

Punks in the outfield

I don't recall how the final out was made, whether it was a ground ball or a pop fly. What I do remember is that when the game was over we were undefeated. We danced around the pitcher's mound and tossed our gloves in the air as Sister Sledge's "We Are Family" blasted from my dad's tinny cassette player in the dugout. It was 1980, and the pint-sized T-ball Pirates were champions, just like our namesake in Pittsburgh the year before (when Sister Sledge's disco hit was the team's theme song).

I didn't realize then that at 8 years old I had just experienced the pinnacle of my athletic career. In the following years I would have occasional moments of mediocrity, sometimes display elevated flashes of competence, but for the most part I was relegated to a career of bench-warming and "Team Spirit" awards after that first glorious season.

Not since those halcyon days of T-ball glory have I been a baseball fan. After my prepubescent affection for baseball passed, it gave way to a newfound interest in girls, intoxicants and loud music.

It is in this space—the intersection of baseball and decadence—where author John Albert makes his first appearance on the literary landscape.

Albert's stellar debut is *Wrecking Crew*, a memoir filled with comedy, tragedy, triumph, healthy doses of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll—and amateur baseball. Hitting the shelves on Aug. 16, it is the story of the Griffith Park Pirates, a team of former musicians, junkies and assorted misfits and miscreants, who came together on a baseball diamond in Los Angeles and traded in their addictions for America's pastime.

Eventually the team won a league championship, but that first season the Griffith Park Pirates had more tattoos than RBIs.

"At the end of the day, it's about joking around in the dugout and playing," says Albert. "I mean, it's better to win than to lose, for sure, but we're OK with it."

For Albert, the road from hardcore to hardball was long and perilous, with its origins in Los Angeles' early-'80s punk scene. While still a teenager, Albert co-founded the seminal hardcore group Christian Death, which propelled him into a world of hard drugs and dangerous behavior. Albert later joined legendary punk band Bad Religion before going into rehab in 1985. The road to recovery was long, and after years of battling with his demons, Albert realized he was also fighting the aging process and its accompanying identity issues for a would-be rock star.

"If you don't become incredibly rich and famous, and you don't die, you just end up 40 years old at a nightclub with a

bunch of young kids," says Albert. "Once you grow older, you become more invisible, and you have less of a place. I think that's what a lot of us were trying to figure out. We were living like teenagers, but we weren't teenagers. I just think that what was romantic and glamorous in your 20s is kind of sad in your mid-30s."

But *Wrecking Crew* is not another gratuitous, self-serving jaunt into glorified drug use and self-centered awakenings. Addiction bats cleanup in this lineup, and Albert's portrayal is as accurate a depiction as you'll find outside of clinical journals. He doesn't attempt to shock with grisly heroin chic, nor does he offer a tidy ending with an appropriate ratio of heroes and martyrs. Having lived with addiction, he presents recovery in its true form: as a process, not an event.

"You definitely wouldn't be able to say that everyone lived happily ever after," says Albert. "People are still periodically destroying their lives and getting them back together."

For Albert, his life has come together in unexpected ways. After playing with the Pirates for a few seasons, Albert submitted a two-paragraph write-up on the team to the L.A. Weekly. The paper asked him to turn it into a feature story, which ultimately won the Best of the West Journalism Best Sports Writing award. Albert is now a regular contributor to the newspaper, along with other magazines.

Though new to the writing game, Albert is able to avoid many of the rookie errors that can tank debut outings, particularly with a book as self-involved as *Wrecking Crew*. As much a lead character as any of his teammates, Albert could easily have imposed too much of his own backstory into the book. Instead, he reserves his own indulgences for between-inning entertainment rather than the starting lineup. The result is an entertaining book that has been described as the Bad News Bears meet punk rock.

While this description touches on the basics, it leaves out the most significant element of the story: salvation. *Wrecking Crew* leads off with the line, "You never know what's going to save you." While it may not be a story of clear-cut happy endings and innocence regained, it is a reminder that salvation can be found in unexpected places—and that victory isn't measured by runs, hits and errors, but through smaller triumphs that don't show up in the box score.

The only thing missing from *Wrecking Crew* is a tinny cassette recording of "We Are Family." For Albert and the Griffith Park Pirates, you'd better make that a remix with the word "dysfunctional" added to the chorus. **2**

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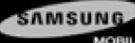
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