

Chapter Fifteen: Everything's a Gamble Here, Right?

Continuing mistakes; serious “course correction” along the Road—find an old friend

Come early September we loaded the Chrysler Imperial Dad had acquired from my cousin Carol Norton's husband, Dr. Richard, with clothing and a modest amount of school gear and headed north; Mom, Dad, and Easy Ed, bound for Reno, Nevada and my initial college experience.

Although it ended up that the last draftees came from the birth year before mine, those of us anticipating future draft lotteries had no way to know that we would be safe and spared. The nation remained on a “war stance” as the conflict in Vietnam dragged on. UNR maintained a military commitment requirement: Male students either had to join and participate in the ROTC program or go through a one-week “orientation” prior to their freshman year. I was not inclined to enter the ROTC program so instead I had reported to school a week before regular classes began. I was not the only one; hundreds of us checked into the dorms a week early so that we could go through the orientation and thereby avoid the ROTC program (and the risk of post-college wartime military service if we had joined allowed the ROTC to pay some of our tuition).

Nye Hall was (and still is) the largest traditional residence dorm at UNR. The 7-story building houses over 500 students in a semi-co-ed arrangement. In 1971, men and women lived on the same floor but were divided by the lounges and bathrooms at the middle, thereby separating the men on one side and women on the other. The dorm sits just south of mid-campus about one block north of Lake Manzanita just across the main Reno thoroughfare (N. Virginia St.) from campus. The dorm is conveniently located almost directly across the street from the largest dining hall on campus and in 1971 was just down the block from what was to become the new baseball field. More about that wretched and God-forsaken place later.



*The folks drop Ed
off at the
University of
Nevada, Reno
fall 1971*



After we arrived and completed the standard check-in procedure I headed for my dorm room. I was very concerned about sharing a room and putting up with community-style bathrooms. My life as an only child provided my own bedroom although the three of us shared a single bathroom in both in Waterloo and on Killdee in Long Beach. As is probably the case with most first-year students entering dorm life, my primary concern was over the roommate assignment. There were no surveys or questionnaires about preferences in those days; you got whoever was assigned. We were told that we *might* be given the opportunity to change roommates after the first semester, but only if *absolutely necessary*.

When I reached the door of my room at the end of the men's wing of the seventh floor I realized that my roommate was already there. I entered somewhat hesitantly and looked across the room to find a young man about my height with Asian facial features. I don't recall if my heart sank or quickly rose into my throat as we stared at each other, both wondering and worrying. As luck and fate would have it we both spoke at the same time. We startled and surprised each other by asking, in unison, the same thing: "You don't like country music do you?" Both answered "Hell No!" Needless to say, Las Vegas native Phil Chin and I got along swimmingly during my time in Nye Hall.

Phil was a Mining Engineering major; I had signed up as a Journalism major. We didn't share classes so never studied "together" although we sometimes studied at the same times. Phil was the better and more dedicated student (by *a lot*), a fact that was not a plus in my column. From the start, we were a good personality match with both more than willing to leave the other alone. Further, neither would have a girlfriend in my time in Reno, so our space was shared by only two, avoiding the trouble often brought when romance hits the dorm-room fan. I kissed Mom and Dad goodbye and they headed off for a well-earned vacation along the California coast on their way back to Southern California.

I suppose many/most first-year college students, living away from home for the first time, struggle through similar troubles as I experienced. Finding buildings and classes, making friends, facing the academic challenges presented by college, homesickness. I was certainly no different. The early arrival on campus took care of most of the location orientation problems; by the time classes started, I knew my way around campus and its buildings. However, this early period pointed to what would soon become one of more than a few major difficulties.

UNR did not provide orientation or advisement to incoming first-year students (then called freshmen). That included a lack of contact from the athletic program. I have no way of knowing if this lacuna was due to the chaos in the baseball program or if all new athletes were treated the same way. Clearly, student-athletes on the football team, already in full gear and practicing, received special treatment early in the fall. Baseball players, to my knowledge, not so much. I was left to pick my own class schedule. The only "guidance" (if this can be so labeled) was a red tag on my master schedule sheet that reminded me to not schedule classes in the late afternoon, due to fall baseball practice.

