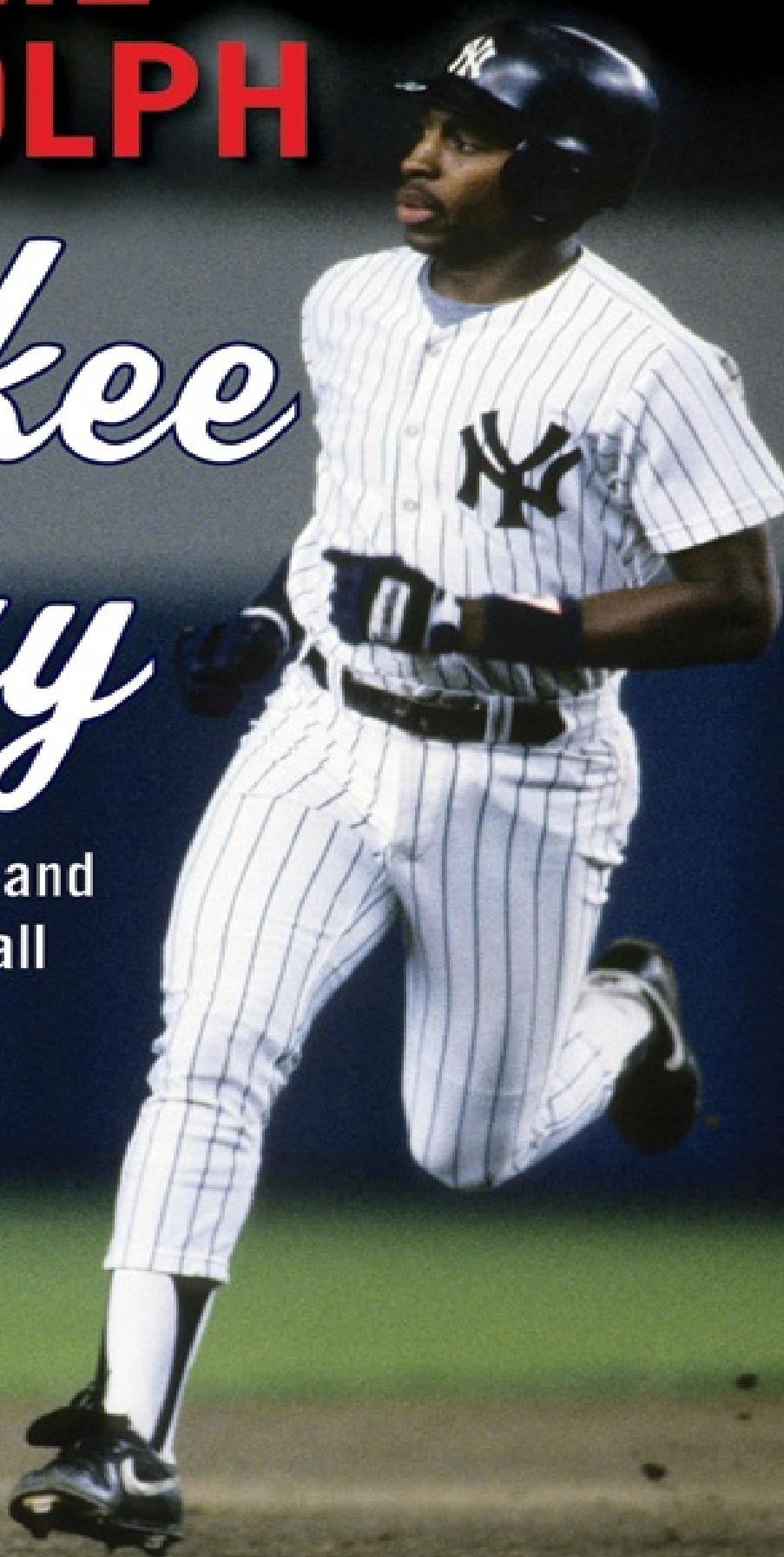


**WILLIE
RANDOLPH**

The
Yankee
Way

Playing, Coaching, and
My Life in Baseball



The **Yankee** *Way*

PLAYING, COACHING, AND
MY LIFE IN BASEBALL



WILLIE RANDOLPH



itbooks

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Dedication

FOR MY WIFE, GRETCHEN,
YOUR LOVE AND SUPPORT MADE THIS ALL POSSIBLE

FOR MY MOM AND DAD, WHOSE WORK ETHIC AND
DETERMINATION TAUGHT ME TO BE A BETTER BALLPLAYER

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For the Love of the Game

In one way or another, I've been involved in the game of professional baseball since I was first drafted in 1972. That's more than forty years. In that time I've seen a lot of changes in the game, everything from stadiums to salaries, from equipment to egos.

One thing has remained constant.

I've always loved the game of baseball.

Still do.

And that doesn't mean that I loved the game only when I was participating in one of the eleven World Series championships I was blessed to take part in. I loved it when I was an eighteen-year-old warm-weather city kid freezing my butt off and enduring one of the worst slumps of my life in what seemed the frozen tundra of Thetford Mines, Ontario. I loved it when I was a twenty-two-year-old kid watching Chris Chambliss lead off the bottom of the ninth in game 5 of the American League Championship Series (ALCS) against the Royals with the loudest 372-foot home run ever hit. The ball carried the Yankees back into the Series for the first time in a dozen years and triggered the wildest celebration I have ever seen. I even loved the game when the dreaded Boston Red Sox did the unthinkable and climbed up off the mat and won four straight against us in the 2004 ALCS. Fifteen days later, I was still in love with the game when, at the age of fifty, I became the first black manager in New York baseball history.

And yes, even in the early morning hours of June 18, 2008, when Omar Minaya was too upset to say the words "You're fired," I still loved the game and still wanted to be a part of it.

I would have loved the game and the city of New York even if I'd never advanced to play anywhere beyond the sandlots of Prospect Park in Brooklyn. The taste of a cold Champagne Cocktail drunk outside of Jimmy's Grocery Store to celebrate the first victory with the Bullets (my first youth league team) might not be as memorable to some as a champagne shower in the bowels of old Yankee Stadium, but for me the memory is just as fresh.

The saying goes that the heart knows what it wants. From the first time I saw and heard Major League games on the radio and television, I knew exactly what I wanted to do—play that game and have my name called. I can still hear the voices of Ralph Kiner and Lindsey Nelson, still feel the powdery tar and the stale snap of baseball card chewing gum, and still hear the echoes of me and my buddies haggling over trades as I coveted my Donn Clendenon, Tommie Agee, Roy McMillan, and Jerry Koosman cards. No day was better than the ones I spent at Shea Stadium as a kid. Money was always

tight around the Randolph house, so we had to do some turnstile jumping and take advantage of some of the charity programs that offered neighborhood kids free tickets. Regardless of how I got in there, looking down on that green diamond was like looking down on the carpet of some Taj Mahal compared to the dust and clumps I was used to playing on.

You've got to love a game and a city a whole lot to forsake one of the blessings that your parents bestow on you. I was mostly a well-behaved child—and my parents wouldn't have tolerated anything but—yet I told everybody that my name was Mickey.

