

BASEBALL DIGEST

★★ WORLD SERIES EDITION ★★

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By Abe J. Shear
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I love watching good pitching and am totally mesmerized by great pitching. This has never been more true than when watching John Smoltz, particularly when the count was 0-2. The batter was more amused than aggressive – mostly wondering what pitch was going to be the strikeout pitch.

What makes a great pitcher isn't having one signature pitch, it is the willingness to throw any pitch any time, the confidence the pitcher has in the catcher and the pitcher's knowledge of the hitter. It doesn't hurt that the batter knows he has little chance. Think Koufax – think Maddux – think Smoltz.

So next year when John Smoltz will surely be Cooperstown bound, it will be so deserved, an achievement of a great pitcher, one who loved the big games, one who amazingly became a lights-out closer, one who was remarkably able to change his pitching motion in a week, one who came back from big injuries – and one who gave and continues to give to the community. A true Hall of Famer.

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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.

John Smoltz “Big Game Pitcher”

Shear: John, what are your first memories of baseball?

Smoltz: Well, I had to quit playing the accordion! That's what I was doing from the age of 4 to 7. I was following the family, that's what they knew. They were accordion players, so I asked them if I could play baseball, and probably t-ball like everybody else. My dad was my first coach, and it was in Warren, Michigan. So I didn't come from an athletic family or someone that said, you know, “Hey, let's just play a game of catch.” It was more music and a lot of hard work trying to learn the accordion.

And what prompted you to want to play baseball when you were a little boy?

“ I went to a team that needed pitching.”

You know, I don't know if it was watching it on TV – it was just something that I vividly remember telling my mom. You know, “I want to be a Major League baseball player”. And then to an Italian mom who maybe didn't have any sports knowledge, it was probably something she could easily have turned down. Thankfully, she didn't.

You said your dad was your first coach, but did he know baseball well, or did he just want to coach his son?

I think he was just putting in the time. It was at a local church, and yeah, he knew baseball enough to coach from growing up watching it. Probably didn't play

much of it. He, ironically, was in the seminary and decided that that wasn't his calling or this conversation wouldn't even be happening I guess.

Probably not.

But he was very supportive and he gave me every opportunity to play. He drove me all over the place. And from an early age, I guess I could throw a baseball pretty well.

When you were little, you didn't pitch, I would think.

No, I didn't start pitching until, you know, when I physically could.

I always went outside and threw the ball against the wall – a rubber ball.

Emulated anybody I saw on TV –

Tigers primarily. And I had no problem

inventing games – you know, playing the traditional games that kids don't play today – strikeout and all that stuff. But I loved it enough to where I, every day, I did something baseball-related.

But you played basketball too?

Played basketball, a little bit of football. You know, again, my parents were very supportive and let me play and just try all the different things I wanted to try. And then when it became pretty apparent, I think, that I was going to probably be a baseball player, football went away by about 7th grade. Whatever it was, I could throw it pretty far and pretty hard.

Did you like hitting and fielding too, or mostly pitching?

I played every position but catcher. I didn't probably, at that time, think about myself only as a pitcher until I got to high school. That was probably where you could see that maybe the future in pitching would be better than another position.

And I loved basketball. Basketball is probably my first love as far as playing it as much as I could. Baseball was something I just was much better at.

So you pitched when you were like 11, 12. And were you dominating over the other kids?

Probably. Yeah, I would say that. I was a small kid that threw very hard. And I guess it came pretty naturally. I never had a lesson. No one ever taught me how to pitch. I just kind of picked it up and did it.

When did you first throw a curve ball? Who taught you to throw a curve ball?

Nobody taught me how to throw it. I would read books. I would look at, you know, again, more emulating what people would do. I was probably 12 or 13. I probably threw it earlier than I would suggest you throw it. The one thing that I was able to do is throw it correctly, which is odd because I never really had a coach who would say, "How are you throwing that?" The problem was nobody could catch it. So I didn't throw it as often because there weren't a lot of kids who could catch it. It was a big breaking ball.