One of the major challenges ahead was that UNR maintained a foreign language requirement for graduation and I was particularly lousy at learning them. The nominal exposure to Spanish provided by Mrs. Wesierski in grade school at St. Cornelius, augmented by the occasional ribbing with Ramon Estape, enabled me to recite my name, say “hello how are you,” and “I’m fine thanks and you?” in Spanish. I’d flunked French as a senior at SAHS. My only claim to foreign language ability rested on three years studying high school Latin. Since I couldn’t graduate from UNR without at least one semester of successful foreign language training, I signed up for Latin I: **mistake #11**. The teacher covered the equivalent of three years of high school Latin in less than two weeks. From then until I dropped the class about 10 days later, the Latin course was mostly Greek to me. However, one thing was very clear to me within the first month of my time at UNR: I might never graduate from UNR because I could not pass a foreign language class. This factor later entered my decision-making about the future.

Overall the Reno gig was a pretty mixed deal with the mix tilting toward the negative side of the scale. On the plus side, even though I was sharing a room and living way from home for the first time (not to mention all of the other features of dorm life) I experienced a relatively happy day-to-day existence. I attended classes and did well in everything except Latin I. I enjoyed Phil’s company, I made friends, I went on outings, and stayed out of trouble. Although I did not develop a steady or intimate relationship with any particular female, I dated and had mostly positive experiences with the girls in the dormitory. I even managed to wander down the street to the local coffee house and play and sing at a few Friday night open-mic events.

Since none of my new dorm mates at UNR knew much about me I acquired a new nickname. The young man who quickly rose to lead the group living on our floor decided that

each of us needed a nickname. He based his choices on looks. I became “Crazy Ed the French Jew.” I’ve no idea where the “Crazy” part came from: my demeanor was no more excessive than anyone else on our floor. The “French” part I get: my Last name provided the French part. And “Jew”: I have long and often been cited as a dead wringer for someone from somewhere in the so-called “Middle-East.” So off we go with a new name, again.

Weekends at UNR proved a revelation to me: Once the weather turned colder, most of the students headed for skiing in the mountains, especially near Lake Tahoe. I had no idea that UNR was a “ski school.” Although I had visited ski areas (Big Bear and Lake Arrowhead) while living in Los Angeles, I did not ski and I assumed that my baseball scholarship did not allow it. I never made the Tahoe trip on the weekends although one such weekend, left behind in the almost-empty dormitory, featured a somewhat bizarre occurrence and missed opportunity.

One of our dorm mates was an older student; perhaps old enough to be a graduate student, though we were never clear about his status or why he (still) lived in the dorm. The young man had a penchant for alcohol consumption but was never out of control or troublesome. He did not ski so we found ourselves watching *Star Trek* reruns one weekend when everyone else was away from the dorm, out on the slopes. During one of the advertisements he turned to me and said something about my needing to “invest money in his father’s company if I wanted to make some money.” I told him that we weren’t big investors but that I would take down the information and that I appreciated the tip. Of course, I didn’t know if I wanted a tip from this fellow, but nevertheless when I went home at Christmas I told my Dad about the information. We didn’t have money to invest in the stock market; I was aware of that when I told my folks about the opportunity but I figured that I would be remiss if I didn’t share the story.

Come to find out, the young man was one of William (Bill) Hewlett's, co-founder of *Hewlett-Packard*, sons. *Hewlett-Packard* was developing the first personal computer and fostering a young Steve Wozniak, eventual co-founder of *Apple*, as an HP employee. Had we invested a couple hundred dollars in 1971, we would have shown a tidy profit on the HP stock within a decade and might have gotten an early-eye on the Wozniak kid: **Mistake #12**.

In those days, minors were allowed to enter casinos in order to get to the restaurants within but were, of course, not allowed to gamble. Weekly, a group of us trudged down the hill and into *Harrah's* for its casual dining facility. *Harrah's* maintained a high-quality Chinese buffet. Phil reported that it was about the best Chinese food he'd found outside of his home. He taught me how to use chopsticks and some of the older boys showed us how to make a quick pass at a slot machine or table game on the way out, just before security came to show us the door.