I have old friends who still call me Mickey. When I'm in Houston, I'll often leave tickets for my dear old friend Lou Rodriguez, who lives in Texas now. As soon as I heard a voice calling, "Mickey," from behind home plate in Minute Maid, I knew Lou was in the house. When I was at Tilden High School, I even signed myself "Mickey Randolph" on forms I had to fill out. I wouldn't be surprised if I signed my name as Mickey on my first driver's license.

"That's what we thought your name was for years," said Joe Laboy, who I played ball with from age thirteen, and who is now an appliance salesman.

I thought Mickey was a cool name. I was a Mets fan, sure, but you have to be flexible in life, and Mickey Mantle was a New York baseball icon. Like the real Mick, I was a switch-hitting shortstop back in the day, until I went all-righty when I was about thirteen. Even though he was a white man from Commerce, Oklahoma, and I was a black kid from Brooklyn, New York, even though he learned to hit against a battered tin shed and I learned to hit against a graffiti-covered project wall, in my mind we were practically blood brothers, bound together by our stances and our speed and my overactive imagination.

I first met the real Mickey in the spring of 1976 when I came over to the Yankees in the Pirate trade. He walked in the clubhouse, blond and brawny as ever, with the blacksmith forearms and the big smile. What are you supposed to say when you meet a baseball god? I don't know how I greeted him, but I'm sure I stammered a lot. I definitely didn't tell him that I imitated his stances or that I claimed his name for my own. It would've been way too embarrassing. Now that I think about it, Mickey must have loved the game as much as I did, and I think he would have understood why I claimed his name off the waiver wire.

My teachers and my family didn't call me Mickey, but around Betsy Head Playground it was all I heard. Betsy Head was my home away from home as a kid. Set in the heart of Brownsville, the ten-acre park was built in 1915 with money from a British philanthropist named—guess what?—Betsy Head. The park won awards when it opened, but Betsy wouldn't have been too pleased to see it fifty years later. The place was full of broken bottles and garbage, and when you dove for a ball you needed to make sure you didn't land on a syringe. It takes a lot of love to stretch your body out on such a potentially dangerous surface, but a base hit is a base hit and it was my job to prevent them.

The park had a Little League field at one end and a full-size field at the other, with intersecting outfields. The infields made Thetford Mines look pristine. There were enough rocks to start a quarry, and there was no such thing as a true bounce. If you could catch ground balls at Betsy Head, you could catch ground balls anywhere. I took bad hops in the face, head, you name it, but it made my hands good and it made them quick. Back then we didn't even pay any mind to the conditions of the field. Betsy Head was where my teams played. It's not as if we had a lot of options. Besides, being on the

Betsy Head infield beat almost every alternative. As my friend Phil Davis said, “Sports was the way we got away from the real devils in life. Between that and church and school, we didn’t have time to get into the devils that were out there.”

I also played a lot of football when I was a kid. The surface was usually asphalt, and my position was always quarterback. Our neighborhood team was called the 19ers. The name made perfect sense. We got our shirts at a place called John’s Bargain Store—the local five-and-dime. We bought every football shirt John had on his shelves. The only problem was that they were all the same number: 19 (drove those fledgling defensive coordinators nuts). We used to barnstorm around Brownsville challenging other teams to games, and though you can’t look it up, the 19ers did not lose very often.

I liked basketball too, but baseball had a hold on me all its own. The first book I read was *The Jackie Robinson Story*, and before I was even on chapter 2 I think I knew I wanted to be like Jackie. I wanted to play in the big leagues. (Who knew I would wind up playing his position?) I’d watch every Mets game on TV and do batting stances in front of a full-length mirror in between innings and after the game. If I didn’t have a real bat—and I usually didn’t—the curtain rod would work just fine. Henry Aaron, Willie Mays, Stan Musial, Roberto Clemente, I did them all, and Rod Gaspar too. Years later my wife, Gretchen, told me that when we were younger she would often sit on a bench in the projects at night and look up at my apartment and see the silhouette of me doing Donn Clendenon and Jerry Grote and all my other stances in the window. She was completely loyal even then.

And I was loyal to the game despite all the pressures to stray from it and my idealized version of what an athlete should be. My stance show started early and went late, except if I had a game the next day. If I had a game, I was in bed early. I knew nothing then about big league ballplayers’ carousing or after-hours exploits. To me, if you wanted to be an athlete, you didn’t drink, smoke, mess around with drugs, or hang out in the projects. You went to bed, got your rest. You made sure you were ready to play the next day.

And I was.

My friends would call up to my window (“Yo, Mickey, c’mon out with us”) and apply even a wretched hold of peer pressure they could, but I never weakened. I just went to bed.

For the love of the game, I traveled all over Brooklyn and the city playing ball, on too many teams to count, from Our Lady of Mercy to Funelaria Cruz. The coach I remember most was the late Galileo “Gally” Gonzalez. Gally reinforced my love of baseball through close contact with his. He didn’t want to have anyone on his team who didn’t think the same way he did—that baseball was a great gift we should all cherish. He was a stocky man with a gravelly voice, graying hair and a mustache, and thick leathery, sunbaked skin that so many baseball lifers have. He wanted to win every game. Bad. He yelled at us all the time and cursed in two languages. His practices were nasty. He’d make us play close on the Betsy Head infield and then would smash grounders at us. You got smacked in the head, you shook it off, kept going. There was no other choice, really. Gally brought a football mentality to coaching baseball. He didn’t believe in softies.

There was a kid on our team once—I don’t remember his name—who didn’t take to Gally’s hard-driving ways, and after getting reamed out by Gally one day, he stood out in right field, crying. No one said a word as Gally strode slowly out toward second base, then into the outfield. The poor kid must’ve been petrified. I tensed up as I watched Gally walk out there like a sandlot sheriff. I wondered

how rough on the kid Gally was going to be. I hoped he might sympathize with him or at least cut him a break. Hoped that Gally would finally back off a little.

Gally arrived in front of the kid. Backing off, apparently, was not in his mind-set.

“If you are going to cry, you better leave right now, because I don’t want no crybabies on my team,” Gally said.

Gally wanted to make you a man. He wanted to make you tough. I was almost always the youngest guy on the team, and one of the smallest. He cut me no slack, made me painfully aware that my love of the game could bring me joy or pain and sometimes a bit of both at the same time. Looking back on it now, I think Gally sensed how much I loved playing ball, thought I had potential, and was determined to be harder on me than anyone.

When I’d go off to play ball on a Saturday morning, there were times I wouldn’t be back until the end of the day, so my mom would make a sandwich for me. She packed it up nicely and put it in a brown paper bag. I was very protective of my sandwich. It made me feel good knowing it was there that my mom made it for me. One day Gally walked down the bench, reached down, and snatched the lunch bag out of my hands.

“Hey, what are you doing?” I shouted. “That’s my sandwich!” This was way out of character for me to speak to an adult this way. But I was shocked by Gally’s actions and reacted accordingly.

“I’m giving it to somebody else,” Gally said.

“You can’t do that. That’s mine. My mother made it for me.”

Gally looked at me with a half-sneer. He paused a minute, my sense of violation building by the second.

“ ‘Oh, my mother made it for me,’ ” he said, mocking my voice. “The little momma’s boy wants his sandwich.”

