

My son Connor is a baseball fanatic. When it's World Series time, every bedtime story has to be about baseball. The following is a folktale Connor, his brother Will, and I created together that celebrates baseball's quirky legends and superstitions. – John McCormick

The Dirty Underwear the Pitcher Wore

By John, William, and Connor McCormick

The game of baseball has many traditions. Fans love singing “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” during the seventh inning stretch, eating hot dogs and Cracker Jack, and never jinxing the pitcher who has a perfect game going (by saying, for example, “Hey, did anyone notice the pitcher has a perfect game going?”).

Players have their own traditions too. They love eating and spitting sunflower seeds between innings, or wearing their caps turned upside down and inside out to rally their teammates to a come from behind win.

Some of the players' traditions are quirky, even superstitious. Many hitters take the exact number of practice swings before stepping up to the plate. Pitchers avoid stepping on the foul line as they walk back to the dugout after ending an inning. And of course, the scratching. The players scratch themselves so often and in so many places you wonder why the League Office doesn't make flea collars part of the official uniform of Major League Baseball.

But one player had the strangest superstition of all. His name was Jackson Heater, which was the perfect name for a starting pitcher. Jackson, or “Heat” as his teammates and friends called him, had worn the same pair of boxer shorts for every single game over two seasons.

This superstition (or “tradition” as Heat insisted it be called) started in his last season in the Minor Leagues. Heat’s once promising career had hit the skids, after his ERA ballooned to 5.00 and he lost his fourth game in a row. His worst game came on his 22nd birthday, when he lasted just one and a third innings, gave up five earned runs, and worst of all, had no one to celebrate his birthday with after the game.

Heat arrived home that night dejected, bored, and lonely. He pulled his mail from the mailbox, and was picking his way through the bills when he noticed a UPS package outside his front door. He took it inside, kicked off his shoes, and flopped on the couch to see who it was from.

Inside the package, he found a birthday card nestled next to a parcel wrapped in tissue paper. He opened the envelope first and read the card.

“Happy Birthday Grandson! Here’s a little present to bring you some luck (and help get that ERA down.) Love, Gramps.”

Heat laughed. “Grandpa was always my biggest fan and my best coach,” he said aloud.

Heat peeled away the tissue paper to see what was inside. He chuckled again. “I should have guessed. It’s what grandparents always give.”

Inside the tissue paper was a pair of underwear. They were red, white, and blue, and covered with crossed baseball bats and red-stitched baseballs.

“A little loud, but I like them,” said Heat, as he held them up to the light. “Let’s just hope they bring me luck.”

Heat didn't have long to find out. His next start – and likely his last if he didn't win – was four days away.

Those four days were the longest in Heat's life. When game time finally arrived, Heat took his gear from his travel bag and laid it on a bench in the locker room. Stirrup socks, baseball jersey and pants, cap, and of course, his new underwear. There was never any question in Heat's mind that he would wear his new underwear for the game. When a baseball player is desperate to change his luck, he'll try anything.

Butterflies filled Heat's stomach as he took the mound. Maybe it was his nervousness, or perhaps the extra adrenaline in his body. But that night, Heat pitched the best baseball of his life. He struck out the first five batters he faced. He only gave up three hits and one walk the rest of the game. His team won 4–0, and he was the winning pitcher. Maybe it was the new underwear after all.

After the game, a reporter asked him, “What's the big difference between your performance tonight and your last start four days ago?”

“Luck,” said Heat. “Bad luck last time. Good luck tonight.”

And that good luck continued. Every time Heat wore his lucky underwear, he won. The only time that season he lost a game was when he forgot to pack his lucky underwear for an away game. He swore never to let that happen again.

Before long Heat was called up to the Major Leagues. His success was phenomenal. Though he joined the Big Leagues halfway through the season, he ended with a record of 7–0, and an ERA just over 2.00. Though he hadn't played enough games to be considered for the Cy

Young Award given each year to the League's best pitcher, he was considered a shoe-in for the following year.