So you're not really going to try to slow it down at that point, even though it'd be advantageous for you to learn the change-up. I never really had one, never had one in my whole career. And probably going back to playing that type of baseball, the kids that you would slow it down to probably would have a chance to hit it. So, your opportunities to use change-ups in Little League are very limited because the guys who are the great hitters at that age probably would be the only ones you could throw it to.

So it was a tension between the coaches who want to win and teaching you to play better, or more completely, maybe?

Yes.

Did you have good pitching coaches in high school?

No, never really had a pitching coach. The guys who were my coaches in high school – it's kind of a neat story. My junior and senior year, I transferred schools. My basketball coach just took on the baseball job for the 2 years I was there. He has been a great friend of mine. But, he would readily tell you he didn't know much about baseball, and just kind of did what I said. He asked me a lot of questions. So, I was self-taught, really. Everything: self-taught delivery, self-taught grips, everything.

What position did you play in high school when you weren't pitching?

Shortstop, primarily. I could play

Yes, it was an extraordinary season to have and then the next year I got walked like 30, 35 times intentionally. But, I always felt like I could hit, you know. And my last swing of my high school career was a game-winning, extra-inning walk-off homerun to win the championship. And, to this day, it's the greatest moment, including anything I've done in big leagues, because it's one of those things that you dream of, you know. And it happened against a team that – we were like 15 and 15, and the other team was 22 and 2. So, it was a pretty special game.

It's interesting how everybody's got their own special memory of something that was really just unbelievable.

Well, what made it so special – it was in the Diamond Classic. And we, like I said, we weren't a very good baseball team, but we got invited because of me, and I'd been there 4 years. And so, Friday I win the game. Friday I pitched a no-hitter against my old team that I transferred from. That was ...

Special.

... special. Monday, I win. So I pitched Friday and Monday, and the championship's on Wednesday. Well, I'm not going to pitch, so I'm playing short, and there's like 1,200 to 1,500 people at this game. It's just packed. And we jump up to a big lead – 4-nothing – which against this team was extraordinary. Well, they tie it up 4-4, bases loaded in the 3rd, nobody out. And I called out my coach – which was my basketball coach – I called him out to the mound from shortstop, and I said, "I can get out of this jam." He said, "Are you sure?" I said, "Yes, I can get out of this jam." I get out of the jam, and then I pitched the 4th, and I pitched the 5th, and now I'm pretty tired. And ...

Not a save possibility?

No. Then I pitched the 6th, then I pitched the 7th. The game's still tied. Then I pitched the top of the 8th, and I'm exhausted. Now, I've pitched Friday, Monday and now virtually 5 innings, and then in the bottom of the 8th, I hit the homerun to win it. It was a 7-inning game and I hit it in extra innings. It was a unique situation where I had known a couple of kids on the other team that I'd played with, and everybody rushed the

“Dale Murphy was the guy for me in Atlanta.”

Well, a curve ball is hard to catch.

Yes.

I remember that when I caught I tried to learn how to catch a left-handed curveball, and after it went by me 10 straight times, I asked the pitcher, “How do you do this?” Did you learn how to throw a change-up before you learned to throw a curve ball?

No, I don't think I did. The one problem with youth baseball is we're not teaching other positions. We're just kind of teaching catching and pitching. And, you know, if you've got a live arm, kids can't hit something that's really hard.

outfield, but mostly shortstop.

And you liked hitting, I'll bet.

Yes. I had a unique situation. My first 2 years of high school, the coach that I had wouldn't let me hit and all I did was pitch. So I was a little frustrated, and after 2 years of that same scenario playing out, I transferred. In my junior year, I went 48 for 96 and hit a bunch of homeruns and set the school record for hits and RBIs. So, it was my first year getting a chance to hit.

That is a 500 batting average.

Yes.

That's, wow – a 5's pretty unusual.

field. So that's why that memory will always be special.

That's a great memory. When did you first think that you could play Major League baseball?

