

# 1<sup>st</sup> INNING

## Here Comes “Jeeee-sus!”

Ten minutes, maybe.

That would be all the time granted for an audience with the almighty, and those 10 minutes would be shared by five sports writers and a radio broadcaster.

Each had been hoping for an opportunity to conduct an interview, but instead ended up being compressed – along with the competition – into one lone time slot so that each of the four local television stations could have its own five minutes for an interview. A few more minutes were set aside for an exclusive “one-on-one” with the local newspaper.

These were the ground rules.

And don’t dare try to ask for more.

There would be no deviations.

That was the edict put forth on April 6, 2010 by Terry Byrom, the Harrisburg Senators’ director of media relations. On this mild Tuesday afternoon, a beleaguered Byrom dealt with a challenge like none other in his first five seasons as the team’s front man and radio voice. In seasons past, he only needed to handle the local newspaper and four TV crews for the Senators’ first preseason workout on City Island. There had been no special requests then.

On this day, though, Byrom had to deal with a media turnout four times larger than usual, and each outlet wanted something from him.

Patience waning, Byrom’s face grew longer by the minute. He seemed flustered.

Then again, he had never had to introduce a god to the media.

In this case, the deity stood 6-foot-4, weighed 230 pounds, sported a little billy goat of a beard and came with a blemish on his left cheek.

No one particularly cared about his looks. The much ballyhooed Stephen Strasburg was arriving on City Island with a Heaven-blessed right arm that cranked out fastballs timed in excess of 100 mph.

Strasburg was baseball's top pitching prospect in 2010, its most hyped pitching prospect since Mark Prior turned pro out of the University of Southern California in 2001.

Strasburg was scheduled to make his professional debut the following Sunday in Altoona, Pa., where the Senators would open their 24<sup>th</sup> season since rejoining the Class AA Eastern League in 1987.

Only one other game in modern franchise history had been as greatly anticipated. That came Opening Day on the island in 1987, when pro baseball returned to Harrisburg after a 35-year absence.

Only one other player had been met with such interest and awe – and that was 120 years earlier when Frank Grant, one of baseball's premier players in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, was brought to the island by horse, carriage and hype to join the Harrisburg Ponies.

On that day, Grant was met by enthusiastic masses lining the new People's Bridge that led from downtown to the island. Not knowing quite how to react to adulation from total strangers, the man who many felt was the finest black ballplayer of his day simply doffed his cap in appreciation.

Strasburg was greeted not by adoring fans but by a gaggle of gawking media. Knowing exactly how to react, he skillfully responded with ready-made answers to the questions he knew he might face.

But that was when Strasburg finally got around to answering them. He was running way behind, thereby rendering Byrom's carefully crafted interview schedule useless.

Jason Bristol, the Emmy Award-winning sports director from Harrisburg's CBS affiliate, was among the first scheduled for an interview.

He spent more time shaking his head, pursing his lips and pointing to his watch than he would get talking to Strasburg.

"This is supposed to be my time now," Bristol said. "Where is he?"

Alas, Strasburg was busily trying to find his glove.

When the 21-year-old Californian finally stepped out of the dugout and onto the field he was promptly led by Byrom and a front-office underling to the first waiting TV camera. After five minutes there, Strasburg was led to the next TV interview, followed by a third and fourth.

The writers came last.

As Strasburg was shepherded from one interview to the next, his two dozen new teammates sat in the dugout and watched, left to entertain themselves while waiting for the dog-and-pony show to end and their workout to begin.

Occasionally one of them was pulled from the dugout to be asked a perfunctory question or two about the upcoming season before being asked more questions about – who else? – Stephen Strasburg.

This was how the Senators' front office – with guidance from the Washington Nationals, their major league affiliate – handled the early moments of Strasburg's introduction to his new city, and to the local media covering him.

Strasburg, though, already was well known.

He had been a collegiate All-American at San Diego State, a member of the United States' Olympic baseball team in 2008 and the first overall pick of the 2009 amateur draft.

Only a few weeks before showing up in Harrisburg, Strasburg experienced his first major league spring training with the Nationals.

He already was known to his prospective teammates there, too. Upon first seeing Strasburg pitch in camp at Viera, Florida, Nationals center fielder Nyjer Morgan announced in awe to all, "*Jeeee-sus!*"

So much for blending in.