He still had my bag in his hands. He showed no sign of giving it back and, in truth, seemed to be enjoying this. I didn’t know what to do or say. I started to cry, and that was all Gally needed to see because as we know, he had no use for crybabies. So then he made fun of me for crying, in front of the whole team. I felt completely humiliated. He was wrong to be doing this to me. The contents of the bag were much more important to me than the nutritional value of the bologna and two pieces of bread. I didn’t care how much Gally wanted to get into my head or toughen me up. This wasn’t fair. He was stealing my lunch, not to give to another kid who was hungry—that would’ve been different—but just because he knew how important it was to me and somehow saw that as a sign of softness. Part of me wanted to storm off and never come back and play for him.

That day, it turned out, would come soon enough.

I will say this for Gally: there definitely was a method to his madness. He wanted me to be able to handle anything. He wanted me to go out there with a full suit of emotional armor so that nobody, in the turn of events, could touch me. In his mind, love of the game could have been a weakness, could have made me too soft. Loving the game was one thing, but loving to win was another. The two often went together, but not always. I didn’t have to be taught either kind of love, and in time the two became nearly inseparable.

Gally didn’t want to win two out of three, or three of four. He wanted to win every game, and he’d be all over our butts if we didn’t comply. Gally was a Billy Martin of the barrio, hypercompetitive and

feisty to the core. He believed that winning was a habit, same as losing. He never let up. For the reason, I'm not sure he ever forgave me for what I did when I was fifteen years old.

I knew a guy from the Tilden Houses named Frank Tepedino, who was the groundskeeper, the man who tended to the flowers and mowed the grass and kept it looking really nice. We had our share of run-ins with him, because we were forever hopping his chain-link fence to get onto a little patch of grass to play ball. Mr. Tepedino, the uncle of a Yankee first baseman by the same name, got tired of chasing us off, and one day he called a few of us over. I thought we were really in for it this time.

"I coach an American Legion team called Cummings Brothers Post," he said. "If you guys love to play so much, why don't you bring your bats and gloves and come down for tryouts this Saturday? We have a good team, and we play a good level of competition. I don't know if you know the Parade Grounds, but that's where we play our games."

The Parade Grounds was a complex of ball fields in Brooklyn's Prospect Park. It was where Sandy Koufax and Frank and Joe Torre and all the Brooklyn greats played. I didn't know much more about it except that I would be there that next Saturday. I got up early, took a subway and a bus, and went to the tryout. When I stepped into the complex, I felt as though I had come upon a whole new baseball world. The fields were smooth and manicured. They had lines and dugouts. They had on-deck circles. Compared to what I was used to, this was Shea Stadium. Hell, this was Shangri-La.

From that moment, I knew that I wanted to play there.

The tryout went well, and soon I had a new team and Cummings Brothers Post, a fraternal organization established in honor of two young brothers who died in World War I, had a new shortstop and leadoff man. It wasn't just the field I liked. It was that the competition was better, and more than anything, it was a place where big-league scouts were known to come by and watch you play and, if they liked you, maybe even give you one of their little calling cards.

It was a great opportunity, the only trouble being that now I would have to deal with the wrath of Galileo Gonzalez. He had nurtured me and toughened me—he had stolen my sandwiches. Now somebody else was going to benefit from that. I knew Gally was going to like this about as much as losing a doubleheader. But I had to talk to him. I found him in Betsy Head Park. Like a guy about to break up with one girl because he had fallen for another, I was really nervous as I walked up to him.

"Gally, can I talk to you for a minute?" I began.

"What's going on?"

"Well," I said, "I tried out for a team in the Parade Grounds. They want me to play for them, and I think I'm going to do it." Gally's face went blank at first. He took in what I said for a few seconds and then his face quickly turned flush with anger. He didn't want to hear anything more.

"Why you going there?" he said. "Why? They don't want you. They don't want no kid from the projects. They've never wanted no kids from here. Why you wasting your time? Why would you leave our team to go play for strangers?"

He didn't call me Benedict Arnold. But he might as well have. I knew I wasn't going to be able to soften the blow. I just tried to speak from the heart.

"I'm sorry, Gally," I said. "I don't want to leave my friends. I don't want to leave you and my team. But the Parade Grounds is where the best players from Brooklyn have always played. You know that. You know it's the place to play and where the competition is the best. I'm sorry. I am really

sorry, but I just think I have to do this.”

He mumbled something and then turned and walked away. It was the last conversation I ever had with Galileo Gonzalez.

Now, understand that loyalty is huge to me. Was then and is now. The idea of being disloyal to Gally and my teammates weighed heavily on me, but when it got down to it, I knew I had to go. My dream was to make the big leagues. Cummings Brothers was going to give me more games on better fields against better players. It was going to get me out there in front of the scouts—the white men with their sun visors and clipboards and beach chairs who could make my dream happen. For years I had seen guys who were great players—better players than me—who didn’t want to leave the neighborhood and never wound up going anywhere. These were guys I admired and looked up to. They stayed in the neighborhood, and then their baseball careers stayed in the neighborhood too. As terrible as I felt about leaving, my gut was telling me that this was something I had to do.

And you know what? I never regretted it.

All these years later, it’s very humbling to think about that time of my life and to think about my good fortune, to wonder why I was the lucky one, why I was the one who made it to the big leagues when guys like Joe Laboy and Blackie Ortiz and Georgie Cruz—my baseball brothers—did not. They were friends I played alongside for years, guys I learned from, guys who could really play the game. Georgie Cruz could pick it better than me at shortstop, better than just about anybody I ever saw. Joe Laboy could do it all, and Blackie Ortiz, well, he may have been the best of all. Blackie was an undersized first baseman, maybe five-foot-seven or -eight, but he had the quick and powerful wrists that all great hitters have, and he could hit the ball out of anywhere. Blackie was a hell of a ballplayer. The Mets invited him to a tryout at Shea Stadium, and he did really well, even had a scout tell him he was definitely pro material. The Mets asked for his schedule, then found out almost all of his games were at Betsy Head.

Scouts didn’t go to Brownsville. It was too dangerous. Blackie never got drafted. He’s been a motorman for the New York City subway system for twenty-five years.

I’m not discounting the work I put in to make it to the majors, because I put in a ton of it. I was dedicated to the sport as a kid could be. But there’s more to it than that. I believe God had a plan for me, and I believe I have been incredibly blessed to be able to follow that plan. I believe I had the good fortune to stay healthy, to stay clear of trouble, to be able to make good decisions. But the most important blessing of all was to have a loving family who gave me the rock-solid grounding I needed to get ahead. When you have parents who tell you that you can do whatever you set your mind to, and who really believe that, well, it makes all the difference.

Even though I was like most professional players and eventually had to deal with salary issues, free agency and collusion, the demands of media and ownership, and all the rest that goes into the business side of the game, I never lost my childlike enthusiasm for the simple (or not so simple, really) act of fielding a ground ball, feeling the bite of the seams as a ball left my hand, the almost numbing sensation feel of a well-struck line drive, and the sound of my spikes as I dug around first base and headed toward second. That’s why I wanted to coach and eventually manage. I wanted to teach the fundamentals, the finer points of the game, share my experiences, and help mold the next generation of players, but mostly I couldn’t give up the thing I loved.

I believe I will get another shot to manage in the big leagues. I really do believe it will happen, and when it does I will take everything I learned from my first go-round with the Mets and be the better for it. Whatever happens, whatever I do, I will keep going to work and getting after it, the way my parents did in the fields.

