

BASEBALL DIGEST



OPENING DAY EDITION



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By Abe J. Shear
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Some players like Merv Rettenmund can just hit. Big park or small park, daytime or nighttime, home or away. Sure you can get better when you practice but if you can't hit . . .

I first met Merv (really!) in Ephesus (Turkey). A couple of us were talking baseball and Linda noted Merv's Oakland World Series ring (green and huge). We talked over the course of the cruise, hitting, managers, ballparks, pitchers. Merv has eight World Series rings – I listened – really.

What came through, in all of the conversations, was Merv's love and respect for the game. Baseball has been Merv's life and he insists that the game be played correctly, intelligently, and thoughtfully.

What a delight it was to visit Merv in San Diego. He has wonderful memories and, for sure, you will surely enjoy his perspective and his memories.

I Remember When, a book which includes the first 35 interviews in this series, is available for \$20. A check should be made payable to Abe Shear and mailed to him at Arnall Golden Gregory.

Merv Rettenmund “Player and Coach”

Shear: I am in San Diego with Merv Rettenmund and am about to learn a lot about baseball. What are your first memories of baseball?

Rettenmund: First memories of baseball would probably be my uncle taking me down to watch the Detroit Tigers in Tiger Stadium. We lived sixty miles away and it was probably the highlight of growing up. I used to just love to go down and look at the grass and I'd sit out there and watch the field and watch them take batting practice and I felt like that's what I wanted to do.

And how old were you?

I was probably six or seven.

You grew up in . . .

“Everybody enjoys the swinging of the bat”

Flint, Michigan.

And who taught you to throw a baseball?

We had a gentleman by the name of Monk and he was very wealthy. He was the largest single shareholder of General Motors stock and he supported all of the local athletic programs. Flint was an industrial town but we had tremendous sports teams and everybody had the opportunity to play the sports they wanted to. We always had instruction and we always had equipment. My parents both worked for General Motors and when I got older they gave me the opportunity to go to baseball camps.

Did your family follow baseball?

My dad loved it. My mother really was a good softball player and they followed my career when they were healthy enough. They showed up at every World Series I was in and usually every opening day. They liked to go to the games.

Did your dad play ball with you when you were a little boy?

We'd play catch all the time and stuff like that after he'd get home from working his eight hour shifts. He was a supervisor and he never was too tired to go out and play catch or hit fly balls to me down the street. I don't know how he did that. I'd be hitting them on roofs or something, you know.

You got the ball a little bit more as a pitcher and you were out in the middle of the field.

Oh for sure.

What position did you first play when you were a little boy?

I was a catcher. The truth is I was a catcher my whole career. The reason for that is my dad was a catcher. I used to really enjoy it. When I went to high school, I was a catcher and I was a catcher on our American Legion team. We had six players out there signed, three pitchers. We really had a talented group of players. I really and truly think that catching was my calling. I signed

as a catcher with the Baltimore Orioles and I went to spring training at that time. It was in Thomasville, Georgia and the one thing I could do – I could run. We had a sixty yard dash track there and everybody had to run. I don't know why. You don't run sixty yards in baseball, you know? My time was really, really, well it was pretty tops because I was a running back in college and I was drafted by Dallas because I could run. As soon as I ran my sixty yard dash they sent me upstairs and I was done working out for the day and I showed up the next day and the coach gave me an outfielder's glove and he said I was going to be a centerfielder.

You played ball in college?

Right.

At Ball State?

At Ball State, right.

Did you catch there?

I was a catcher and a centerfielder there. They had a catcher so I'd catch half the time and play centerfield half the time. I kind of knew they were going to switch me but I wish I had stayed with the catching part because I did like it a lot.

Did you catch any in the Majors?

No, I didn't. I tried it one time in an exhibition game and that was after not catching for four or five years and I spiked myself and rolled over and couldn't get up, so I gave it up. I mean you either do it or you don't. You have to be comfortable back there and I was flinching and I was grabbing at the ball and I wasn't following it off the bat. I mean you have to be able to do that.