"It's to be expected," Strasburg nonchalantly said. "Not too many guys have had this kind of hype coming out of the draft, so I just have to live with it and keep things simple."

But how was that possible, especially when chatty teammates refer to you as "Jeeee-sus," and the media continue asking you to comment on that throughout camp?

The question again was broached on his first round of interviews in Harrisburg.

"Not that again," Strasburg said softly. "Now, there's no hype there, is there? ... (Morgan) was just messing with me a little bit."

Truth be known, Strasburg had welcomed Morgan's comment.

"It was good," he admitted, "because it made me feel comfortable."

With the Senators, Strasburg was ready to embark on a career that would quickly take him to the major leagues, where he would win every game he pitched, appear annually in the All-Star Game and become the first unanimous selection to the Hall of Fame.

Or so said the pundits.

And why not? While at San Diego State, Strasburg had become a bigger celebrity than the team's coach – and the city's most iconic sports figure – Hall of Fame outfielder Tony Gwynn.

"I'm just trying to fit in here," Strasburg said to the group of writers who had waited nearly an hour for their audience with him on the island.

"I'm just trying to go with the flow."

An almost impossible task.

Outside of wearing the same uniform and playing for the same organization, Strasburg and his new Harrisburg teammates had little in common, and likely never would.

None of them had been the first overall pick of the annual amateur draft, as Strasburg had been in 2009.

None of them had been in a position to command anything remotely close to the \$15.1 million contract Strasburg received late in the summer of 2009 from the Nationals, who waited for the spring of 2010 to start him on his professional career with their Class AA affiliate on City Island.

And certainly none of them had ever been considered a perennial All-Star, future Cy Young Award winner and – dare it be said? – Hall of Famer before ever playing in a pro game.

None of his teammates could claim his All-American status, or a spot on the 2008 Olympic team, or having been on countless magazine covers. Nor could Strasburg's first pro pitching coach, Randy Tomlin, the onetime Harrisburg left-hander and Pittsburgh Pirate who in 2010 was beginning his third season working with the Senators' staff.

During his playing career a couple of decades earlier, Tomlin had been the virtual anti-Strasburg. He was a 5-foot-9, 179-pound lefty who relied on changing speeds, nibbling at corners and fielders behind him making plays.

Tomlin's plans for handling Strasburg were simple: Watch, enjoy and dispatch glowing reports about the right-hander to the home office.

"Stephen's a great pitcher now," Tomlin said in the spring of 2010. "He understands the stuff he has. I can try to help him with the experience I have in the game, like game management and what it's going to take for him to pitch in the big leagues as far as adjustments and game situations. I can help him with stuff like that."



**Great expectations accompanied Stephen Strasburg to City Island in 2010**

The rest of the stuff – the ultimate combination of a ridiculously fast 100-mph fastball and a timing-killer 79-mph changeup – could not be taught.

Strasburg knew it.

Tomlin knew it.

Everyone else knew it.

If the pundits are right, Strasburg will turn out to be greater than any of the seven Hall of Famers who once summered on the island – Hughie Jennings, Frank Grant, Vic Willis, Billy Hamilton, Chief Bender, Oscar Charleston and Ben Taylor.

Greater than Spottswood Poles, the outfielder who was so good in the early 1900s that he often was called the “black Ty Cobb.”

Greater than Vladimir Guerrero, the right fielder who obliterated Eastern League pitching in 1996 while leading the Senators to the first of four straight Class AA Eastern League titles.

These were the yardsticks from Harrisburg’s past by which Strasburg would be judged for as long as he played on City Island.

Not that Strasburg had ever heard of City Island before seeing it, or knew of the storied teams and Hall of Famers who had played there since 1890.

“I’m just concerned with what I’m doing now,” Strasburg said, then diplomatically added, “but it’s obviously cool to play in parks where there’s been a lot of history.”

Before he would add to the island’s history, Strasburg had to endure the team’s annual preseason media day, which included a local radio announcer shoving a slip of paper into Strasburg’s right hand and asking him to read three lines into a tape recorder.