They did what they had to because they loved us. If it weren't for them, I never would have had the amazing opportunities and experiences I've had in the game.

For me, dignity and respect don't come merely by winning. They come by doing your best, always, no matter the circumstances. They come by persevering and by paying more attention to the process of life than the box score of it. Dr. Martin Luther King, one of my heroes, expressed it quite succinctly when he wrote this:

“If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, ‘Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.’”

I DON'T SWEEP STREETS. I work with ballplayers. I do it with everything I have and all the passion I have. Before every game I managed with the Mets, during the national anthem, I would close my eyes and recite a special Bible verse of my mother's: “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” Those ten words have a remarkable ability to center me and fortify me. Moments later, the pitcher would be looking in and the leadoff batter would be in the box, and it would absolutely be the best time of the day. A baseball game was about to begin, and more lessons were about to be learned. What could be better than that?

I don't know if it is possible to love something too much, and maybe some people could say that my intensity and passion were responsible for both the highs and lows I experienced in each of my roles in the game. I will say this: I'd rather be hanged for my errors of commission than my errors of omission. Put another way, I'd rather lose because I cared too much than because I didn't care enough.

I've also heard people talk about spreading the love. Well, I'm blessed in that regard also. My wife, Gretchen, who I literally fell for in the sixth grade when I tried to impress her by leaping a fence and wound up flat on the ground and needing seven stitches to boot, has been my most loyal supporter. She's seen countless games, and I'm not exaggerating when I tell you that she knows nearly as much about the game's tactics and history as just about anyone else I know inside and outside of the game. My son Andre played the game and spent a few years in the Yankees' organization. My daughters, Taniesha, Chantre, and Ciara were all good athletes and put up with having an absentee father for much of the summer. We all are grateful for what baseball has meant to our lives. Andre and I still go to a few games, and most recently, we attended Mariano Rivera's moving and well-deserved retirement ceremony. Though the new Yankee Stadium is a far different place from the old Shea Stadium I first attended, I felt that same thrill rising up from my stomach when I caught sight of the ball field. Green is the color of hope, I'm told, and every time I see a field I'm filled with the sense that all things are possible.

The pages that follow detail many of the things I love about the game of baseball—the people, the places, and the events that I recall. Some of them are painful, but that's one way to measure how much

you care.

I also know this beyond a doubt. I am many, many times blessed. My career has spanned the explosive growth of baseball, and I have made a living and provided a life for my family far beyond what my mother and father, sharecroppers in the 1950s in South Carolina, could have ever imagined for playing a boy's game. My mother was working the field picking cotton for fourteen to fifteen hours a day while carrying me inside her. She did what it took. For a long time, even after I was a major league All-Star, my father worked his regular day job and then climbed into his gypsy cab to troll for fares.

I paid attention to my parents' work ethic and commitment, and I learned. And I think that more than anything is what got me through that rough year in Thetford Mines. I ended up hitting only .250 but I led the league in walks (110) and runs (103) and stole 38 bases and wound up being an All-Star second baseman for a team that won the Eastern League championship. And then things—good things—started happening very fast. I hit .339 in a half-year in AAA ball. I was a midseason call-up by the Pittsburgh Pirates, and in that organization I found the big brother I'd never had, Willie Stargell, and got my first taste of postseason baseball. A few months after that I was traded to the New York Yankees.

And so began a baseball journey that continues to this day, my years carved out in 162-game installments. My years with the Yankees' organization spanned several generations of players whose names both longtime and new fans could easily recite along with me. The roster includes names like Berra, Jeter, Rivera, Piniella, Martin, Rodriguez, Lyle, Gossage, Brosius, Dent, Nettles, Martinez, Williams, O'Neill, and the list goes on and on. Whether I'm recounting the thirty-six different shortstops I was paired with, the heaviness of my heart at the loss of Thurman Munson, or the inspired wackiness of Mickey Rivers and the other residents of the Bronx Zoo, I want you to feel the passionate intensity that I brought to the game and my role, however small, in the Yankees' success story. I know that my scoring three times in an ALCS game pales in comparison to the three home runs Reggie Jackson hit in a World Series game, but that was my role.

I'm a table setter and proud of it. I'd like you to sit down and enjoy the spread I've prepared for you. It's going to be a lot of fun.

A Winning Start

On the evening of July 29, 1975, the night I became a big-league ballplayer, I was so excited, probably couldn't have remembered the lyrics to "Happy Birthday." I had to keep it simple, and these were my thoughts: I had just turned twenty-one. It was a Tuesday. Life was good.

Very good.

Unless you've spent a lot of time in what passes for a clubhouse in a minor league ballpark, you can't appreciate how different it is to set foot in a major league clubhouse. That's especially true of one that has been done up by a successful franchise. The '75 Pirates were defending National League East champions. They played in what today we think of as baseball's version of the housing projects—an Astroturfed, multi-use doughnut of a stadium known as Three Rivers—but their clubhouse was like a penthouse suite in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in comparison to what I was used to.

Staying in a hotel was also a far cry from the accommodations Gretchen and I had found in Triple A. With the exception of one trip to Puerto Rico when I was a youngster, I'd spent almost all of my time in New York City. Adjusting to life away from home wasn't always easy. Still, I was able to perform pretty well in my first season of pro baseball, hitting .317 in the Rookie League and dealing with my new second base position without much trouble. I moved up to A ball the following year, and Charleston back in my home state of South Carolina, not even fifty miles from my birthplace of Holbrook Hill. I hit with much more pop (8 homers, 6 triples, and 25 doubles) and stole 43 bases, earning the promotion to Thetford Mines. By the time I escaped the cold and the ruts and the asbestos, I was mentally stronger and ready to take on the challenge of Triple A ball. I was also a married man.

I proposed to Gretchen in the middle of the 1974 season, during a road trip to West Haven, Connecticut. She came up from Brooklyn. I snuck out to a jewelry store and bought a ring, then we went back to the hotel. I didn't get on one knee or anything dramatic like that, but I popped the question to the girl I'd loved from the first time I saw her. The way my season was going, I was a little surprised she didn't say no. We got married just before spring training, and then I headed down to Bradenton, Florida. I had a good spring, and when camp broke Gretchen and I headed north for Charleston, West Virginia, home of the Charlies, the Pirates' AAA affiliate. The Charlies were famous for their logo—a smiling baseball with a derby hat and a cigar. In the local paper, the *Charleston Gazette*, the ball would be smiling if the Charlies won and frowning if the Charlies lost.

I was in town long enough to be amused by Charlie, but not much longer. My stay lasted ninety-one games and taught me a couple of valuable life lessons:

1. Do not live in a redneck trailer park if you are an African American.
 2. Be careful where you get caught speeding.
-

I'm not sure what Gretchen and I were thinking, but when the Pirates broke camp and we ventured north to set up our first home together, we wound up settling on a mobile home in a tiny town outside Charleston called Rand, West Virginia. It's not far from the Kanawha River, a place that has since gained fame for being the hometown of NFL star Randy Moss. With a small salary and our first child on the way (we worked fast), we wanted to live as economically as possible. We accomplished that. And we got what we paid for. Maybe less. Our first clue that we hadn't selected wisely, housing-wise, was finding out that our next-door neighbor slept with his shotgun.