Now when you were a little boy, did you like to hit more or field more?

I liked to hit. Everybody enjoys the swinging of the bat, you know? But I hated to go out and shag but I sure liked to stand up and swing the bat and I think everyone does now because even when you go to the big leagues, strength training is what they do. They hit for hours, that's all people do. They just hit and hit and hit and hit. I'm not sure if it's too much really.

And who really taught you to hit when you were a little boy?

I don't think anyone did. I think you figure it out as you go along. In little league, no one told me how to hit or how to hold the bat. I think that kids today do the same thing, they're like major

leaguers. I can watch them over at this facility I teach at and they come in there and one day they'll have a leg kick, the next day they won't have a leg kick. They'll watch a major leaguer and if he's doing good they'll copy him. I don't think that's all bad. But my first major league instructor that helped me out was Jimmy Frey. In the minor leagues I had a hitting coach by the name of Billy DeMars and he really helped me out. He gave me an opportunity. He was

pitch, you can't hit it. You can't pull it all the time, you know. You gotta take that pitch. If you watch a really good hitter, they should be watching the spin on the ball.

When did you first think that you could be a really good player?

When I went to college, I had athletic skills, the running. I could really run. I could really jump, anything in sports I could do. Football, I was really pretty good at but I didn't enjoy it. Baseball,

“Making the big leagues was really and truly one of the easiest things I ever did”

my Triple A manager and he was a hard man to work for but you had to work. I remember one time we took a bus trip from Toledo up to Rochester, New York. That's a long ride. As soon as we got to Rochester, we got off the bus, he told me to get dressed, we're taking batting practice. It was like eight in the morning or something, you know. But the thing is when you do stuff like that, I mean, you keep working at it and keep working at it.

What was the big difference between hitting in the batting cage where you saw everything down the middle and hitting in a game where you got just a few pitches and then went back to the bench for a while?

That's a very good point. I think one of the biggest issues in baseball today for hitters is they don't realize that they go into slumps taking batting practice. You don't have to track the ball. You don't have to control your eyes. You don't have to, you hit the high and inside pitch to left field and you hit it in the seats in batting practice. In the game no one can hit the same pitches so why practice swinging at it? You know you swing at pitches you can hit. I think in batting practice you have to have a game plan and all the kids that I taught over here, they're not old enough to have a game plan yet, but if I get high school kids or major league kids, I'll tell them to lay off the inside pitch and cover the others. That's where 75% of the pitches are. Your .250 hitter cannot hit the inside

I was much better than in high school, but I enjoyed it. When I first started professional baseball, after my second year, I was invited to Major League camp and it was a nice situation too because I went to Major League camp with the Baltimore Orioles. I looked around and liked the rules. I knew that I'd make the major leagues. Making the big leagues was really and truly one of the easiest things I ever did. And that's tough for most people to say that and I appreciate that because I didn't have to work really hard. I could run it, throw it, hit it, you know. So making the big leagues was simple.

What was it like to get in the locker room the first time to see all the ball players?

I was scared to death. Our locker room then was in Miami in the old ball park, in the city ball park. They actually had two locker rooms. They had the big locker room where all the major leaguers went and then they had the other room, we called it the “head ‘em up and herd ‘em out room” because this was going to be the first wave going back to the minor leagues, and the lockers were stuck in the corner somewhere. I mean it was a terrible situation but you didn't give a darn. We were happy just to be there. I would say I was probably nervous every day.

Do you know what your number was?

Yeah, minor leagues I remember it. I was like forty something or fifty something. That was different, but when I was in the minor league camp the first year, it was

141 and that was in the grey uniforms. The grey uniforms were the regular players. The white uniforms were the pitchers. We had six or seven minor league teams and my number was 141.

Who told you that you were going to make the major leagues?

No one had to tell me.

When you found out you made the team, who told you?