Probably my junior year in high school. I had always been told about, you know, playing in "the show" – we didn't even have showcase tournaments then, we just had travel baseball. And I played against a lot of good players and felt like I held my own, but I grew 7 inches between my sophomore and junior year. And all that did was give me a little bit more confidence and stability because, what I tell people all the time, I was 5 foot nothing with size 12 feet, so something had to give. And I grew in the body and coordination and fastball velocity and then I started playing in all these big tournaments and seeing the scouts. I had a determination that that I was going to play. I'd signed to go to Michigan State, so I was going to play college baseball, possibly college basketball as well. And that was going to be how I was going to pursue my dream. And, fortunately, I got signed late, but worked out a deal with the Tigers and bypassed college and the rest is history.

I'm going to back up in just a second. You really only played a little in the minor leagues. You were only in the Minor Leagues 2 or 3 years?

Well, what happened was, I got signed by the Tigers and it was late, so I missed rookie ball and I went to A-ball and half of AA and got traded to the Atlanta Braves.

You played in Lakeland?

Played in Lakeland. I was having a horrible season – like 5 and 11 – team was terrible, and I got traded, which was probably the most devastating thing that had ever happened to me at that point, thinking I wasn't wanted. But I went to a team that needed pitching. And the opportunity to pitch at an early age was there and I spent basically 2 and a half years in the minors and then got called up.

Now, backing up a little bit further. When you were a little boy, I'd guess the first ballpark you would've gone to was Tigers Stadium...

Tigers Stadium. Yeah, my grandfather worked on the ground crew there for like 20 plus years. So any chance my dad

could take me to the stadium, we'd sit in "roaming" seats. He'd just get us in through the ground crew. And we'd just sit until somebody said, "Hey, those are our seats." And I got to see what his life was like, you know, being on the ground crew, working with the guys. Then he moved to the press room, which is where all the executives go, and the owner, and you know, I met all those people. And he used to tell people that, you know, his grandson was going to play for the Tigers someday. And I used to have to tell my grandfather "Hey, stop". But it was cool. I got to see the behind-the-scenes a little bit.

saw the town go crazy. And so, there's some direct connection with the irony of getting drafted by the Tigers and this whole thing playing out that my grandfather was proud of his grandson like everyone is, and he probably over-promoted me. I can only imagine the Bill Campbells, the Al Kalines, all those guys. They used to call my grandfather Father John, it's like all right, whatever. Okay, nice story, let me get in the room. Shoot, it played out. And I remember going to Al Kaline after I'd signed and after I'd been in the big leagues, seeing him all the time. I'm like, you're not going to remember this, but I was the

“No disrespect to the TV guys, I would watch TV and listen to Ernie Harwell.”

How did he get to the grounds crew?

Oh, that's a great question. I never did ask him. He owned a bakery; the ground crew was a side job. You know, it was something that he did during the season. And he did for a long time, and then they made him retire at, like 71.

And he was in the press box then, for a while?

Then he went to the press box, yes. And he had quite a collection of stuff that – you know, he's no longer with us, but he had a collection, as you can imagine, of Tiger paraphernalia and bats and stuff.

Well, I was going to ask you about that, and I don't mean to ask anything current, but since he was on the grounds crew and in the press box, do you think that during your career it was really important to you to treat all those people extra well?

Yes, it was a unique experience. I mean, he would stand outside the door and would let people in, like if they had the credentials – kind of like what I do now, when I go in. And to see that part, and to play baseball and to be at Tigers Stadium, and watch all your heroes. You know, watch the game, or stand with him and then the game would start I'd go to the stands. I think what was neat is my dad gave me so many opportunities. We didn't live close. It was an hour and a half. We went to the '84 clinching game when they won the World Series. We

little snout-nosed kid sitting next to my grandfather as you'd come in and he'd tell the story. He goes, "Oh, yeah yeah yeah".

Who were your favorite players for the Tigers? Or in the American League?

It was Tigers. It was anybody – Whitaker, Gibson, Trammell, Parrish, you know. I used to watch Mark "The Bird" Fidrych pitch. Anyone who had a Tiger uniform on, they could do no wrong in my eyes. But, of course Jack Morris and the whole pitching staff.

I'm not going to talk about Jack.