The second clue was that not only was there no welcome wagon to greet us, but almost nobody would even speak to us. The newlyweds from Brooklyn might as well have been completely invisible.

Trouble wasn't long in coming. While I was off on an early-season road trip, Gretchen was resting in the trailer when she looked outside and saw a mangy and suspicious-looking man with a white German shepherd prowling around not far from the window. She lowered the blinds and quickly called me, managing to reach me in the clubhouse. I heard the panic in her voice. I told her to stay calm and said whatever I could think of to help that process. Gretchen wasn't calm at all. How could she be? She was pregnant and all alone in a trailer park with a prowler outside her door.

What words were going to fix that?

As she lay there, she heard the door knob begin to rattle, first lightly, then much more vigorously. Now the prowler was trying to force his way in. Now he was one flimsy lock away from who knows what?

Gretchen was terrified. All she could think of to do was scream, and that's what she did, as long and as loud as she could. Our neighbor with the shotgun—he actually was the one person who was very nice to us—heard her screaming and burst out of his trailer, shotgun cocked and loaded.

"Hey, get away from there!" he bellowed, and with that the prowler and his white German shepherd were off into the woods.

In the morning, I called the club's general manager and told him what happened. He asked where we were living.

"You are living in that redneck trailer park?" he said, alarm rising as he spoke. "We've got to get you out of there. That's no place to live." Somebody from the team came right over and drove Gretchen to a hotel. When I got back, we packed up and said good-bye to the trailer park forever, making sure we stopped to thank our guardian-angel neighbor with the shotgun.

Gretchen and I and the baby on the way settled into a nice routine off the field. On it, I was having my best year yet, hitting close to .340, leading the league in hitting for most of the first half of the season, playing a good second base, stealing bases without being caught even one time. One note from the majors now, I began to think for the first time about getting the call, about what that would feel like. The Pirates were in a pennant race, so I figured that at the end of the year, when rosters were expanded, they might bring me up to give me a little taste of the majors.

One day late in July we were on a road trip in Rochester, New York, when Steve Demeter, our manager, asked me to come to the ballpark early. I was apprehensive. I didn't know what the issue was. I rifled my brain for possibilities. I was still rifling when Steve sat me down in the little square

visiting manager's office.

"Willie," he said, "you are going to the big leagues. The Pirates want you on the big club. You've got to get to Pittsburgh as soon as you can."

I all but froze at the sound of his words. I thought he was joking. I really did. Never did I think I'd be called up in the middle of the season. Steve had been a career minor leaguer; his cup of coffee in the major leagues was not even half full, consisting of fifteen games in 1959 and 1960. He extended his hand and wished me the best.

As soon as I left the office I found a pay phone and called Gretchen.

"Hey, Gretch, it's me. Guess what?"

"What?" she asked.

"You better start packing, because we're going to the big leagues," I said. The next sounds I heard were shrieks of joy.

It was time to move again, for the best reason of all. I took a bus back to Charleston, we loaded up my Ford LTD, and we took off in the wee hours of the morning. We headed north on Interstate 79 bound for Pennsylvania, a 169-mile trip to the big time. My head was dizzy with excitement and anticipation.

The excitement stopped when I saw a blue blinking light in my rearview mirror.

I looked quickly at the speedometer. I was going eight or ten miles over the speed limit on a dark, empty road at two in the morning. I was hoping this was just a routine stop. My heart was pounding as I pulled over.

A big, jug-eared policeman appeared at my window, shining a flashlight into my face and into the car. He had a big hat and a jowly, no-nonsense face.

"License and registration," he said.

"Right here, Officer," I said, quickly producing them. I felt like I was in a movie. A bad one.

"Where you goin' so fast this time of night?"

"I'm a ballplayer for the Charleston Charlies, Officer. I was just called up to the major leagues and I have to get up to join the Pittsburgh Pirates as soon as I can."

He wasn't impressed. Even a little bit. Maybe the guy was a Phillies fan. I don't know. My father used to call cops like this in the South "High Pockets." The cop seemed to be in love with his authority and with the fact that we were scared.

Mr. High Pockets told me he was going to give me a speeding ticket and that I had to follow him to the station house to pay the ticket.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"Officer, if you want to give me a ticket, I'll be happy to pay it, but if you don't mind, we have to get to Pittsburgh. My wife is pregnant and tired. I have a game tomorrow. Can't you just give me the ticket and I'll mail in the payment?"

He glared back at me. Uh-oh. He looked ticked off that I had the gall to even make the suggestion.

"That's not how we do it around here, son. You follow me to the station. Now let's go."

He got back in his car, and we followed him to the next exit, onto a windy side road, then onto a dirt road that had more craters than the moon and was not much wider than a base path. I mean, the trees and bushes were practically sticking into our car. It felt as though we were on that road for

hundred miles. With every mile, my feeling grew stronger and stronger that we would never be coming back. It felt like *Deliverance*, except we were in a car, not a canoe.

At one point I was a split-second away from slamming on the brakes, throwing the car in reverse, and hightailing it out of there as fast as my LTD could go. I'll admit it: as a young black man in that situation, I couldn't help thinking about lynchings and back-alley beatings and all the atrocities perpetrated on black people in previous eras. I half-expected a big old sheriff to come out of the woods and say, "You in a heap of trouble now, boy."

I turned to Gretchen.

"Why do I have the feeling he wants to kill us?" I laughed nervously. Gretchen didn't laugh. At a

After half an eternity, we finally got to the station. I had no idea what town we were in, and still don't. The car was caked in mud. In front of us was a dilapidated brick station house, not much bigger than a one-car garage. There was a chubby officer seated at a skinny desk in the front and two small holding cells in the back. A drunken old man was in one of them. The other one was ominously empty.

Maybe they're saving it for us, I thought.

The jug-eared officer handed me the speeding ticket.

"Cash only," he said. I wasn't going to do any more debating. I just wanted us out of there. I pulled out \$30 and handed it to him. I had a feeling the two officers would be dividing it up and going to the saloon. At that point I didn't care. We got back in the Ford and somehow found our way back to the interstate. Every mile that we put between ourselves and the station house brought another wave of relief.

Gretchen and I arrived in Pittsburgh just before dawn. The Phillies were in town, and there was a ball game later that night. I never saw a trailer park or the inside of a station house in the boondocks again. I was in the major leagues now.

BACK IN '75, I had no real thoughts about how off-the-field factors would play into winning. I was too excited to think about much else besides how I'd realize my dream. I looked around and saw the uniforms hanging in the lockers: Willie Stargell's number 8, Richie Hebner's number 3, Dave Parker's number 39. Finally I arrived at the locker that belonged to me. There was a uniform waiting on a hanger, number 18, sparkling white double-knits with black and yellow trim. My name was across the top of the back. I ran my fingers over the letters. I wasn't beyond the "R" when a shiver ran down my spine.

The only thing that made my first day in the big leagues less than perfect was that the greatest Pirate of them all, number 21, Roberto Clemente, was not a part of it.