Baseball wasn't the only area of Heat's life that was looking up. During his second season in the Major Leagues, after he had won his first four starts, he was introduced to a beautiful lady at an after-game party. Her name was Sophie, and she was the prettiest, smartest woman Heat had ever met. Heat and Sophie hit it off right away. She was a high school math teacher, and loved tracking baseball statistics. She knew things about baseball that Heat didn't even know.

Sophie: Which pitcher holds the career record for lowest ERA?

Heat: Uhh, I don't know. Cy Young?

Sophie: Ed Walsh, White Sox and Braves, with a career ERA of 1.82.

Sophie: Who holds the record for most strikeouts in a season?

Heat: Nolan Ryan?

Sophie: Not even close. It was Matt Kilroy with 513. He set the record in 1886 with the Baltimore Orioles.

Sophie: Which pitcher holds the career record for most home runs hit?

Heat: No idea.

Sophie: Wes Ferrell with 38. I believe he played for the Indians and some other teams.

Heat might not know the answers, but he loved it that Sophie did.

Sophie and Heat had a lot in common, except for one thing. Sophie was a very tidy person. (Heat called her a neat-freak.) Sophie liked mathematics because it had rules and was very orderly. She kept her home the same way.

“Heat, pick up your socks,” said Sophie. “You just leave them on the floor right where you take them off.”

“Okay, okay,” said Heat. He picked them off the bedroom floor and jump-shot them into the laundry hamper.

When Heat had a cold, he often blew his nose and dropped the tissue right on the floor.

“Gross,” cried Sophie. “I’m not touching that. Put it in the garbage.”

“Alright, already,” Heat responded.

Heat was such a messy person, Sophie took to calling him “Blow and Throw,” or “Stop and Drop.”

One day, Sophie was gathering clothes for washing when she found Heat’s lucky baseball underwear hanging on a hook in their closet. She was about to toss them into the dirty laundry when she noticed a peculiar smell.

“Pee-yew,” cried Sophie, wrinkling her nose. “When was the last time Heat washed these?”

Actually, Heat rarely washed his lucky underwear. He was scared to. He wore them so often they were wearing out, and he didn’t want to risk washing them too much.

Sophie raised the underwear to the light. They were ripped, stained, and paper thin in the seat. Worse, they were beyond smelly. “These aren’t even worth washing,” said Sophie. She tossed them into the trash.

Two days later, Heat was getting ready for his start that night. Heat had a routine before every game, where he lined up his gear on the bed before packing it into his travel bag.

Sophie was sitting downstairs in the rec room reading a magazine. She heard pacing upstairs, and then what sounded like wardrobe doors slamming.

“Sophie, have you seem my lucky underwear?”

“Which underwear is that?” she called from downstairs.

“You know the pair. Red, white, and blue, with crossed bats and baseballs.”

By the time he finished his sentence, Sophie had run upstairs and found Heat on his hands and knees looking under the bed. “They have to be here somewhere,” he said.

“Listen, Heat,” said Sophie cautiously. “I did find them on the hook in the closet, but they were so ripped and torn and filthy, well . . . I thought it was time for them to go.”

Heat jerked his head up so fast he hit it against the frame of the bed. “You what?” he asked, rubbing his bruised noggin.

“I, I threw them out,” said Sophie. “Honestly, Heat, they weren’t worth keeping.”

“Weren’t worth keeping? You don’t understand, Sophie. Those were my lucky underwear.”

“I understand . . .”

“No you don’t. I wore those underwear in every game I’ve won the last two years. If I don’t have them by game time tonight . . .”

Heat stopped in mid-sentence and looked at his watch. “I gotta go. If I don’t leave now, I’ll miss warm-ups. We’ll have to talk about this later.”

Heat left the apartment in a rush, looking completely shaken. Whether it was a lack of focus, or a lack of confidence, Heat had his worst outing of the season that night. He gave up four runs in the first inning, and one each in the second and third before his manager pulled him. Sitting alone on the bench afterwards, Heat looked like he’d lost his best friend.

Next morning, Heat had a long discussion with Sophie. “Sophie, you don’t realize how important those underwear are to me. We’ve got to get them back, whatever it takes. What did you do with them?”

“I put them in the trash can.”

“Then what?”

“Well, I dumped all our trash into the big metal can on the curb.”

“Great,” said Heat. “Let’s go search the trash can outside.”