To see that, up close, and to be in a uniform in their locker room. Because I had that unique thing where I signed so late, they took me to the big club and worked out for three weeks to end the season. So, I literally, as a brand new rookie player, stayed with the big league club. And I would work out with them. You talk about unique and seeing first hand! Alan Trammell probably, for me, set the table of what a first-class player is and how to treat people right. You know, you can be thrown in that environment and some pretty brassy and grouchy guys can ruin your experience really quick. I was a fish out of water and Trammell came up to me, shook my hand, said "Hey, I'm Alan Trammell." I'm like, "Yeah, I know." He said, "Anything you need while you're here, you know, don't be afraid to ask." For me, it's been a

privilege to do that ever since. And of course, Dale Murphy was the guy for me in Atlanta. Did the same thing. It was like when you think about somebody and hold them in high regard, and then they live up to it, it's a really great thing. But the opposite happens a lot, where you can't wait to meet that guy and for whatever reason, bad day or whatever, he shatters your dreams. I'm sure many people have had some experiences like that.

were on the west coast, and I would listen to 2 or 3 innings before I'd fall asleep. But I'd always listen to Ernie Harwell. No disrespect to the TV guys, I would watch TV and listen to Ernie Harwell. I got to know him personally. He knew my grandfather. To speak to what kind of man he was, he came to my grandfather's funeral when he probably didn't have to. It was just pretty neat to grow up on a voice and to have that voice be your ticket to baseball. He used

what to expect, small town kid, kind of first time I'd ever been out on my own. The Tigers in Lakeland was more prototypical of old time baseball and kind of stuck in the 30's if you will. They didn't have a lot of state of the art stuff. There was no flashiness.

I was there; it was basic.

Yes. And, you know, little dorm rooms that were as big as where we're sitting right now. More like, not boot camp, but more structured, regimented and not a lot to do. That's where I learned to start playing golf and fish.

Did you have good coaching then, or were you still pretty much on your own?

There were plenty of people in spring training. It's just when the individual clubs would leave, they had a manager and that was it. Roving pitching instructors – there were 2 of them. The Tigers back then had this theory based on the 1920 Yankees; if they didn't have it, we don't need it type thing. And they were behind the times, big time, and didn't spend money, especially in their minor leagues.

When you were first drafted and played for the Tigers, they were in the very old stadium, right?

Yes.

What was the stadium like to be wandering around?

Awesome. It was one of those unique, old-time enclosed stadiums. It was one of those stadiums that even if you were behind the pole, it wasn't that bad, because that was the only bad seat in the house. You know, when you grow up with that kind of history and you're seeing it grow older, I never thought twice about them getting a new stadium. I understand why they had to, but there was a lot of history and a lot of memories in that old Tiger stadium. It wasn't in the best part of town, and probably wasn't the easiest place to get to, but I think from the standpoint of my dad and me and my brother, we had some great memories sitting in that old stadium, a kind of unique stadium that doesn't exist anymore and probably won't because of modern technology.

When you were sort of playing out that first year after getting drafted, did you get to go pitch off the mound in the stadium?

“I don't think I would have minded playing for Earl Weaver.”

You said your grandfather collected stuff. As a child, did you collect?

You know, I've never gotten an autograph ever. I never asked for anybody's autograph. I did collect baseball cards. My buddy and I – Chuck and I, at one point, we had over 40,000 baseball cards. And then I can remember where I was when I opened up the 5th or 6th pack, this one given day and my first card was in it. To see it was weird.

I was going to ask – what was it like?

Well, you know, if you ask every baseball player, I would say they'd like to have more input on the picture that's chosen, but it's pretty surreal for a guy who collected them and put sets together manually. To me, that was the greatest challenge. My mom would reward me, or we'd have different bonuses that if I did this or did that in sports, you know, I could go buy a pack or box of baseball cards. So, that's how it started. And then I just remember sitting outside, and I was opening up some packs, and I was like “No way!” That's my card.

That is pretty neat. Now, when you were growing up, I'm guessing you listened to the Tigers games on the radio, too.

All the time.

I had the real pleasure of talking once with Ernie Harwell at some length.

I'm guessing that you listened to Harwell almost every night?