*“This is Stephen Strasburg, and you’re listening to Senators baseball on 1460, The Ticket.”*

*“Senators baseball on 1460, The Ticket.”*

*“I’m Stephen Strasburg, and this is Senators baseball on 1460, The Ticket.”*

Strasburg did everything in one take with perfect elocution and returned the slip of paper to the radio man, whose work was done for the day.

And just how many similar non-compensated plugs had he given over the last couple of years?

Strasburg rolled his eyes.

“Too many.”

By now, Strasburg had grown accustomed to being steered from one interview to another, asked the same non-probing questions for the umpteenth time and coming up with variations of the same answers.

“It would be nice to get settled in,” he said, “but you guys (in the media) have a job to do, too. I understand that. You guys have to fill up that piece of paper, so I’ll do my best to help you.”

On his terms.

What the media quickly learned in 2010 – first at Class AA Harrisburg, then Triple-A Syracuse and, ultimately, Washington in the major leagues – were the “Strasburg Rules.”

After the initial crush at media day on the island, Strasburg never again conducted a one-on-one interview while playing in Harrisburg. He was made available to the media only after the games he pitched – and that availability was confined to an orchestrated press conference monitored by the Nationals.

Just like on media day, there would be no deviations. Reporters knew better than to ask for more.

Not that Strasburg seemed to care.

“I don’t think too many people look at newspapers anymore,” Strasburg said mere moments after telling the writers that he appreciated their jobs.

He then admitted he was among those who no longer relied on newspapers for information.

“My dad does all of that,” Strasburg said. “He does the reading. He keeps me updated. I try to keep away from all of that stuff.”

That stuff would include his \$15.1 million contract, which became a lightning rod for disgruntled fans in Harrisburg who thought that for the money Strasburg was being paid he should have been willing to give them an autograph or two or 12.

Strasburg frustrated some fans even before the season started by arriving late to the team’s preseason banquet and, once there, segregating himself from the majority of the fans.

That was by design.

“Our players don’t typically generate mob interest,” said Senators team president Kevin Kulp. “Our players can go to the batting cage with the back gate open and nobody is going to hound them, but with a guy like Strasburg everything changes.”

The front office’s approach to a home game became two-fold: Use Strasburg’s presence as the carrot to sell tickets to as many fans as possible but, once that was accomplished, keep those same fans from smothering him with requests for autographs, photos and locks of his hair.

“It’s so rare that a guy comes here with that much notoriety,” Kulp said. “Usually, you don’t know who these guys are until they’re long gone. You can say, ‘Oh, Ryan Howard was here,’ but he was just Ryan Howard

then. Unless it's a major league rehab appearance, you never have this much interest.

"This is one of those things where we have to be smart about the situations we put him in, so that he can do his job," Kulp said. "We just can't throw him to the wolves. I can't treat him like every other player, because people aren't going to treat him like every other player."

During his brief time in Harrisburg, Strasburg was vilified for not giving out more autographs. The same fate would befall Bryce Harper, the 18-year-old outfielder who was mercilessly hounded by autograph seekers after joining the Senators midway through the 2011 season.

Both signed autographs, but not as many – or as readily – as some fans demanded.

The Nationals understandably wanted to limit outside contact with Strasburg and later Harper, preferring that their top two prospects concentrate more on their craft while in Harrisburg.

"It's a job coming here every day," Strasburg said before his inevitable promotion to a higher league after only five starts for the Senators in 2010.

Not that you can truly blame players for being cynical when it comes to handing out autographs, since what they sign tonight could be up for auction on eBay by tomorrow morning, if not sooner.

Nationals jerseys signed by Strasburg sold for \$200 or more on eBay; signed baseball cards routinely went for more than \$250. One single-issued card issued by Topps for its Bowman series attracted 84 bidders on eBay before selling for \$16,403 – \$400 more than the cost in 2010 for a year's tuition at Penn State's main campus.

Within two months of his arrival in Harrisburg, there were 3,056 Strasburg-related items for sale on eBay. At the time, his items were only 34 fewer than the total for Hall of Famer and noted recluse Sandy Koufax, and two more than those posted for Tim Lincecum, the two-time reigning Cy Young Award winner.

The profit-taking mentality of some eBay-driven fans also extended to the Senators' front office, which twice got caught up in the hype – first with Strasburg and then a year later with Harper.