I also saw two memorable concerts while at UNR. Canadian-bred *The Guess Who*, led by Randy Bachman and featuring lead singer Burton Cummings, played a rocking show at the downtown Pioneer Theatre Auditorium. Even better, an emerging British rocker, Elton John, made an appearance at the indoor facility on the Reno County Fairgrounds. Affectionately referred to as the "Cow Palace" (a play on names as the NBA team in San Francisco, the Warriors, then played in a building with that name), the structure had seats-on-risers, walls, a roof, and a dirt floor (covered with canvas for the show). The place served as the site for county-fair-style animal competitions and rodeos (The **Cow** Palace). The UNR baseball team used the facility for winter practice once the weather overwhelmed outdoor play. Elton was still in his "Mad Man [from] Across the Waters" phase, having only scored one modest ("Take Me To The

Pilot”) and one major hit record (“Your Song”) in the U.S.; he was still a largely an unknown quantity. Low name recognition did not constrain the Reno crowd: we went bonkers over his great music and “standing on the piano” antics.

On the other hand, my college athletic career was off to somewhat negative start. I was chagrined (and a little confused) when no visible support was provided. The former students who were coaching only contacted me with directions to the locker room (“it’s across the street, in the basement of the gym”) and a heads-up to the attendant who provided the combination for a locker. They also detailed the fall practice schedule (“show up at the new field every weekday at 3 p.m after September 15”). Those two aspects were the extent of my “college athletics orientation.” Neither equipment nor apparel were offered; no workouts, drills or meetings (other than practices) specified. In short, I was on my own and fall practices didn’t start until almost a month after my arrival. I probably should have worried more about this than I did. At the time, I chalked it off to the program’s chaos and lack of adult leadership. I also failed to take any proactive steps to improve the situation. Not starting workouts and strength training, on my own, before formal practice started was clearly **mistake #13**.

Eventually, when fall practice began, the situation did not improve. First, there was the (so-called) “field.” In previous seasons, the team practiced and played its games at a local park. *Peccole Park* now features a state-of-the-art college baseball stadium as the home of the Nevada Wolfpack baseball team. But in 1971, the *Peccole Park* facility was little more than a souped-up city-park field. The team longed for a more “college-like” place to play. Meanwhile, back on campus, the College of Mines, over the years, dug a large and deep hole in a vacant lot that stood between the football stadium and the student gymnasium in order to teach their students various

mining techniques and skills. The site outlived its usefulness and the College of Mines moved their equipment to another site. The athletic department, the College of Mines, and the University decided that rather than fill in the excavated hole, the baseball team would develop a “home” stadium there.

When I arrived, the bottom of the hole had been smoothed and shaped into a very rough baseball diamond. Chicken-wire fences were raised. There wasn’t much grass anywhere although the outfield area contained some rough growth and weeds. The diamond was less finished than were neglected fields at public parks in Southern California. The East Long Beach Little League fields were all dirt, but were far better cared for; the Wardlow Park field where I played high school ball was head-and-shoulders above the glorified hole-in-the-ground we called our UNR “home field” that fall.

Our practices featured standard batting and fielding drills. Except, of course, that the field was significantly less than standard. Coach Roper came to fall baseball practices after football workouts. His favorite activity was aggressively hitting infield practice on that gawd-awful mess of a diamond. There were rocks, ruts, undulations, and tufts of weeds everywhere. Hard-hit ground balls became dangerously uncontrolled missiles. Slick fielding was my specialty yet I could barely protect myself: gold-glove-worthy fielding was out of the question.

I managed to hold my own despite the field conditions and my lack of self-initiated training the first month of the school year. I soon found myself sitting across the desk from Roper, in his office, after practice: He wanted to talk.

The situation was pretty straightforward. The young man, a senior, who was ticketed to play third base was not a good defensive player; in fact, he was a brutal fielder. Coach Roper saw

that I could “glove” and he wanted to know if I was willing to make the switch from second base. I was not going to start at second: the incumbent senior was a solid all-around player. The conversation, then, was an all-out-offer for me to earn a starting position on the varsity squad of a Division I college baseball team in my freshman year *if* I’d switch to 3rd base.