The first Latin superstar, Clemente was a hero to me and a lot of the kids I played with growing up. He had a game all his own, with a great arm and that slashing swing and the way he'd slide into bases, almost as if he were flying into them. He had so much passion for the game, and I loved that about him too. I loved it when the Pirates came into Shea because chances were, you were going to see number 21 do something spectacular. I was drafted six months before Roberto died in that New Year's Eve plane crash while making a relief mission to victims of an earthquake in Nicaragua. It would've been an incredible honor just to meet him, never mind wear the same uniform.

A couple of hours before game time, I found out that I would not have to wait long to make my debut. Rennie Stennett, the regular second baseman, had sprained his ankle. Danny Murtaugh, the manager, posted the lineup, and my name was at the top of the order. That's how I found out I was playing. Danny was a sour, rotund man who was much more into chewing tobacco than being the welcome wagon. He wasn't big on motivational speeches or niceties, or talking to rookies for that matter. Call me into his office and give me a pep talk, tell me he was glad to have me with the ball club? Ask me how I liked playing for his son in Triple A? Forget it. My name was in the lineup and that was all I needed to know, and all he wanted me to know.

Besides, he had bigger fish to fry than a pan fish like me. We were in the middle of a pennant race and that first game was against the Phillies, who trailed us in the division. I felt like the new kid in school, anxious but not nervous, knowing that if the Pirates thought enough of me to bring me up, I belonged on the field. Becoming one of the guys wasn't even on my mind. If I did have any nerves, they were put to rest immediately by getting involved in the action early. I was in the middle of a 6-3 double play in the first inning, off the bat of the hard-hitting but lead-footed Greg "The Bull" Luzinski. I came up to the plate for the first time a minute or two later. As I heard myself introduced and walked toward the box, everything seemed big and bright, as if a million megawatts of power were bathing the stadium in light. Three Rivers looked like the Roman Colosseum to me, and I felt like a gladiator. I was surprised I wasn't more nervous. I just felt completely alive and tuned in to the moment. All my senses were on overdrive, soaking up every bit of the experience.

The pitcher for the Phillies was a left-hander, Tom Underwood. He was a smallish guy like me who was drafted the same year as I was, a good pitcher, though not overpowering. I got a good pitch, hit and drove it to center, but Garry Maddox caught it on the fly.

Two innings later, in the bottom of the third, I came up with two on and nobody out. I settled into the box, got into my crouch. When Underwood wound and delivered, I was right on it. I swung and made solid contact, rapping a single to center field. As I ran to first, the Colosseum looked even bigger and brighter than before. I turned the bag, then retreated to first and found myself face-to-face with the muscled physique of Dick Allen, the Phillies' first baseman. He was looking straight at me.

"Nice going, kid," he said.

"Thank you, Mr. Allen," I said. Dick Allen looked like a black Paul Bunyan to me. I was not just in awe of him, I was mesmerized by him. I kept looking at the rippling muscles in his arms and forearms. If I'd had a pen and paper, I might've asked for an autograph right there at first base. Also, this was a guy who could have very easily dismissed me as a nobody and here he was *talking* to me.

Dick Allen had a borderline Hall of Fame career. In his fifteen seasons, he would hit 351 home runs and drive in 1,119, while hitting .292. He was back with the Phillies at the tail end of his career, a guy who'd been the National League's Rookie of the Year in 1964, a seven-time All-Star, and winner of the American League's Most Valuable Player Award with the White Sox in 1972.

"Never let anyone play your position," Allen said. "It's your position. Treat it like that. Play every day, kid. Don't ever take a day off."

"Thanks, Mr. Allen," I said.

I took those words to heart, and for the bulk of my career I owned the second base position, particularly with the Yankees. In spring training, we call it winning a spot on the ball club, winning

the battle for a particular position. That's the first kind of winning that you have to do when you're a major leaguer. Yes, you want to win games, but you also want to contribute as much as you can to the team's success, and that means being out there on the field playing. Sure, you have to understand your role on the team, but I'm not sure too many guys really accept that they are backups or reserves. You have to believe that you belong out there, that you own that spot in the lineup. Just because you own it doesn't mean that it can't be taken from you, just like Gally took my sandwiches. You shouldn't even take it for granted that your name's going to be on that lineup posted in the dugout.

The other thing about winning that I took from Dick Allen's statement was this: have some respect for your elders in the game. The flip side of that is that veterans can, and I think should, feel the responsibility to pass on to younger players some of the values that are important to how you play the game and how you go about winning. Call it old-school schooling, but I was raised in the game and was deeply influenced by older guys, many though not all of them African American, who felt it was their duty to help a young guy out.

On that Pirates team, Willie Stargell, who in 1976 was thirty-six years old but had been in the big leagues for fourteen years already, took on that role for me of big brother. And he was a big brother, but with an even bigger heart. Like a big brother, Willie taught me some good and painful lessons. The painful stuff wasn't so bad, really, but Willie thought it was fun to beat on me—punch me in the biceps, put me in a stranglehold—all those big brother-like kinds of moves. The man was strong, and my arms were little pipe-cleaner kinds of things in comparison. Even though I was from the big city, which earned me one of the nicknames that Willie anointed me with—"Slick"—I still had to learn how to conduct myself like a major leaguer off the field.

"Pops" schooled me in how to dress, where to eat, what wines to order with meals. It wasn't exactly like I was attending the Willie Stargell Finishing School, but it was close. And you have to remember, this was the mid-1970s: disco was in full swing, and the clothes we wore—well, the less said the better. Fortunately, I wasn't too much of a trendsetter on my rookie salary of \$16,000, so no jumpsuits, crocheted suits, or anything else too Superfly. I did like hats, or "brims," as we sometimes called them. I remember one time I was in downtown Pittsburgh, eyeing an applejack hat, when I caught sight of Larry Demery, a young pitcher, in the window's reflection. He stepped out of a turquoise green Lincoln Mark IV, complete with opera windows, a vinyl landau roof, and the Continental spare tire hump. You would have thought he was a pimp, given his platform shoes, knee-length suit coat, and fedora. Demery wasn't alone in his fashion statement. I can remember Pop wearing a fur coat, Dave Parker and a few others with their man-purses, and the outrageous Dock Ellis looking like he stepped out of a clothing ad in *Ebony* magazine.

What I remember about that Pirates team and those first experiences in the major leagues was how the guys seemed to have an on-off switch. In the clubhouse, Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes, Gloria Gaynor, the O'Jays, and other groups were playing on the boom boxes and guys were dancing around. Guys made regular visits to the clubhouse bulletin board to see what Willie Stargell and his cameramen were up to. Willie loved photography, and he would take pictures of guys at weird angles and then post them on the board so that others could enjoy the laugh and post a funny caption. That was an early form of social media, I guess. Willie caught me from below once and took a photo that earned me another nickname—"Goose Neck." Seeing myself on that bulletin board, a midseason call-up, d

make me feel like I belonged—even though a distorted, skinny-necked image of me was hard flatterring.

Come game time, though, while we weren't deadly serious and expressionless, we had a more focused kind of fun. That team was loose and fun-loving, but we also knew how to win. One win in particular stands out. In late September, we beat the Cubs, 22–0, at Wrigley. Fewer than 5,000 fans sat in the stands, and not nearly that many at the end, when Stennett finished off the best hitting day of any player in the twentieth century with an eighth-inning triple.

That made him 7-for-7, at which point Murtaugh told me to go in and pinch-run for him.