Senators general manager Randy Whitaker openly and understandably gushed about the special T-shirts to be ordered, the customized jerseys to be produced and, of course, the money to be made.

“We didn’t build anything around Strasburg,” Whitaker said. “This just kind of happened. Now, did we do anything to adjust the merchandise in our store? Darn right we did.”

To further hype Strasburg, the password for the wireless Internet signal to the press box at the start of the 2010 season was changed to “100mphfastball.”

“After he leaves here,” mused one press box wag, “they’ll probably change it to ‘Tryingtogetto500.’”

On May 1—the eve of Strasburg’s final 2010 start on the island—Senators public address announcer Chris Andree read from a script prepared by the front office.

*“We invite you back tomorrow afternoon for a 2 p.m. game with Stephen Strasburg on the mound. Your chance to see the 2009 Number One draft pick. Limited tickets are available. ... It seems like a big day tomorrow.”*

Andree read the announcement six times that night, not the least bit worried how Strasburg’s less-publicized teammates felt about playing subordinates to Strasburg’s stardom.

“They tolerate it, because they realize he’s legit and he’s not going to be around here for long,” Andree said. “Besides, what are they going to do? Call him out?”

The Nationals decided Strasburg needed only five starts for Harrisburg, where he went 3-1 with a 1.64 ERA and 27 strikeouts in just 22 innings. He was even better at Class AAA Syracuse, going 4-1 with a 1.08 ERA in six starts while striking out 38 in just 33 and one-third innings.

Strasburg’s major league debut came June 8, 2010, when he made the Pittsburgh Pirates look like the Class AAA team they were often accused of resembling.

The Nationals drew a crowd of 40,315 that night as Strasburg struck out 14, walked none and allowed only two runs on four hits over seven innings.

Every strikeout was called by Bob Costas for the MLB Network, with Jim Kaat and John Smoltz—two pretty fair pitchers in their time—dissecting Strasburg’s every step, tic and pitch.

Strasburg’s night began with a standing ovation and ended the same way. More standing O’s followed as Strasburg, who spent less than two months with Harrisburg and Syracuse, continued to fill Nationals Park.



**Autograph hunters on City Island gravitated to Stephen Strasburg in 2010 and 2011**

In Strasburg's seven home starts in 2010, the Nationals averaged crowds of 33,446. For their other 74 home dates, their average was nearly 12,000 less at 21,540.

Major League Baseball would report that Strasburg's No. 37 Nationals jersey was the game's top-selling jersey in June 2010. MLB's bean counters said they believed Strasburg may have been the first player to top the list for jersey sales in his first month in the majors.

While everyone in the Nationals' front office was convinced that Strasburg as a rookie already physically possessed all the tools to be a perennial All-Star – not to mention box-office gold – others inside and outside the organization worried about his composure on the field.

What would happen, they wondered, when some batters actually got a hit or two off Strasburg?

Those who were concerned quickly received an answer.

In only his second major league start at Cleveland, Strasburg seemed more concerned with his landing spot on the pitcher's mound than he was

by the Indians' lineup. He would get pushed around in other starts against Atlanta, Cincinnati and Florida.

No huge red flags; more like a white napkin with polka dots.

"Sometimes, his body language is awful," said one high-ranking Nationals official. "He's a baby. He lived at home when he was in college. Look, he's a great kid, but he's not very worldly."

At least one Hall of Famer – Bob Feller – thought Strasburg, at that early juncture of his career, was as much sizzle as substance.

"Call me when he wins his first 100," Feller told reporters after watching Strasburg's mound-pawing performance in Cleveland.

Feller could relate to Strasburg's enormous talent, though. He had been like Strasburg more than 50 years before Strasburg was born.

Feller, also a right-hander, went 5-3 in 14 appearances for the Indians as a 17-year-old rookie in 1936 and would have 31 career victories in the majors before his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. Feller, too, knew how to fire a baseball, throwing as fast if not faster than Strasburg in an era before radar guns.

"If you start believing all that hype and attention, that's the end of your career," Feller said. "You can't believe all that. It's 24/7 now on hype, but there's nothing wrong with that. All sports are show business now. ... The game itself in all sports is almost incidental to what goes on around it in merchandising. It's a different world."

