

The Streak

A Novel

By Bill Chastain

Dedication

To all the players I've had the pleasure of covering from my seat up in the press box. While chronicling your triumphs and failures, I've always tried to keep in mind the old saying that the game gets infinitely easier the farther away you get from home plate. Even if your accomplishments fell short of expectations, you were major leaguers, each of you. Nobody can ever take that away.

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CHAPTER ONE

Arlington, Texas, 1986

Silence. Professional golfers demand it. Why? Dorsey McWhorter ponders the question. Nicklaus could hear a fart anywhere on the course. And he'd back away from his shot accordingly.

Dorsey kneels in the on-deck circle, taking deliberate passes with his Louisville Slugger, a licorice-colored beauty that runs thirty-three inches long and weighs thirty-one ounces. Fifty-cent beer night and the hometown Rangers fans are roaring idiots dedicated to making Arlington Stadium vibrate like concrete and steel on cocaine. Nachos with jalapeno peppers permeate the sweltering night. Not exactly Augusta National. You've got to hit, dumbass. Are you kidding me? Nicklaus hearing farts? Get your head in the game.

Runners are on the corners with one out in the bottom of the ninth of a scoreless game. Dorsey loves the noise that tells him what the hometown fans want him to do against the Tigers pitcher. "Now batting, Dorsey McWhorter..."

Hearing his name announced never gets old. More noise always follows. Noise directed at him. Sometimes they love him, sometimes they don't. Either way he processes the good and bad simply as noise.

What would Nicklaus do?

Dorsey bends to pick up a handful of dirt, rubbing the dirt until the grit digs into his callused hands. Batting gloves have never suited him. He steps into the box, kicks dirt in both directions and settles into his stance. Three good hacks are on the horizon. He doesn't plan on getting cheated.

"Fat Rays" fills quickly after the Rangers game.

The joint's beef ribs are tasty enough to make you want to slap your grandma. A dress code mandating tight skirts and tops for the waitresses isn't bad for business, either. Mostly Fat Ray's is the place to be.

Dorsey McWhorter always shows, win or lose.

Nobody parties like Dorsey. He isn't picky about the company he keeps, either. A pulse and a penchant for fun are the only prerequisites to hang with Dorsey.

"Fat Ray" Garrison loves Dorsey. Once he steps through the door, the Lone Star flows, and the cash follows, filling the canvas bags Ray carts to the Arlington Federal the next morning.

Dorsey's spirits are running high. A game-winning three-run homer will do that for a guy. Nursing a vodka martini, he enjoys a silent chuckle, reflecting on the expression of the Tigers pitcher while he circled the bases. Dorsey plans to buy rounds for everyone.

Hidden behind the façade of Fat Ray's immediate gratifications and the good offerings of the day, the thoughts about having unfulfilled potential lurk in the background, weighing him down with anxiety. Life at home complicates matters further. His once passionate marriage to Melissa is now a vacuous existence between strangers. Fights are daily, erupting like a flash fire in a parched forest. If not for Sam, he would already be gone. He wonders if his son's life will be enhanced if his parents are apart. No longer having a relationship with Melissa has created a huge void in his life—physically and mentally. Talking to teammates and being with Sam can only go so far. Nothing can substitute for the intimate conversations they once shared. To fill the physical void, Dorsey first dabbles with infidelity on an as-needed basis. After all, a man's gotta eat. And he does so, bringing him sexual relief accompanied by knifing pangs of guilt. Adultery runs counter to everything he believes. Continued affairs and Melissa's miserable presence eventually breeds indifference. If Dorsey isn't chasing women,

consuming martinis or Lone Star longnecks occupies most of his free time. Every now and then he staggers to the dance floor at Fat Ray's. Nobody does the "Cotton-eyed Joe" like Dorsey. A switch in Dorsey's mind flips when the lights come on to signify closing time. Like a seasoned angler, he tosses his car keys on the ripest table of women. If one takes the bait, he reels her in for a tumble in the sheets. Otherwise, he calls a cab to drive him home.

Melissa sleeps through most of Dorsey's trysts. Normally he crawls into bed with the boy. If Sam awakens, Dorsey scratches his back until they both fall asleep. Melissa doesn't give two shits about what time Dorsey drags in his sorry ass as long as he doesn't get into bed with her. In the morning, the dark part of her heart compels her to torment him at any hint of a hangover.

Dorsey knows his marriage can't be salvaged. When the marriage will end is the only unknown. Sitting at Fat Ray's celebrating his game-winning home run provides ample motivation for getting shit-faced. Maybe this will be the night when enough emotion returns to finish off his marriage with a bang. Dorsey skips his usual order of ribs and opts to order a bucket of Lone Stars. Martinis follow. Soon everything is funny.

Fat Ray embraces Dorsey getting stinking drunk. The louder and rowdier he grows the more booze everybody drinks. Given Ray's obvious preference, Dorsey finds Ray's offer strange. Ray walks up to him and begins to rub his shoulders in an "aw shucks" fashion. "Dorsey, how 'bout I fix you up a couple of those brisket sandwiches you like? Cole slaw, sauce, and the bun toasted the way you like it."

