

Excerpted from THE YEAR OF THE PITCHER: Bob Gibson, Denny McLain, and the End of Baseball's Golden Age by Sridhar Pappu. Copyright © 2017 by Sridhar Pappu. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

In the early morning hours of September 14, 1968, Denny McLain woke up on the couch of the split-level house that he and Sharyn had bought in the Detroit suburb of Beverly Hills. His three-year-old daughter Kristi was still asleep on his stomach. The biggest day of his life — a nationally televised Saturday afternoon game in which he was widely expected to record his 30th win — was ahead of him. He put Kristi to bed and tried — for a few hours at least — to find some measure of peace. The makings of a celebration were all there. The house was full of family and old friends: his mother, whom he'd always resented for denying him the chance to go to college; his brother Tom, whose own baseball career was cut short by a car accident; and two Catholic priests. Later that morning one would offer up a single prayer, and Denny would ask for more than just one. He always wanted more. He needed it. McLain had heard it for months now — the drumbeat of 30, of history in the making. He believed that an achievement like that would not only set his family up with the kind of life they were entitled to, but nullify all his previous failings, particularly at the end of 1967. He was now the golden boy. The one who could do no wrong. As for his teammates, what could they do? Whatever their feelings about McLain's many absences — about his shady business dealings and late nights spent at questionable places, about the different rules he operated by — those feelings wouldn't bubble over until later. As long as he won his games, all they could do was shake their heads and go about their business. Al Kaline, who was in his 16th year with the Tigers that season, believed, like others, that this was a team on a mission. They'd let the prize get away from them in 1967, but now they were just a handful of games away from claiming it — and they knew that they couldn't get there without Denny. When the press rushed the locker room in Tiger Stadium the day before, Mickey Lolich was waiting for them with a sign that read: attention sportswriters denny mclain's locker this way→. This sign summed up the fragile relationship between the two players. As far as the world was concerned, McLain and Lolich couldn't have been more different. McLain's face — though tired and already creased with deep wrinkles, his teeth rotting from all the soda he drank — was still handsome. He still had a wry, wide-open smile and those arresting blue eyes. Lolich, with his roundish physique and protruding ears, didn't cut the same figure. He wasn't able to begin the season with the team because of his National Guard duties after King's death. And for a great deal of the year, while McLain performed as the stopper, Lolich struggled with his pitching and endured mistreatment from Smith, who, in his opinion, unfairly aimed his frustration at Lolich. Despite his blue-collar appearance, Lolich was a boy who came out of the West. He developed his arm strength by throwing rocks at anything that ran or flew through the wide-open spaces of his hometown in Oregon, where his father worked as a parks director. Lolich, not McLain, was supposed to be the next big thing after he won 18 games in 1964 under the tutelage of Charlie Dressen. Dressen kept him from tipping his

pitches, helped him adapt to a new windup, and encouraged him to throw his curveball when behind in the count. When Lolich beat the Yankees, he earned the praise of Mickey Mantle, who admired his ease and how effectively he kept the ball down. By 1966, though, there were those who believed he'd never emerge as a consistent starter. The fans and pressmen never failed to mention his weight, his appearance, his inability to re-create what he had done against the Yankees in 1964. And now, as he watched the reporters and fans flocking to McLain, it appeared that despite nearly taking his team to the World Series the year before, he was all but forgotten. There were those who still believed in him — namely Johnny Sain and his bullpen coach Hal Naragon. Neither could care less about his weight. And what did it matter how fast he could run so long as his arm was strong and able? Early in their time together, after Smith pulled him from a 1967 contest, Lolich was alone in the locker room when Sain approached him. Lolich didn't know Sain very well yet and expected that he'd tear into him about his performance. Instead, Sain asked Lolich, "Mickey, do you know that curveball you threw in the third inning?" "Yes," Lolich said. "Well now," Sain said in his folksy way, "that's what we're looking for. That was a great pitch." And that was it. Lolich felt that perhaps he hadn't pitched a bad ball game after all. This was something Naragon had seen often when he and Sain were with the Twins — Sain's ability to lift a pitcher's spirits after a loss, to help him shake it off so he'd return to the field the next morning ready to work. Naragon and Sain found much to like about Lolich when they began working with him their first spring together. Sain always preached about the importance of movement over speed. But Lolich had both — especially with his fastball. Lolich's fastball also had a natural sink to it — something Mantle picked up on in 1964 when he compared him to Whitey Ford.