Every night. Yeah, I would probably cheat a little bit, and my parents didn't know this. During school nights I'd set the alarm for 10:30 when the Tigers

to always speak at the old-timers banquet in Lansing to all the young youth teams that won. They'd go and he was so special.

As an announcer, do you ever think about Harwell and what he would have done or how he would have done it?

Well it was a little different, because he was painting a picture on the radio. You know, I wonder what it would've been if he'd have done more TV and stuff like that. But to hear him on the radio and to broadcast – like, I think what was so unique about him is he literally did paint a picture. He would use statements like, a guy would take a called 3rd strike and he, I remember he'd say, “It's like the barn by the side of the road that watched the car go by” or something like that. Now all of a sudden you have an image of – you know, you can actually see the two. When you weren't able to watch the broadcast, but could feel like you were right there. It was pretty neat.

I was struck by what I read when he retired; he wrote a note that basically he said on the radio “I want to thank everybody for putting me under their pillow and taking me to the lake and taking me on vacation”. I mean, he really did understand his audience extraordinarily well.

He was brilliant. I mean, he really was. He wrote well, and he wrote these poems and these different short stories.

Now, what was it like to go to spring training the first time?

I was a little bit nervous. Not knowing

Well, I actually got to pitch in an All-Star game there my senior year. I played with Jim Abbott and got an experience that was unique. Empty stadium, they're cleaning it, you know, none of the sounds you would normally hear. But played there, and I went "Wow." This was before I got drafted. This is where it's at. Got a chance to maybe even play a little shortstop. The grass was super long and so you play that out in your mind and you think "This is it." This is every hometown kid's dream. And then I got drafted and never got a chance to pitch there. In the new stadium, of course, I pitched there when inter-league play came around.

The old stadium was as quirky a stadium as I think I'd ever been in.

Most of the seats were facing the wrong direction.

Exactly.

It was a football stadium that they played baseball in.

You were sitting a little like this [he moves awkwardly sideways].

You sat sideways. Nothing was ever in front of you that was supposed to be.

Right.

It was really weird. Now, ignoring the Braves entirely, if in your career you could have played for another manager, particularly thinking of managers that are not current, who might you have enjoyed playing for, do you think?

0-2 on a batter, we would just watch because the batter had no idea what you were going to throw at that point. How important was it to have a great catcher?

Well, I went through a lot. I started with some veteran guys. But for me, it was probably the most important of anybody on the staff because I lived with movement and stuff in the dirt. I wanted them chasing, and I led the league in wild pitches there for a while. And then when Greg Olsen came along, it was probably our best match-up, not only our personalities, but his ability was so flexible, he gave you the confidence there was no way I'm going to let the ball get by him. We've had this great friendship ever since. I wish his career would've been longer. Then, from Javey Lopez to Brian McCann, especially breaking in a young catcher – that was going to be difficult for them because of my style of pitching. And as time went on, I developed such better control and was in tune with my mechanics, but early on, I was one of the hardest guys for them to catch, I'm sure.

And I'm sure that whether in high school or the pros, if you're not confident that the catcher is going to catch it...

There's no doubt, it's a mental thing, like if you're catching me on the side and you don't wear any equipment and we're throwing in the bullpen, I'm not

What were the favorite ballparks that you got to play in?

There's something special about Dodger Stadium. It's old, but it doesn't look old – that and Shea Stadium have the same timeframe and Shea Stadium was beat up. The old Yankee Stadium was pretty unique. The fans – I think what makes a stadium besides its architecture is what goes on inside. And the fans inside of old Yankee Stadium, bar none, might have the most intimidating fans in baseball. Philly is pretty close when it comes to that.

Oakland fans are pretty rowdy.

Oakland – not getting a chance to play that much in Oakland, but yes. Coors Field, to me, was always the most picturesque, kind of unique, never wanted to pitch there and didn't care if I played there, but I loved watching a game. It really is a neat, special place. But, to me, I couldn't stand Fulton County Stadium, and I played almost half a career there and I loved The Ted. I think they really did a nice job making that stadium a fair and modern stadium.