In 1968, I broke with the ball club. Billy Hunter told me I was going to make the team. Paul Blair had the flu or he was sick or something. I don't know what it was. So I opened with the club and I went two for three and then they sent me down. You know they said don't rent a house but then the year after that I was minor league player of the year and I knew that, I mean no one had to tell me I was going to make the club. I knew either that or they were going to trade me.

What was it like to play for that Baltimore team? They had some great ballplayers.

Well, when you played with the Baltimore Orioles back then, they went to spring training just to get the pitching set up for the World Series. That's the way you had to feel, because you were going to be good. When we played every game in spring training, we played to win every game. We would go 20 and 6 in spring training. No one remembers records in spring training but we did. That meant something to us you know. You did not want to lose in any spring training games and we didn't. We won 108 during the year. We went to Japan, we went 15-1-1. You had to win.

Earl Weaver did not like to lose very much, did he?

Oh, he said that, and that was repeated to me the other day [Note: Just after Earl Weaver had died.] The worst loser ever, well that was Weave. But we had to win games and he was so tough about the game and you'd appreciate this because you were a baseball player. But when you're leading off first base and the first baseman is playing behind you or on the bag and there's a line drive behind you to the first baseman and the runner stands and gets doubled up, Weaver found there's no excuse for that. That's not good base running. That's not allowed, you know. You'd have to get back.

What was it like the first year you played? Do you remember?

I don't remember the first year on the, Jesus, that's a long time ago. Very different too. No one wore batting gloves. World Series games were all in the afternoon.

When you grew up who were your favorite players?

Harvey Kuehn. Al Kaline was a favorite but Kuehn was my favorite player.

He was a great hitter.

Great hitter, really good, in fact he was traded for Rocky Colovito one year and they traded the league leading hitter for the home run champion and that made big news in Detroit but Kuehn was a really good hitter.

What about your favorite pitchers?

I liked all the Detroit pitchers. The Tigers were my team. They never could win. They were always in second place you know. It was like I said that to Billy Martin one time when he was the manager of the Tigers. We went to a function together and I said you might as well let me speak first because we're always in first place and you can speak second because your team is always in second. Billy Martin, one reason I said that to him, I was in Flint and I felt comfortable there.

What about that Detroit ball park?

I liked to go to that old ballpark downtown, Tiger Stadium, and I loved to play in there. I really hit well there. It was a good park to hit in.

Big centerfield.

460 feet maybe to center. I don't know what it was.

What was it like to play in the World Series for the first time?

Great stadium and then the 3rd deck had to be reinforced. They were spending more money in the off season reinforcing the stadium. That was one of their biggest expenses.

Did you used to follow baseball on the radio or TV or the paper?

Radio all the time. George Kell and I mean it was Jerry Purdy was their second baseman, the Tigers' second baseman. I remember him. One year he slid to home and broke his ankle and I felt like that broke mine because I felt so bad you know. But they always have finished second so they'd get your hopes up.

The Yankees were pretty good.

The Yankees were good.

The Yankees won every year.

Every year. Every darn year.

It was like the Yankees and the Dodgers, the Giants.

Yes.

Now a couple of other questions.

What's the favorite team you played for?

The strangest thing is it would have to be a team that I did well for, so it had to probably be the Baltimore team because I really, really did well the first few years there. I really, really did well and my on-base percentage was leading the league. It was really up there high. I thought it was excellent until I saw Bonds a few years ago had oh my God numbers. His numbers were special, you know. I mean I hit for power and then my numbers were good across the board for two years.

What was it like to play in the World

“Weaver sent me into the game to pinch run for Frank Robinson”

A long ways.

A long way to centerfield. It was built, it was a square you know. It's short to right, kinda semi OK to left, right center was short and then centerfield was a long way away.

The upper deck in right field...

Overhang. You could go back for a fly ball and you'd wave for the ball and it would fall on the upper deck.