Talk about being a caddy. But I didn't mind. It was cool to have a front-row seat for history. We celebrated later in downtown Chicago, with my version of a night of debauchery: I went to a liquor store and, despite Willie's tutoring, bought a bottle of Mogen David wine. I guess I hadn't made the connection between ordering good wine in a restaurant and buying it in a store.

I went back to my hotel room, watched TV, and drank the bottle. I got a buzz on, and the next morning I had the first hangover of my life. That was it for me and Mogen David wine. I went back to my choirboy lifestyle.

On the last day of the season Murtaugh stopped by my locker. He was typically expansive.

"Ever play third base?" he asked.

"No, sir," I said.

"Well, you're playing it today," he said.

"Yes, sir," I said.

Half the regulars were out, resting for the playoffs, nursing their own hangovers from the final Saturday night of the season. Soon enough I had a sour stomach myself to deal with.

I handled my first chance okay, but the rest of the day . . . well, let's just say I wasn't asked to start in any how-to-play-the-hot-corner instructional videos. I caught the ball well enough. But the first basemen standing across the diamond—Willie Stargell in the first half of the game, Ed Kirkpatrick in the second half—looked like they were on the other side of the country. I airmailed the ball over their heads twice, then compensated by throwing a grounder to them on my next chance. We finished the day with seven errors. Three of them were by the rookie third baseman.

Raise your hand if you are surprised that I never made another big-league appearance at third base.

As much as that hurt my pride, I wasn't too down about it. After all, we'd won the division and were heading to Cincinnati to take on the Big Red Machine in the playoffs. If you're not old enough to remember the Reds of that era—and that year in particular—let me tell you this. They won 103 regular-season games. They won their division by 20 games. They were led by a Hall of Fame manager named Sparky Anderson. With the Yankees, we had the Core Four—Derek Jeter, Andy Pettitte, Jorge Posada, and Mariano Rivera—who all have a shot at making the Hall of Fame. The Big Red Machine's eight players most frequently thought of as members of the Big Red Machine include baseball's all-time hit leader Pete Rose; three Hall of Fame players in Johnny Bench, Tony Pérez, and Joe Morgan (and Rose, whose on-field achievements are Hall of Fame-worthy); six National League MVP selections; four National League home run leading seasons; three NL batting champion seasons; twenty-five Gold Glove winning seasons; and sixty-three collective All-Star Game appearances. The starting lineup of Bench, Rose, Morgan, Pérez, Concepción, Foster, Griffey, and Gerónimo

(collectively referred to as “the Great Eight”) played eighty-eight games together during the 1975 and 1976 seasons and lost only nineteen.

Talk about winners.

And talk about exciting. Even though I knew that I wasn’t going to get a start in any of the games, I still had that kid’s night-before-Christmas feeling going through me. Stepping out onto the turf at Riverfront Stadium, with bunting draped all around the stands, the crisp October air, and early fall coloring everything with a special light, I’d arrived in one form of baseball heaven.

Still, I don’t want to idealize things too much. Yes, we all wanted to win because winning was so important to us, but we had other motivations as well. In 1975 the minimum salary for a major league baseball player was \$16,000 per year, with an average salary of just under \$45,000. If you won it all that year and your team voted you a full share of the winner’s proceeds, you’d get just over an additional \$19,000. If you lost in the World Series, you’d earn an additional \$13,000 or so. I’m not a math whiz, but with the help of a calculator, that \$19,000 winner’s share was 42 percent of the average salary. If you were a guy earning the major league minimum, winning the World Series and getting a full share would mean you could double your yearly salary. Now, I’m a New York guy, and I know a thing or two about bonuses and salaries and Wall Street and all that, but getting that kind of money on top of your salary is pretty strong motivation for winning. Pride is one thing. Being able to feed your family is another. To be fair, allowing for inflation, that \$16,000 was equal to nearly \$70,000 today, and \$45,000 translates into the buying power of approximately \$165,000. But the percentages remain the same whether you’re talking about 1975 or 2013 dollars.

As much as I loved the game, baseball was how I made my living, like every other major leaguer. I was thrilled to be in the playoffs, as were my teammates, but I heard something said with great frequency as the season wound down: “Don’t be messing with my money.” That’s a polite rephrasing, but you get the point. I need this playoff check. I might have to get a job in the off-season (which a lot of guys did) if I don’t get that check. I want Christmas money to buy toys for the kids. I might want to take a vacation. I’ll have to make some adjustments in the house and maybe do some renovating. The postseason money was huge for us.

The positive side of what some might think of as greed is this: guys back then held each other accountable. If a guy wasn’t giving his all, or he was making too many errors of aggression that were contributing to losses, the veterans would get on him with a not so subtle and not so gentle reminder. Putting this in context helps you to better understand that old cliché about a lot being at stake in the playoffs. I didn’t want to get a job in the off-season to make ends meet. I was a young player, newly married, and I took my responsibilities as a husband and provider seriously. Like any regular wage earner concerned about who’s getting overtime and who isn’t, we had a deeply vested interest in getting to the playoffs and succeeding once we were there.

Of course, reality set in pretty quickly. We got swept in three games by the Big Red Machine, being outscored 19–7 in the process. As I mentioned, there are a lot of formulas for winning, and one of them says that pitching matchups are crucial to success—the righty/lefty matchup being one of the most highly touted of them. For that reason, Danny Murtaugh decided to go with three left-handed starters—Jerry Reuss, Jim Rooker, and John Candelaria—hoping to slow down left-handed-hitting Joe Morgan and Tony Pérez. Playing the so-called percentages didn’t work, obviously, but I already knew

that playing by the book didn't guarantee results.

What I didn't know was that I was going to learn another lesson. Not everybody expresses their competitive desires in the same ways. Put another way, being a winner sometimes means being selfish. Like Dick Allen pointed out to me, you've got to want to keep your spot. That means sometimes playing when you aren't at your best. That might be considered selfish, but there's a fine line between self-interest, self-sacrifice, and the desire to win.

Maybe it isn't fair to cite Dock Ellis as an example of how self-interest can come across in the wrong way. After all, today Dock is probably as well known for his claim that he threw a no-hitter—one in which he walked eight men but still gave up no hits—under the influence of LSD. Dock was his own man and went his own way both off and, apparently, on the field. The truth, though, is that he was a hell of a good pitcher too. You don't go 19-9 and 15-7 in consecutive years like Dock did in '71-'72 unless you've got some good stuff. In '75, after a couple of mediocre years, Dock was slowed by injury a bit and only went 8-9. Still, he wanted to pitch in that series and made no bones about the fact that he wasn't happy with Danny Murtaugh's strategy.

Dock had a fit, and if he had proven anything in his big-league career, it was that you could never predict what he would do next, especially when he was angry. About three weeks after I was called up, Dock directed a clubhouse tirade at Murtaugh and was suspended without pay. During the 1975 playoffs against the San Francisco Giants, Dock was incensed because the bed in his hotel room was too small, so he went and found another room. That was nothing compared with the time Dock pitched such a fit with a Riverfront Stadium security guard in Cincinnati that he had to be subdued with Mace.

Dock was so enraged at Murtaugh about not getting a start that he protested by sitting in the dugout with curlers on, refusing to report to the bullpen. It reminded me of the stories I'd heard about the 1971 All-Star Game, when Dock was named to start for the NL against Vida Blue and said he wouldn't do it, because there was no way baseball would let "two soul brothers" start in the All-Star Game. Baseball did indeed let two brothers start, and Dock wound up being the losing pitcher in the only All-Star Game the National League lost between 1963 and 1982.

