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Sports

Walter Mitty lives

Highlands coach achieves natural high in senior World Series

By Phil Ross
News-Press Sports Editor

There he was, standing astride the pitching rubber in Phoenix Municipal Stadium in late October.

No, not Dave Stewart, Storm Davis or Mike Moore. Those Oakland Athletics' starters had worked out at the ballpark in the Arizona capital just days before, preparing to complete their earthquake-shaken World Series with the San Francisco Giants.

Now there was a different kind of Series going on in Phoenix and several of its suburbs, and Acres Green resident Dan Marcus was making his first appearance in relief for the Denver Bears.

No, again, not the old minor-league franchise that preceded the Zephyrs. These Bears were a bunch of guys in their 30s who played this past summer in the Men's Senior Baseball League. It is not to be confused with the new Senior Professional Baseball League of former major-league stars currently playing in Florida.

Marcus was one of several players comprising the Bears, made up of all-stars from teams that played 13 regular-season games between May and August on diamonds around Denver. He had an unspectacular regular season with an 0-7 record but was anxious to throw in last week's Series.

That anxiety built to a crescendo and turned to what Marcus termed "an adrenalin rush." It crested in a 4-2 record during Series week for the Bears and an incredible 4-1 mark for Marcus, mostly in relief.

But back to Phoenix stadium on the Series' first night with Denver trailing Eugene-Salem, Ore., 8-7 in the bottom of the sixth inning.

"I got loose. I went out to the right-field bullpen to throw to the bullpen catcher. I had to stop. I stood on that rubber, and my heart wasn't butterflies, it was Godzillas," Marcus said. It was because it hit him at that very moment about the A's array of flame-throwers having been on and now here was this 36-year-old Highlands Ranch teacher-coach living out a Walter Mitty fantasy to the hilt.

The Bears came back to win Marcus' three innings of shutout relief.

Denver in the next several days proceeded to play Coral Springs, Fla.; Lansing, Mich.; Rhode Island; Rochester, N.Y., and a St.



In between games, Dan Marcus relaxes in his dad's backyard.

"I stood on that rubber, and my heart wasn't butterflies, it was Godzillas."

Dan Marcus

Petersburg, Fla., team managed by Tom Zimmer, son of Chicago Cub manager Don Zimmer. The Bears lost only twice, including to the Zimmer team to eliminate them, and Marcus got credit for all their wins.

But it was against Rochester on the Arizona State diamond at Tempe that the Highlands faculty member peaked.

On that day, the Bears played twice and Marcus said he had awakened at his father's nearby Phoenix home "with excruciating pain from my shoulder to my fingertips."

Even when Rochester cut an 11-6 Denver lead to 11-10 in the bottom of the eighth, Marcus said, "I thought, for sure, there's no way I'm gonna be in this

game." What then transpired inadvertently turned into an anti-drug message, even though Marcus doesn't take drugs.

"You can get such an incredible high from adrenalin, and if people — athletes — would just tap this. . . I know I was on an adrenalin rush the whole time. The hardest thing was coming back here to school this week."

When he related his experience to a teaching-coaching colleague, Jeanne Janney, she told him he was in "The Zone," that nebulous area athletes achieve when adrenalin hits its high point.

In the Rochester game, Marcus batted because a player doesn't have to be on defense to come to the plate.



With his shortstop behind him, Dan Marcus rares back for his delivery.

"I lined into a double play and began pacing because I was mad," he said.

Marcus, normally a Type-A person, probably could have been designated a Double-A-Plus or something similar as his pacing took him into foul territory down the right-field line.

When Bear manager Rick Vigil noticed Marcus, he told him, "Dan, let's get loose."

Said Marcus, "In two minutes, I was ready. The bases were loaded, nobody out and it was still 11-10."

With what is known in baseball terminology as a "short porch" from home plate to the backstop at Arizona State, Marcus said he had little trouble focusing.

"It almost seemed like I could take the ball and place it," the right-hander said. On the first pitch, the batter grounded into a double play, but the tying run scored. Then the go-ahead run came across when the Bears' third baseman couldn't handle a "big whopper" by the next batter.

Denver retaliated with two runs in the top of the ninth to regain the lead, bolstering Marcus' already heightened confidence.

"When I went out in the bottom of the ninth, I knew I'd get 'em out," he said. And that he did, retiring the first batter who had tried a swinging bunt, the second on a fly ball to center field

and the last on a pitch for a called third strike on the outside corner.

"After the Rochester game, I let ego take the best of me," Marcus admitted. "I went up to Rick and said, 'Gimme the ball tonite. I'm on a roll. Sink or swim, I'm on a roll.'"

"I kept on my uniform and cleats" between games when he made the 20-minute drive to his father's house before returning to Mesa, where the Bears played St. Pete. At his father's place, Marcus said, "I paced the floor for three hours. I could not sit down."

Marcus needed someone with whom to talk, someone who had been in extreme pressure situations in sports. So he phoned Dave Barnhardt, a fellow Highlands teacher and former long-time coach and basketball referee. Said Barnhardt, "There wasn't a lot I could tell him. He was in a situation he had to work out on his own. All I had to do was reinforce his confidence."

"I told him to look within a pinnacle he's never got before. He learned something about what was inside him."

Yet as quickly as the buzz reached a zenith, the nadir — the return to the bottom level of normalcy — returned.

The Floridians, paced by a Jose

Canseco look-alike named Frank Vito, pounded Marcus, jumping to a 10-0 lead, with Vito hitting a tape-measure home run off a curve the Highlands teacher hung on him.

"That was my down moment. As disappointed as I was," Marcus said, he reflected on having won four games in one week, compared to only one previous win (in high school nearly two decades ago at Evergreen) in his entire playing career.

"What I realized," he said, "was I won more games in four days than I've won in 36 years. That's when I had to pinch myself and realize it was just a dream."

Coupled with that dream's larger scope was Marcus' ability to pull off a baseball rarity — the hidden-ball trick — against Rhode Island.

A Rhode Island runner at first base was mad because his manager didn't give him a green light to steal second.

"I noticed he was jawing with his coach about not having him go. I went to the mound" while the first baseman conveniently concealed the ball, Marcus said, "and I was cleaning my cleats, and when the guy got off, the first baseman tagged him out."

Rhode Island played the rest of the game under protest.