Dorsey points at his empty martini glass and declines. "Risky as an organ transplant." He hiccups and begins to chuckle. "Fifty-fifty chance of rejection."

Moments later a group of three men and two women invites Dorsey to join them. Usually such a group wants to rehash the game. To Dorsey's credit, he never tires of the endless questions about the game.

"When you go up there with the winning run on third do you consciously try to hit the ball out of the park or is that just TV bullshit?" one of the men asks. Dorsey responds politely. "I just try and hit the ball hard."

Something is funny about the men at the table. Dorsey can't pinpoint what it is, though.

"How are your knees?" asks another of the men.

Dorsey pats one knee at a time. "Usually they hurt like hell. Spend a lot of time in the trainer's room."

Dorsey taps his martini glass. "Medicinal purposes only."

Pleased to be in the company of the local sports star, the men laugh a little too hard. Dorsey rolls with the punches, and they order more drinks. Still, he can't pinpoint what exactly strikes him as funny about the group. Once the chitchat begins about their respective rotisserie leagues, Dorsey feels like crying "Eureka!"

at the top of his lungs. Fat Ray's falls into the redneck/cowboy bar category, yet these guys are wearing Polo shirts, Topsiders, and khaki trousers. One fashions tortoiseshell glasses. Instead of drinking Lone Star, they drink Corona with a twist of lime at the top of the bottle. Yuppie sons of bitches!

"You guys filming a Dockers commercial?" Dorsey laughs at his own joke. Nobody else follows suit.

"Fuck you," one of the men says.

"Fuck who?" Dorsey stands, allowing his height to unfurl slowly in a theatrical move to call attention to his size. No yuppie pussy is about to give him any shit. Dorsey grows concerned when the man stands. *Big son of a bitch.*

Seconds later Dorsey feels a fist strike his jaw. He crumples to the floor.

Ray runs to help Dorsey. He scowls at the man who has decked his golden goose. "Mister, you better get. Folks in here don't care for your kind."

The man heeds Ray's advice. He heads toward the exit and motions for the rest of his party to join him. Only the men follow. When he looks at the women, one answers for both. "We're staying."

The man who hit Dorsey waves an arm. "Jock sniffers. You could've at least picked up one that wasn't such a washed-up fuck."

Dorsey remains quiet, owning enough sense to understand how drunk he is, and that his attacker knows how to throw a punch. Prudence tells him to remain down, like Mickey telling Rocky Balboa to stay on the canvas to recover. Meanwhile, both women huddle around him, each growing more attractive by the minute.

Dorsey's body is beaten up from playing for mediocre Cardinals teams on Busch Stadium's concrete-like artificial surface. Once Cardinals management decided to build a team to fit its spacious ballpark, his days in St. Louis were numbered. Ironically, he had been one of the fastest players in the league when he first joined the Cardinals. Injuries robbed him of that speed. A young Dorsey would have been a perfect fit for the team St. Louis wanted to build.

The Cardinals traded Dorsey to the Rangers for two players. He had hit twenty or more home runs three straight seasons for the Cardinals, and one year he hit thirty-three, a stunning number given Busch Stadium's vast dimensions. Power, sure hands, and a will to run full stride into any wall to grab a fly ball all made Dorsey attractive to the non-contending Rangers. They were in need of a popular player, someone to help navigate some rough attendance spots. Dorsey fit the bill

as a player who could conform to the Texas lifestyle while providing a constant home-run threat in smaller Arlington Stadium.

The Rangers' assessment of Dorsey proved accurate. Fans love players who hit home runs and run into walls like professional wrestlers slamming into other behemoths on the circuit. Unfortunately, his popularity remained in Texas. National recognition was tough to attain playing for a doormat.

Dorsey enjoyed playing for the Rangers. Texas felt right. Melissa did not adjust so well. Anxiety accounted for much of her problem. Becoming a mother at an early age wasn't a part of the plan. Adjusting was difficult. She joked a little too much about the carnage birth caused to her once income-producing body. Dorsey realized deeprooted insecurities lived within the jokes. Throughout her pregnancy, the "Tiki Suntan Goddess" pounced on cheeseburgers, French fries, gravy, and chocolate shakes. Fifty-five pounds and cellulite on the backs of her legs were byproducts of her obsession.

Sam's arrival initially established a greater bond between Dorsey and Melissa. He never played better than when Melissa was with him in body and soul. They lay side-by-side in bed with Sam between them, sharing a sense of awe at what they had created. Dorsey's home schedule worked well for the couple. Melissa tended to Sam during the day. Dorsey took care of the late-night feedings and was happy to do so. They brought a special bond. He vowed to never leave his son, regardless of future circumstances. Dorsey's image of his own father had never ceased haunting him. Did Big Ed McWhorter have similar conversations with me, his only son? *Am I preordained to follow in my father's footsteps?*

Sam grew. So do the couple's problems. Moving to Texas further exacerbated the situation. Melissa dedicated herself to getting skinny, reducing herself to where she looked sick. Accompanying her quest was an abstention from sex. Plastic sandwiches of the American Express, Master Card, and Neiman Marcus variety supplanted orgasms. Dorsey was left to deal with it.

