career not be respected by the players

• Imagine several years have passed since the umpire's "Big day." What advice do you think the umpire in the story would give a new umpire before *his* first game?

• The speaker says you must "know the game forwards and backwards." Is this more important for a player or an umpire – or must they know the game equally well? Explain your answer.

• Look back through the story for clues which suggest that the speaker is an umpire rather than a player. Make up a *new* clue of your own that hints that the speaker is an umpire.