Like the young fool that I was, I respectfully declined: **mistake #14**. I explained to coach that (a) I was really good at second base and I needed to stay sharp at that position. The team would need a 2nd baseman after my freshman year and I’d then be able to play there for three years after the current senior graduated; (b) I had not played third base in six years, since my last season in Little League; and (c) I’d had significant throwing-arm trouble over the years and was not confident that I could make the necessary throws; I might develop a sore arm that would prevent me from playing at all (reflect on the time that I had *not* spent pumping weights, in the dorm basement, leading up to the start of fall practice). At this point, the conversation, and my college baseball career, took a direct turn south.

Roper eyed me carefully, then said something to the effect of

“you know, out-of-state players like yourself cost us a lot of extra tuition money. We might just be better off staying with the in-state players that we can get more easily.”

Recall that I was still head strong, conceited, and had competed in one of the three major hotbeds of youth baseball talent in the country (Southern California—Texas and Arizona being the others). I responded:

“Coach, I’ve been practicing with the team now for a couple of weeks. I’ve seen the guys from Nevada play and I can tell you that none of them would have *started* on my high

school team and some of them might not have even *made* that team. They may be cheap, but ya' get what ya' pay for: they can't play a lick." **Mistake # 15**

Needless to say, Coach did not like hearing that. I was dismissed from the meeting, although I was allowed to continue practicing, and did, for another couple of weeks.

We were scheduled to move into the *Cow Palace* for winter practices as the weather was gradually turning worse. In the meantime, to conclude our daily outdoor workouts, we ran up and down the dirt and mud hills that surrounded our new, totally unfinished, home field. My last practice featured that closing exercise in rain, hail, and snow. I'd never come away from a practice more mud-caked, filthy, and miserable. In Long Beach we ended practices—and went inside—even during light rain, in order to protect our expensive leather gloves and not risk injury. I'd had enough, but I didn't quit the team that afternoon; fortuitously, that was the last scheduled outdoor session and we weren't to start practicing indoors until after Thanksgiving break. At that point, I said nothing about my intention to leave the team and the university as I had not yet fully made up my mind. Thanksgiving break provided the final impetus.

We now get to the *beginning* of the part where the wheels really start coming off (as if it hasn't already seemed that way). Unfortunately, this was not a quick, painless, decline. My downfall and collapse took nearly two years; the Reno portion marked only its beginning. Enter **mistake #16.**

The first step toward the brink began with a last minute, poorly planned and horribly executed, furtive visit to see Ann Raney in Keokuk over the Thanksgiving break. Our mail correspondence continued unabated after I moved from Long Beach to Reno. I wondered if I was falling in love and I wanted to investigate the situation. It seemed to me an important factor in

my decision-making about UNR and playing baseball. If I was going to get my life in order fast enough to have a love affair with Ann, who was going to graduate from high school the following spring then go off to college, I felt that I needed more assurance about our relationship. If I committed to playing ball at UNR, I wouldn't have as much flexibility as I would if I stopped playing and went home, but if I quit and went home—Oh, never mind. It didn't make much sense, then, either.

I could not bring myself to tell Roger and Evangeline the truth about the trip. We had planned for me to travel home over the break and they sent extra money to pay for a plane ticket. I called and lied to them over the phone, explaining that the break was just too short for that trip and that I'd decided to spend the break in San Francisco with Jack Burns, the resident assistant on the dorm floor where I lived. I brought Jack into the plan in case they called him at his house to see how I was doing. He was instructed to say that I was in the shower, then call me in Keokuk, after which I'd call home. I figured out a way that I could use the extra money to make the trip. I didn't have enough for plane or train fare but I could take a bus from SFX—if I could get west across the mountains. The bus route to Iowa did not travel through Reno so I had to go west in order to catch a bus headed east. I did not plan the return trip; I had enough money for the bus trip back but didn't book the return trip at that point: clearly, **mistake #17**.

I called Pat and Rita and asked if I could stay with them, told them about the trip being a secret, and asked if they could keep it from Jim and Veronica (so my aunt or uncle wouldn't tell Mom and Dad). Pat didn't like the plan, but reluctantly agreed; his youthful sneaky streak and Irish humor were still operative.