The perfect little world that Strasburg was supposed to have in the major leagues was suddenly and dramatically altered on Aug. 21, 2010 in Philadelphia.

With one out in the bottom of the fifth inning, Strasburg threw a 1-1 changeup to the Phillies' Domonic Brown, winced in pain and immediately began shaking his right arm.

Strasburg subsequently learned he had torn the ulnar collateral ligament in his pitching elbow.

What followed was Tommy John surgery, named for the Senators 2002 pitching coach who in the mid-1970s had his playing career revived with a then-experimental ligament transplant procedure to repair his damaged left arm.

Today the surgery is commonplace in baseball and often results in pitchers coming back as good as new. Sometimes it takes a year, sometimes two.

*“Our players don’t typically generate mob interest. Our players can go to the batting cage with the back gate open and nobody is going to hound them, but with a guy like Strasburg everything changes.”*

*Senators team president Kevin Kulp*

Strasburg returned to City Island on Sept. 1, 2011 – 362 days after his surgery, a remarkably short recovery time considering his rehab start for the Senators was preceded by five other tune-ups with Washington’s Class A affiliates Hagerstown and Potomac, as well Triple-A Syracuse.

The night was like none other in the century-plus history of baseball on the island.

The chosen one was pitching again for the Senators, if only for one more time.

Future Hall of Famer Ivan Rodriguez, in Harrisburg on his own injury rehab assignment, was catching.

Not that the Senators needed any help selling tickets for the game.

They already had a large presale for fans wanting to see the return of a wildly popular, between-innings act known as “Cowboy Monkeys.” The game also was held on one of the team’s “Thirsty Thursdays,” so beer was on sale for \$2 a cup.

The combination of Strasburg pitching, Rodriguez catching, monkeys riding atop dogs chasing goats and cheap beer flowing led to a sellout crowd of 8,637 – the largest ever to watch a baseball game on the island.

Strasburg worked six shutout innings, allowing one hit while walking none and striking out four in Harrisburg’s 10-0 victory over Portland. The victory clinched the Senators’ first division title since 1997.

Fifty-four of Strasburg’s 71 pitches were strikes. Thirty-seven of those pitches were clocked between 94 and 99 mph. Twelve of his pitches over the first three innings were called strikes as Portland’s batters appeared content to take pitches so they could one day tell their wives and girlfriends how they stood tall against a god’s thunderbolts.

The proudest Sea Dog may have been Dan Butler, whose double down the left-field line to lead off the sixth inning accounted for Portland's lone hit off Strasburg.

As it was, Strasburg did not allow a baserunner until there were two outs in the fifth inning. That's when Jeremy Hazelbaker reached base after his billowing jersey was clipped by a 97-mph fastball.

Had the pitch actually hit him, Hazelbaker might have ended up in the ER with fractured ribs.

The outing was the longest, and easily the best, of Strasburg's six rehab starts in 2011. In his five minor league tests prior to rejoining the Senators, Strasburg had struck out 25 and walked just three in 14 and one-third innings. That was good. He had also allowed eight earned runs in those five games for a 5.02 ERA. That was not so good.

After his final rehab start – just as it had been when he had first arrived on City Island 17 months earlier – Strasburg was escorted by public relations handlers to a makeshift press conference beneath the grandstand. Strasburg talked of his recovery and of what awaited him next in the majors.

“My work isn't done,” he said. “I need to keep on grinding, finish the season strong and go into the offseason healthy and see what kind of pitcher I am in 2012. If these six innings are any indication, it's looking pretty good.”

Given his abilities now and his projected path to success, that “pretty good” for Strasburg is better than most pitchers' “exceptionally good.”

Even if he didn't admit it publicly, Strasburg embraced all of the attention – the demands from the media for his time, the requests from the fans for his scrawl on a baseball, the expectations from his teammates to lead them to the World Series.

Strasburg often was reminded as much by his college coach, Tony Gwynn – a first-ballot Hall of Famer and one of the game's greatest hitters.

“He said to me, ‘Would you rather be batting .350 and having everybody want to talk to you or would you rather be batting .250 and not having anybody want to talk to you?’ ” Strasburg said.

“The bottom line is as a competitor you want to go out there and be successful. And, if you're successful, you have to deal with people, because people want to see who you are.”