He finally backed off in game 1 against the Reds and pitched two innings in relief in an 8-3 loss. Murtaugh called him in the next day and told Dock he had to apologize to the team.

Dock said okay, and Murtaugh called a meeting.

"I talked to Dock," Murtaugh told us, standing in the center of the clubhouse. "We're a team. We stay together no matter what. Now Dock's got something he wants to say to you guys. Dock."

With that, Murtaugh took a step back and Dock took a step forward. The curlers were gone. Everyone's eyes were on him. I was ready for contrition.

We got something else entirely.

"You all look like a scared bunch of mother[bleep]ers," Dock began. "That's what I see in here. Guys who are scared. Guys who won't play or don't want to play because they're candy-asses who don't want to play against no Big Red Machine." I looked at Murtaugh's face, and he looked as red as Pete Rose's hat. His body was almost quivering. I was afraid he might choke on his chaw of tobacco.

Dock continued. "Al Oliver is playing his heart out, and the rest of you look like you want to be hiding in the bathroom. What a bunch of pussies."

Murtaugh had heard quite enough of Dock's "apology." He stepped up next to him, his squat

body pushing right up into Dock's.

"All right, goddammit, that's enough, Dock. You haven't shown me a friggin' thing. Nothing at all. You bail out on the team and sit on the bench in goddamn curlers, and now you are saying guys don't want to play? You got no right to talk to anyone that way, you son of a bitch." And then the five-foot-nine, fifty-seven-year-old Murtaugh called out the six-foot-three, thirty-year-old Ellis:

"C'mon, Dock, it's you and me. Just give me three minutes." Murtaugh put up his fists.

"Sit your little ass down, mother[bleep]er," Dock said.

With that, Don Lefferts, one of Danny's coaches, charged Ellis and, I'm not kidding, had to be restrained by five guys. Murtaugh tried to get at him too. Dock was screaming and cursing—almost everybody was it seemed.

I stood by my locker, shell-shocked. All I could think was, *Oh my God. I can't believe stuff like this goes on in the big leagues.*

I had no idea then, but Dock's display would serve me well in the coming years after I joined the Yankees and played through the "Bronx Zoo" years. At the time Dock went off, I was pretty surprised but I later saw it in another light. Dock didn't go about it the right way, but he was trying to say that he wanted the ball badly because, as a starting pitcher, that's your job. He wanted to pitch, and he wanted to play. He bitched about it, but I didn't.

Which of us was more eager to win? Did his more dramatic performance mean that he cared more than I did? If I didn't throw my helmet down in disgust when I thought I was a victim of a bad call, if I failed to come through in the clutch, did that mean I cared less than Dock did? Or later, as manager, if I didn't get run from a game, did that mean I didn't have my players' backs or care enough about them to protect them when they went off? Questions like these would stick with me throughout my career; I still struggle with them today.

I was very fortunate that my first experience in the major leagues was with a winning team, a playoff team. But little in this game, or in life, is black and white. I wasn't in the Reds' clubhouse, so I have no idea if they had the same kinds of internal tensions and blowups that the Pirates had in the series. From the outside, they looked like a cohesive group of All-American-type guys. Pete Rose was lovably pugnacious, Johnny Bench the quintessential boy next door, Tony Pérez the cool, laidback Hispanic guy. But who knew what boiled and bubbled beneath that surface appearance? Teams weren't subjected to the kind of media and social media scrutiny that they are today, and the money wasn't as great as it is now, so fans seemed less interested in the kind of dirt that doesn't cover an infield.

All I know is that when I was a fan and a player in the '70s before I got to the big leagues, the Red Sox and Athletics were the dominant teams in major league baseball. The Oakland A's of that era seemed to be the complete opposite of the squeaky clean Reds. That's all been talked about and documented before, so I'm not going to go into a whole lot of detail here, except to say that the spectrum with "creative tension" at one end and the "united clubhouse" at the other is often held up as an ideal. Both ends of this spectrum, though, may be myths. All I know is that talent can overcome a whole lot and winning on the field can cure a lot of what ails an organization off of it.

And I also know for certain that being on a championship-caliber ball club as a young player had an impact on me as a player, coach, and manager down the line. At the time, though, I was too busy enjoying the winning feeling, and then too eager to rid myself of the hateful feeling of having failed

win it all, to really give it much thought. Now that I've put some distance between myself and my playing days, some larger patterns emerge. I've moved beyond the simple "winning is good, losing is bad" duality, though I've got to say—there are times when I wish it could still be that simple.

I'm a big sports fan, so I hear things like this all the time. Best golfer to never win a major championship. Greatest player to never win a Super Bowl, an NBA Championship, a World Series ring, the Stanley Cup. As much as I love the game, I think my relationship with it would have been different—maybe not terrible, but definitely not as good—if I hadn't been fortunate enough to be involved in so many championships in my professional career. As you'll recall, Gally Gonzalez helped to fire the newly formed clay of my desire to win into a hardened vessel—kind of like a trophy with the figure of Mickey Mantle at bat atop a wooden base. Things weren't like they are today with the "everybody's a winner, everybody deserves a trophy" mentality. I coveted prizes for victory both then and now.

What fascinates me about winning is that as much as there are certain formulas for winning baseball—and here I'm talking about how to build a championship-caliber ball club, not just how to win an individual game—not everyone agrees completely about how to build a winner. Sure, most would agree that being strong up the middle of the diamond is important, but exceptions come to mind—not every winning team has that combination of skills. Some teams stress pitching and defense. Others want to mash and bash. I can be really simple about all this and say that you have to score more runs far more often than your opponent does, but we also know that there's more than one way to skin that cat.

Every player who fields the ball has to make the transition of getting the ball out of the glove and into his throwing hand. You do that ever since you first picked up a ball and glove, repeating the simple act thousands and thousands of times, and it becomes second nature. As a middle infielder, the longer you play the game the higher you climb up baseball's ladder and the more quickly you're expected to be able to make that move. A strong arm can make up for some of the bobbles that inevitably result when you move from fielding a ball to throwing a ball, but a lot of those bang-bang plays that don't go your way might be a result of a fractionally too slow transition.

As ballplayers, we have to make all kinds of other transitions, just as everyone has to do in their lives. Besides being exposed to winning organizations early in my career, I believe that another reason why I succeeded in the game was that from the very beginning of my career I made transitions. Good fielders have soft hands, which means that they give in to the force of a batted ball and don't fight it with force. I know that the idea of a player being "soft" usually has a negative association, but I use the word in a different way in this context. Knowing how to make transitions and developing a temperament that balances giving in to the ball with going after it are important skills to achieve success.

If Willie Stargell had me enrolled in his finishing school, then my trade to the Yankees was like going off to college and making that pivotal transition from something known and comfortable to something unknown. Not that the Pirates weren't a first-rate organization. I just wasn't with them long enough on the major league level to really absorb as much as I needed to. I had headed off to Caracas, Venezuela, to play winter ball and wasn't there but a week or two when my mother called to report that the papers were full of stories about a rumored deal that would bring me to the Yankees. That was

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