Everything about the trip, except the times that Ann and I spent together, was pretty much a disaster. I hitched a ride to SFX with a friend from school. He drove an older model pick-up truck without adequate heat. Although I dressed as warm as I could, I didn't have adequate shoes and socks and my feet almost suffered frostbite going over the pass; winter had fully set in across the Sierra Nevada range. The bus ride went well enough and Pat picked me up at the station in Keokuk. Luckily, in those days, the *Keokuk Transport Company/Keokuk Motor Bus* ran a transfer route from Fort Madison right into Keokuk. I did not know it then, but I later learned that *Keokuk Transport Company* was the outfit that Bob Walker owned and operated for a number of years. When mom first moved to Keokuk and the law firm didn't yet have a position for her, she worked at Bob's bus company for a short period of time.

The two-day visit with Ann was complicated by the fact that she used the break to have knee surgery. Playing on the high school tennis team, then taking a (non-sport) fall required the repair, so she was laid up. Our visits consisted of me going to the house and sitting with her while she convalesced. We watched the Thanksgiving football games together (Johnny Rogers and his undefeated Nebraska team overcame previously undefeated Oklahoma that day, then went on to win the National Championship). I completed the visit under cover of the lie and decided that the relationship with Ann was more actual than merely potential, pretty much sealing the deal on my decisions against continuing my baseball career and for leaving UNR after the fall semester.

My plans for the return trip to Reno appeared to take a turn in the positive direction when an old family friend (of both the Raneys and the O'Briens) offered to give me ride west with her. She was a student at the University of Northern Colorado so she could take me as far as Greeley,

almost ½ of the way back to Reno, for only \$25.00 toward gas money. From there I could make the short trip into Denver where there were lots of travel options for the rest of the trip. Such a deal! She was taking another friend back to school as well; soon the three of us were on our way. We drove the 850 miles straight through, leaving early in the morning and arriving after dark. **Mistakes #18 and #19** were right around the corner.

I had not thought to arrange for the night in Greeley: **#18**. My friend soon informed me that even though it was against her sorority's "house" regulations, they would set up a cot for me and I could sleep in the basement. The next day I was to make further travel arrangements but she could not be much help as UNC classes were back in session the next morning. I was, more or less, on my own with one additional catch: I was beginning to get sick. Overnight, I started feeling as though I was running a fever; I hardly slept and, by morning, was sure that I had a case of the flu (or worse).

The next morning, I got on the phone and discovered that my options were more limited than I had planned/hoped/suspected. I had to hurry downtown to catch the bus from Greeley to Denver; from there, I would be able to catch a plane for the 1,000-mile flight to Reno: **mistake #19**. My friend had time to drive and drop me at the bus station. I made the bus on time and felt a little more confident as we headed toward Denver. But once I arrived, panic set in as an unexpected fact hit me hard: the bus depot was in downtown Denver. I had no idea that Denver International Airport was 25 miles from downtown and the bus depot. Luckily, there was a United Airlines ticket office not far from the bus station. Not so luckily, the only flight to Reno that day (a) took almost all the money I had and (b) was scheduled to leave in about 90 minutes.

There I was—with air-flight ticket in hand, sicker than a dog, stranded in downtown Denver, almost out of money, without a clue.

I hailed a taxi and told the driver as much of my tale of woe as I could through his open window. I don't recall how much money I had left, but I showed it to him saying that he could have every last dime if he could get me to the airport in time for that flight. Darn good thing one didn't have check-in early for flights back then! He must have taken pity on me because told me to get in and he would do his best. That he did. I made the flight, Jack picked me up at the airport in Reno, and I spent the next three days in bed recovering from the worst case of walking pneumonia I've ever had.

After semi-recovering, I had to get on the phone and explain the lie and my decision to the folks. That was the most difficult long-distance phone call I've ever made. They were deeply offended, disappointed, and disgruntled. We didn't talk for long; I told them that I'd see them at Christmas break and they hung up.

