

The oddball antics and crowd-pleasing rituals of a dirt-licking, tooth-brushing minor-league poet.

STEVEN JOHN (TURK) WENDELL, A PITCHER FOR THE Iowa Cubs, an AAA farm team run by the Chicago Cubs, is signing autographs for fans in the stands along the left-field foul line of Sec Taylor Stadium in Des Moines. It is late in the afternoon on the Fourth of July. The stadium is filled with more than 11,000 people who have come to watch the Iowa Cubs play the New Orleans Zephyrs at 6:30 and then, after the game, to watch fireworks.

Wendell's teammates are warming up in left field. He is the only player standing in the dirt, close to the stands. He is a good-looking young man, about 6 feet tall, 185 pounds, with an almost childlike smile. His fans are mostly children between the ages of 4 and 14. They are clustered around him, like children around the Pied Piper, and they are chanting in their shrill voices: "Turk! Turk! Turk!"

"The kids love Turk," says a gruff-looking man named Steve, who sports a beard and lots of tattoos on his forearms. "He signs every autograph. He takes them fishing. He plays ball in the parking lot. Seventy percent of the players won't even bother with them. Have you seen Turk's truck? The kids love it."

Wendell's truck is a black, 4-by-4 Chevrolet. His front license plate reads "Turk's #13" and is beside a drawing of Jesus on the Cross. Inside, the cab looks as if a Santeria sacrifice had been performed there. A raccoon skin runs the length of the dashboard; a coyote skin runs the length of the seat's backrest. Suspended from the ceiling on strings are two baseballs. Hanging from the dashboard mirror are a rosary and an Indian medallion trimmed in bird feathers.

"Oh, everybody's got superstitions," Steve says. "That doesn't bother us."

Dorothy, a middle-aged woman watching Wendell sign autographs, says: "That stuff they said about Turk on Chicago TV, that really, really upset me. They said he was a weirdo because of his antics on the mound. His antics don't bother us." She looks up, furious now. "They might have bothered the people in Chicago, though."

Two weeks before the Zephyr game, after fashioning a 5-4 record with Iowa, Turk Wendell was called up to pitch for the major league Cubs.

"It was gonna be so much fun," he says. "Pitching in the big leagues! The fans oohing and aahing with every pitch."

In his first two starts with the Cubs, Wendell lasted less than six innings. He gave up an average of 14.40 earned runs per game and lost both starts. After Wendell's second start, which lasted only 1½ innings, his Chicago Cubs manager, Jim Lefebvre, said: "He's got a live arm, good stuff, and no command whatsoever. He's so charged up."

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Lefebvre was partly referring to Wendell's pitching and partly to his antics on the mound. One of Wendell's major league opposing pitchers said that every time he took the mound after Wendell left it, he found it littered with chewed-up bits of licorice and little crosses drawn in the dirt. When Wendell stood on the mound and waved to his center fielder, that player pointed his index finger at his head and made a circular motion to indicate Wendell was crazy.

"I felt cheated," Wendell says. "Like I wasn't part of the team. But I have to be myself no matter what."

His Chicago teammates also found it strange that he brought deer antlers into the clubhouse. "But it was a four-point buck!" Wendell says. "I'd just sit there and stare at it in awe. Wow!"

By the time Wendell made his third and final major league start, he was warned by the team management (which had also hinted that he was headed back to Iowa) to tone down his antics, which, they felt, interfered with his pitching. To prove the Cubs wrong, Wendell went out that night and pitched a fine major league game against the San Diego Padres. He allowed only six hits, two earned runs, one walk and struck out four batters in 7½ innings. When he left the game in the middle of the eighth inning, he sprinted toward the third-base line, made a little balletic leap, hung suspended in midair, clicked the heels of his spikes like an old soft-shoe man and returned to earth amid a thunderous roar of approval from the home-team San Diego fans.

"I'll be back," he said. Then he was promptly dispatched back to Des Moines where the fans do not see him as a nut or a flake or crazy, but rather simply as "The Turk," the most original, engaging and likable ballplayer to come along in years.

They have T-shirts to prove it — white T-shirts bought in the Iowa Cubs gift shop, with a drawing of Turk in an Iowa uniform on the front, surrounded by other little drawings of Turk's peculiarities, and across the bottom bold red letters that read "Turk's Quirks." Those "Quirks" have already made Wendell a legend in baseball at the age of 26.

WENDELL'S DORM ROOM IN COLLEGE was neat, almost compulsively so. The posters hung just right on the walls, the bed as tightly made as a Marine's in boot camp, the 30-gallon tropical fish tank polished with Windex. The college admissions office filmed it, with him studying at his desk — a joke, he says, since he rarely studied, afraid that it would detract from his pitching. The college showed that film to prospective students as an enticement to enroll. The admissions office did not, however, film the feeding of those tropical fish, which always drew a crowd of students when Wendell dropped a few live goldfish into the tank. The waters instantly churned white, then pink, as the goldfish were torn to pieces by his pet piranhas.

It was also in college (Quinnipiac, in Hamden, Conn., where he won a baseball scholarship) that he picked up one of his trademark strange habits. In the time-honored tradition of baseball pranks, his teammates would spit



The toothsome Turk brushes after almost every chew.

Play ball! It's the Iowa Cubs away at the Louisville Red Birds. Starting pitcher for Iowa, Turk Wendell. 1 Taking the field, he is full of energy, and of black licorice (Brach's). 2 A leap of faith over the third-base line on the way to the mound. 3 Turk crouches while his catcher still stands, a signal to get going. 4 Warmup delivery seems fundamental. 5 A prayer delivered in the direction of center field. 6 An about-face and Turk scratches three crosses into the dirt. 7 Then he licks his finger clean (except for licorice juice). 8 Turk waves to his center fielder, who is supposed to wave back. If he doesn't, Turk waves to the right fielder, etc. When someone finally waves back, he's ready to pitch. Play ball! At last! (Iowa wins the game, 1-0. Turk goes six innings, giving up two hits, no walks and striking out four.