Dorsey awakens on the living room floor dressed in white boxer shorts. Melissa stands over him, looking down. "Get up, you son of a bitch. Last night did it. Get the hell out of here!"

Dorsey crawls next to a coffee table, lights a Marlboro and stretches out on the floor. He takes a long drag. "What's so different about last night? Why, after all this time do you want me out?"

Melissa shakes her head. "You're pathetic. Take a look at yourself. Maybe that will tell you something."

Dorsey examines his body. Lipstick adorns the opening of his shorts and several love bites stand out on his stomach. “Looks like I had a pretty good time. Too bad I don’t remember.”

Melissa furrows her brow and her eyes burn into him like twin lasers. “Let me recount the occasion for you. A young woman drives her BMW onto the front yard, honks the horn, wakes up the neighborhood, stops the car, gets out, and screams it’s her turn. She opens the back door, and who steps out but another young woman. This one is wearing no clothes. Who do you think follows her out of the car? Why it’s Dorsey McWhorter, piece-of-shit baseball player—the great slugger who pissed everything away for booze. Dorsey looks like he’s ready for the game. Well...almost. He does have on his boxers. But that’s it. If that wasn’t enough, Dorsey mumbles something about Black Sabbath then begins to yell over and over, ‘I’m Iron Man.’ Well Iron Man, get the fuck outta here! Last night was it!”

Dorsey leaves the room and feels relief that Melissa doesn’t follow him to the guest bedroom. A blissful sleep follows until Melissa gets a phone call. First he calls for her. No answer. Hanging up occurs to him. Only the caller might call back, so he walks downstairs to look for her. The house is empty. Melissa must have taken Sam with her to the grocery store. Dorsey takes a message and notices he has just enough time to make it to the ballpark for batting practice. He hurries out the door for Arlington Stadium, believing the battleground will return to status quo when he returns from the park later that night. That thought is accompanied by guilt. Melissa doesn’t deserve such treatment. Sadly, he doesn’t remember being in love with her. Only Sam makes him happy. Baseball and booze are his escapes.

Dorsey’s hangover beats him up throughout that night’s loss to the Angels. Reflection follows, informing him to slow down or start looking for a new liver. He bypasses Fat Ray’s after the game and drives home. The Bronco’s headlights shine on the front yard as he wheels into the expansive driveway to his house. Illuminated are his clothes scattered on the finely trimmed Bermuda grass. Shit! Given the volume of suits, shirts, slacks, and underwear, Dorsey figures she’s emptied his closet and dresser. *Fuck it.*

Taking several minutes to gather his things in a pile, Dorsey decides he’s not going to get mad. He’ll throw his clothes into the living room and deal with the mess tomorrow. All he wants to do is sleep.

He tries to open the door only his key doesn’t work. Many nights he’s struggled to unlock the front door due to prolonged sessions at Fat Ray’s. Tonight is a different story. Melissa has changed the locks. An envelope with “Dorsey” written on the front rests on the doorstep. Inside is a note.

Dorsey—

You've pulled your shit on me for the last time. You'd better talk to a lawyer because I've already got the shrewdest fucking feminist lawyer in the Southwest—I'm going to take your ass to the cleaners. FYI, I wouldn't be hanging around the house because I went and paid a visit to the judge today. Ever heard of a restraining order? Several neighbors witnessed your show last night, lost a lot of sleep, too. They were more than happy to swear out complaints. Read about the rest of the details in tomorrow's paper. —See you in divorce court.

Dorsey reads about his personal problems in the next day's *Southwest Daily Chronicle*, only the story doesn't paint the picture in the fashion Melissa envisioned. Part of Dorsey's charmed life in Texas includes kid-glove treatment from the media, due in large part to the equity he's accrued by always making himself available when the media needs him. If the Rangers lose, Dorsey can be counted on for a quote. When a reporter needs him for an off-day story, Dorsey does what he can. Thus, they don't forget their buddy in his hour of need. They tone down his domestic dispute. Naked women in his front yard, and the fight at Fat Ray's don't make the story. Melissa is painted as a calculating bitch. Dorsey and Sam's picture at a father-son game accompanies the front-page article. Dorsey resembles Ward Cleaver and Sam, the Beaver, in the warm and fuzzy depiction. Melissa's picture shows a selfish pout, providing victory for Dorsey in a small battle. But Melissa wins the war. She sues Dorsey for divorce. The court allows him to see his son every other weekend and one afternoon per week. Steep alimony and child support payments accompany the final decision. That decision signals the end of Dorsey's tenure with the Rangers. At the end of the season, he is a free agent. They can't justify paying him the money he's asking for, given his physical condition. His desire to stay with the team is overridden by the need to compensate for the considerable financial bite Melissa has taken out of his ass.

The free-agent market beckons. The Indians make him a ridiculous offer with lots of zeroes on the end. Just like that, Cleveland is his new baseball home. Texas fans will not soon forgive management or Melissa—nor will Fat Ray.