I think the inside of the stadium is pretty fabulous. I just have a few more questions. The one thing I wanted to ask about your career, everybody asks about all your pitching, but you did have 3 stolen bases, I think.

Right.

You only got thrown out twice.

Yes, and one was a bad call!

Okay. So you got thrown out 1 and a half times. That was just basically speed wasn't it?

It was early on. You know I was a pinch runner my first 6 years, which I couldn't really understand. Actually, my first 2 years, under Russ Nixon, I was the prototypical pinch runner. But I took every opportunity that presented itself that I had the guts to finally go, and I think I have a post-season stolen base in there. I didn't mind the facets of the game that kept from making me a one-way player. Like, I didn't think of myself just as a pitcher. I felt like I could do all the things I needed to do to help myself win a baseball game, which was important to me. So, if it was stealing a bag, then I was going to go for it.

And when – a few weeks ago, you

“But I really believe my desire and my goal and dream took me there.”

Good question. I mean, you know getting a brief time with Sparky Anderson, I think he would have been a unique guy, just high energy. He was such a big figure for the game. I don't think I would have minded playing for Earl Weaver and his passion for the game. He used to call it like it is. Tommy Lasorda would've been one of those guys, too – you know, he bled for his team.

Now, this is your interview, not mine – but, I don't think there's ever been more fun than watching batters when you were pitching well, when you were

doing it. I've hit more guys because they think "Ah, just throw it." To me it becomes that I know what the ball can do. I know the velocity and I used to really have a problem if I didn't feel like the guy could catch it – especially, not only in high school, but, you know, man on 3rd, it affects your pitch selection. If you know that you can bounce that slider or curveball, and the guy's going to block it, it leaves you the freedom to do it. But if there's any hesitation whatsoever, more than likely you're going to hang it. And so the catcher is so underappreciated and undervalued.

went to Cooperstown, tell me what you thought of the city. What did you think of – not just the Hall of Fame – the whole experience?

It was really unique. If you had told me and built it up, it still would have exceeded my expectations. I want to go there when it isn't that busy. I really do want to go one year and experience the town and all the unique little places. I could go places here in Atlanta and most people are going to know who I am. The sports people are going to always pick you out. You cannot go to Cooperstown and not have anybody who doesn't know who you are, for the most part. They're all baseball fans. That's like the elite. So, I was really – it really was a neat, neat experience.

And, my last question – What do you think made you such a great pitcher? Is it mental, is it preparation, is it pitching, is it coaching?

You know what, I think the desire that I had superseded exceeded anybody else's desire. I don't know that I've come across anybody else that had more

competitive grit to be as good as you can be. I didn't care what was at stake. I didn't care if we were just playing basketball up to 10, I was going to beat you. Because I feel like giving my best in everything that I did was what my DNA was. I think my dad taught me that in a variety of ways. He never let me win at anything. I mean, until now – now, he can't win at anything. You know, it's like it came full-circle. But I really believe my desire and my goal and dream took me there. I really do. I don't think there is anybody that worked at it or believed he could do it more than me, and I wanted to be the guy. I wanted to throw the pitch. I wasn't afraid to fail. All those things, I don't know where they ultimately came from, but it was something that drove me for a career that should've lasted a lot less because of injuries. Perseverance and that desire to just not let it be. I was never going to be status quo.

You came back twice from really big arm injuries.

Yes. The one thing people ask me a lot

is what was the thing I'm most proud of? I think the challenges of that and making a change in the middle of my career. I went from throwing in a natural motion to side-arm in one start. Like, literally, I don't think anybody knows how hard that is to go from not practicing it to making a start on Monday and then Saturday is a whole new repertoire, a whole new everything. And I did that in '98 or '99, right before my Tommy John surgery. But to go to the bullpen was as hard of a challenge I've ever taken on with no knowledge or information. What defines me is I'm going to go all in. Whatever it is, if I'm going to do something, I'm going all in. I'm not half-stepping it, I'm not going to just punch the time clock. I'm going to go all in. And that kind of defined my career, for the most part.

Okay. I don't have any more questions. That's a great place to end.

Thanks.

You got it.

“Big Game Pitcher”

John Smoltz

64th EDITION

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