“We can’t,” replied Sophie. “The trash got picked up yesterday.”

“Then we’re going to make a trip to the dump,” said Heat.

“You can’t be serious,” said Sophie.

Heat just glared at Sophie.

“I’ll get my coat,” she said at last.

One hour later, they found themselves at the dump, staring up at three gigantic mounds of trash. The task ahead was more daunting than even Sophie had imagined.

“We need luck today,” said Heat. “You pick. Where do we start?”

Sophie didn’t hesitate. “The middle one.”

They climbed to the top and began working their way down. The smell had been bad enough at the bottom, but on top it was worse. It smelled like a combination of rotting eggs and chicken left out in the sun for a week. When they pulled their boots out of the muck, the smell worsened, making them gag and wretch.

After four hours of looking, Heat and Sophie had only searched the top half of the trash mound. “It’s no use,” said Sophie. “At this rate, it’ll take us weeks to search the dump.”

“Don’t give up,” said Heat. “These are my lucky underwear. They’ll give us the luck we need to find them.”

Heat was right. After another hour of searching, he saw a familiar sight out of the corner of his eye. A piece of red, white, and blue cloth sticking out from under a tire. He scampered over and gently pulled it out. He held it up in the sunlight and broke into a toothy grin. The baseballs, the crossed bats, even his name written on the waistband, were a welcome sight.

“I found it!” he cried. He was one happy baseball player.

“It’s a miracle,” said Sophie as she came bounding over.

Heat let out a sigh of relief. “And it’s still in one piece,” he said.

“Barely,” said Sophie. “Just look at it.”

Heat’s smile disappeared as he examined it more closely. His underwear was ripped badly in several places, and the entire backside was coated in oily grime.

“You’re right,” said Heat, showing as much fatigue from his emotional rollercoaster as from toiling five hours in a stinking garbage heap. “Even if we wash them, they’ll simply disintegrate the next time I wear them.”

Sophie and Heat stood silently for several minutes. The call of seagulls circling overhead woke Sophie from her thoughts.

“I have an idea,” she said.

“What?” asked Heat.

Sophie was already scampering down the hill. “You’ll see,” she called over her shoulder.

Heat stared at her, mouth open. Finally he called, “Wait up,” and raced her to the car.

Back at their home, Sophie gently hand washed the underwear in soapy water. Rather than drying it in an electric dryer, she hung it on a clothesline to dry in the light breeze.

While Heat’s underwear was drying, Sophie got out her sewing kit and a pair of scissors. She then took from Heat’s drawer all his other pairs of underwear and laid them on the bed.

“What are you doing?” asked Heat.

Sophie told him her idea. As she spoke, Heat chewed on his thumbnail, deep in thought.

Sophie added, “I won’t do it if you don’t want me to.”

Heat said, “No, I want you to do it. I just hope my underwear will still bring me luck when you’re done.”

Sophie walked downstairs and into the backyard. She took Heat’s underwear off the line, brought it upstairs, and laid it on the bed. She took the scissors, and began to cut.

Heat gasped.

“You’re sure?” asked Sophie.

“Yeah. Go ahead,” said Heat.

Sophie cut Heat’s shorts into tiny squares, each about three inches by three inches in size. When she had finished, she had cut twenty squares in all.

Sophie then threaded a sewing needle with white thread. She picked up another pair of underwear, and sewed one of the squares onto it. She continued until she had sewed all twenty squares onto a different pair of underwear.

“Instead of having one pair of lucky underwear,” said Sophie, “you now have twenty.”

Heat paused. “Do you think they’ll bring me as much luck as my old pair?”

“I guarantee it,” said Sophie. “No matter what you wear, you’ll still have a piece of your lucky underwear with you.”

Sophie was right. The next night, Heat pitched a near flawless game. His hot streak continued for the rest of the season. After each win, Heat joked with reporters that he had won the game by “the seat of his pants.” His team made the playoffs, and Heat received the Cy Young Award for the League’s best pitcher.

Heat was convinced that he owed his success to his lucky underwear. But Sophie knew better. It wasn’t because Heat’s underwear brought him luck. It was because Heat believed they brought him luck, and that made all the difference.

