

ROD BOLTON OVERPOWERS MARC ALLAN

By MARC D. ALLAN

At one time or another, even the most astute baseball fan has had one of these thoughts while watching a game: What was he swinging at? Or How could he miss that pitch? Or My grandmother could hit better than that guy!

Distance and beer will do that to you. Although it's probably the most difficult feat in sports - just ask failed baseball player Michael Jordan - hitting a baseball looks deceptively simple from the stands

or on TV.

But what does it look like at home plate, with the pitcher a mere 60 feet, 6 inches away, ready to wing a hardball perilously close to the ol' bean?

For some masochistic reason, I wanted to find out. So one day in early June, the Indianapolis Indians sent pitcher Rodney Bolton to the mound and let me stand in the batter's box.

Before I tell you exactly how this experience went, let me tell you some things about Rodney Bolton: Age 31 ... throws right-handed ... grew up in Chattanooga, Tenn. ... played baseball at the University of Kentucky ... drafted by the Chicago White Sox, 13th round, 1990 ... pitched in the major leagues in 1993 and 1995.

Now let me tell you some things about me: Age 41 ... bats left-handed ... grew up in New York ... never played organized sports ... never drafted, even by military ... body by Entenmann's ... career average of .437 in Indianapolis Newspapers Slow-Pitch Softball League (all singles) ... once shot a man in Reno, just to watch him die. All right, that's not entirely true. I did have one double in softball. In addition, I would have to describe myself as - what's the technical term? - a wussy fraidy-cat. In the days leading to this meeting, I promised myself I wouldn't say to Bolton: "Please don't hit me." But being a wussy fraidy-cat, I said it anyway.

Ain't too proud to beg.

And I must say Bolton was incredibly kind. All his pitches were on the outside portion of home

plate. Plus, he told me what was coming - first fastballs, then curves, then change-ups. And finally, Bolton estimates he was pitching at 78 to 80 mph - short of his usual top speed of 86 mph and considerably slower than the 100 mph speeds that some professionals reach.

(Still, to put it in perspective, Bolton's pitches took a fraction more than half a second to get from his hand to too close to my body for comfort.)

Great hitters usually reduce their craft to a six-word mantra: See the ball, hit the ball. Surprisingly, I could see Bolton's pitches well. I saw them leave his hand. I picked up the ball clearly when it reached approximately 10 feet from the plate.

What was amazing was how quickly the ball moved that final 10 feet. Every flail of the bat seemed to come just after the ball zipped by and thwacked the rubber target in the back of the batting cage.

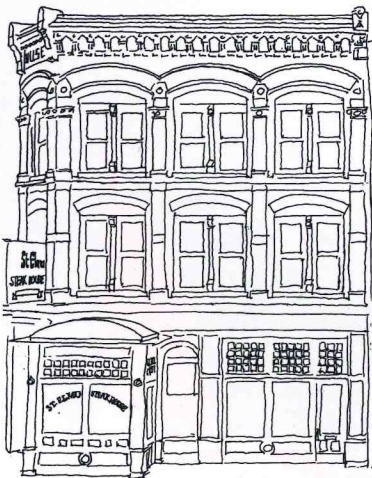
I could hear the ball, too. Sounded something like a dive-bombing wasp: Zzzzzzp! Zzzzzzp! Zzzzzzp! Now, I can't be completely sure of this sound because it was competing with a couple of other noises.

The first was the sound of me bailing out. I faced every pitch with the best of intentions, tapping the bat on the outside part of the plate. Then Bolton would wind up and I'd find myself backing away until I was somewhere inside the visitors' dugout.

"Not being afraid of the pitch is key," Bolton said afterward. "Especially the guys who've gotten hit



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once or twice when they're young, they remember that. That part sticks in their mind because it hurt worse then than it does now, unless you get hit in the face.

"And it's tough when you're pitching - if you get hit with a line drive, as a youth, that sticks with you. Here, you shake it off and say the chances of that happening again are slim. But back then, when it happened one time, you think it can happen every time."

Yet Bolton says he still sees players like this at the highest level of the minor leagues. "Those are the guys you get out. But they're on a Triple-A team because they're great defensively. You've gotta be good at one of them, either a great hitter or great defensive player."

The other noise I heard was the wind from my bat, a light gust from the west coming in at the speed of the sound of loneliness.



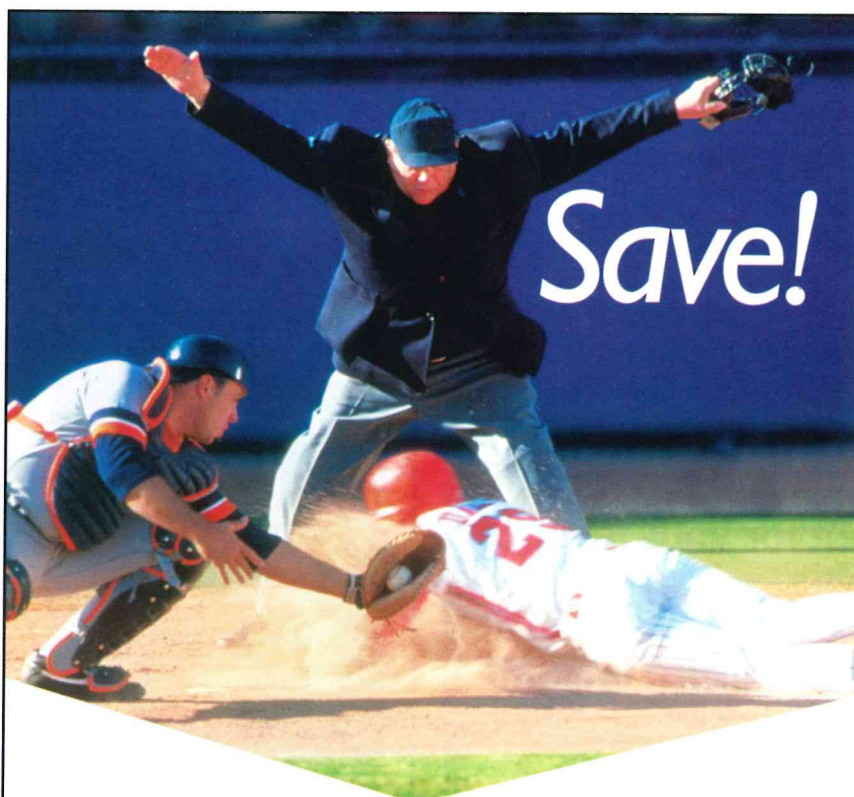
MARC ALLAN and ROD BOLTON

In all, I made contact twice - a foul tip off the end of the bat and a ground ball to shortstop - out of maybe 15 pitches and six or seven swings.

Baseball statistics guru Bill James once wrote about a player:

"Couldn't hit a baby in the butt with a flyswatter."

I probably should have tried that first.



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