Reno followed a dysfunctional schedule in those days (as did many other schools): the first semester was completed *after* Christmas break. Students returned for two weeks of classes and a week of final exams after the break, then took a semester break before returning yet again for the spring term. To complete the semester, I had to make the round trip between Reno and Long Beach for Christmas then return to Reno for classes and exams. Thereafter, I could go home to stay. Although I'd done some stupid stuff, I did not want to waste the entire semester. Despite dropping the Latin class, I was in good standing in twelve hours of coursework, so I returned to UNR and complete the classes before leaving school.

With the decision made, I needed to declare my situation to the baseball program. Before meeting with Coach Roper, I contacted Gary Powers, the only assistant coach that I had bonded with, and went to his apartment for a nighttime conversation about my decision. I explained my love life (I'm sure he didn't think much of that angle), but more importantly, I explained my feelings about playing college ball. Truth of the matter was, and had long been part of my thinking, I hadn't planned to play college baseball: I was focused on playing in the major leagues. But I'd come to realize that dream was, literally and figuratively, over my head. I was 5'5½" tall and weighed about 128 lbs. At the time, the smallest player in the big leagues was Freddie Patek, a diminutive shortstop who was quite a bit bigger than me at a little over 5'8" and nearly 175 lbs. Patek was the smallest player in the major leagues since Eddie Gaedel, a "little person" who was foisted upon MLB for a day by Bill Veeck as part of a promotional stunt. I simply wasn't big enough to play in the major leagues.

On top of that, the earlier haughty conversation with Roper caused me to realize that I wasn't so much playing on a baseball scholarship as I was being paid by the school's baseball program; their support was putting me through college. When Roper threatened my scholarship, I decided that I did not want to risk a college education on my athletic skills as it didn't appear that my partial scholarship was guaranteed for 4 years. Plus, we were sure to get a new coach soon; another unpredictable variable. I was determined to graduate from college as priority number one and there was that language requirement. The plans I was starting to make regarding Ann Raney required a college degree and graduating college had long been a primary goal in my life-plan. Finally, many of the baseball alums took jobs downtown at the casinos post-graduation. I had zero intention of ever working at a casino.

Coach Powers listened empathically, tried to talk me out of the decision to leave, but understood and remained kind toward me. I never forgot that and decades later, when email became commonplace, I contacted Gary (who was, by then, the most legendary head coach in UNR history) and thanked him for the humane treatment that he had shown me. To my surprise, he remembered me in a whimsical way. I had been the first of many students to confide in him about “bailing” from a baseball scholarship.

The day after chatting with Gary Powers, I met with the coach Roper and told him that I would not join the team in the Cow Palace for winter workouts; I was leaving school after the fall term. I did not ask for a formal release from the scholarship/program as I had no intention of playing college baseball in Long Beach (or anywhere else for that matter). I knew that, having passed on summer ball and missed fall practices, I had zero chance to catch up with the players already at Long Beach City College. Obviously, I had no offers at other four-year schools and I had decided against playing college ball anyway. It was over. Not contacting the LBCC coach was **mistake #20**: Leaving my options open and decisions about my baseball ability to the quality of my play would have relieved later feelings of regret for having ended my playing days abruptly, especially since my time on the field at UNR had confirmed that I was college baseball material.

Although my baseball career ended, my time at UNR was not complete. I had to get to and then through Christmas break, then return and complete exams and the term. In many ways, the wheels continued coming off.

Not going to practice in the afternoon left me with too much time on my hands. I started gambling (in the dorm) expanded my drinking and smoking habits. By the time I headed home

for the holidays, I owed a Nye Hall-mate a couple-hundred-bucks in gambling debts (**mistake #21**: never gamble against the live-in “dorm shark”) and I was less than fit both physically and mentally. I caught rides back and forth, for Christmas, with a female friend from the dorm who also lived in the LA area. My folks were not very understanding over my self-induced demise (not to mention the recent lies about Thanksgiving), so the holidays at home were very rough. While there, I visited LBCC and arranged to start classes in the spring term, quite against my long-standing negative opinions of the place. After completing exams, the trip to pack up my college stuff at Reno and return to Long Beach with an almost silent father, was excruciating.

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