Right. It had very bad seating but it

Series for the first time?

The first time was 1969 and we were in Shea Stadium. Things were not going very well for us and I was the fastest guy in the team and there was a situation when Weaver sent me into the game to pinch run for Frank Robinson. I had trouble getting out of the dugout because the pressure was so deep, you know. I was scuffling a bit. I jogged up to second and Frank said “Look, I'm

going to go into the dugout this time, but don't ever come out to pinch run for me again."

Do you remember the first home run you hit?

Yeah, I do. I don't remember the pitcher. I'll tell you what – it was 1968 and I was just called up and we were in a pennant race and I won the game. It was an Earl Weaver three run homer that won the game for us and Weaver said in the paper (it was the only nice thing he ever said about me), he said, "That's the reason you call them up, just to win one game." That's the only time he ever said anything good, though.

What was the favorite team you coached for?

Favorite team I coached? Probably the Padres. I was here for ten years and I coached for some really good teams. The Oakland A's, that was good. We had to win because we had all the best players but we only won one World Series because that's how we went in. We had a lot of injuries one year. I enjoyed the Padres.

You had really good managers when you coached too.

Well, I had, yeah. Most of the managers I worked with, La Russa, Bruce Bochy, a few of them that are really respected a lot. Doug Radar and Jim Fregosi.

What was the best ballpark you ever played in?

I think Tiger Stadium. I swear I enjoyed that ballpark. I could see the ball good there. People don't understand it, it was like Wrigley Field a lot. The

Tigers Stadium was always a good park. Maybe they had weak pitching, I don't know. But I sure did love it.

What's the worst park you played in?

Oh, that's simple too. San Francisco. The old park, Candlestick. What a miserable facility that was.

You've got a lot of stories. If you've got one story you've got to tell that's funny, what's a funny story?

I don't know. I've got a couple of things. I was mentioning to you about talking about Earl Weaver. We would always say if he died, donate his heart, because he never used it himself, you know.

There's one funny story I remember, and this is the way the game used to be played. We're playing the Boston Red Sox and their pitcher was a guy by the name of Luis Tiant and Tiant was a clown but he was very competitive. We were battling for our lives out there.

We had a catcher in Baltimore named Andy Etchebarren and his eyebrows grew all the way across his head so they called him "one brow" and Luis didn't think he was too attractive of a man so he walked up to home plate one day, looked at the plate and he looked back at Etch and when he looked back, he went, "Ahhhh!". He yelled like that and it said, "Etch, do me a favor and don't take your mask off." So he got the plate again and he looked back and he said, "Etch, you can be anything in the jungle you want." And then every time he'd be running in the field, you'd hear him yell as he ran by Etch.

Has the game gotten a lot slower?

I think so. I think one reason is because the pitchers throw too darn many pitches. The pitchers today can't command most of their pitches. These kids don't pitch enough in the minor leagues. They can manage maybe a fastball. They can't command their breaking ball. They don't command their second, third and fourth pitches as well as the pitchers did years ago. We had a four man rotation when I first broke into the big leagues.

And every day we would face a live pitcher, a real starter. What is it now? They try to mix up pitches until they find the pitch the hitter can't hit, you know.

What's it like to have so many World Series rings? You've got a drawer full.

I've got a bag full. I only have eight but the thing is, I always say that I only have eight but my goal was to get ten and I missed it. I was short, but I know I was really successful.

That's a great big pile of them, that's for sure.

Every once in a while I'll go and look. They're all at the bank but I usually take one if I go on a trip.

That's how I met you.

Right. In Ephesus, Turkey. Which one did I have?

You had your Oakland ring on.

OK, and this is the got darnest thing. Every time they'd see each other they'd have a trivia question and I was always at the game and I'm sitting in the movie theater and they would ask the question – who hit the double – "Frank Robinson", and I'm answering every question.

Thanks, this was just perfect.

Merv Rettenmund
"Player and Coach"

59th EDITION

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