

# BASEBALL DIGEST

## ★★ WORLD SERIES EDITION ★★

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*By Abe J. Shear*  
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One of the most overlooked groups of people involved with a baseball team is the medical team, not the trainer, but the doctors who tend to injuries large and small. Their office lobbies are filled with players from throughout the team's entire organization.

Injuries from hit balls, from quick turns, from slides (head-first comes to mind). Injuries from over-use and under-preparation. The doctor's task is to mend, to predict and to analyze. Why is the player always hurt? Should we trade a player or for a player?

The Atlanta Braves are fortunate that they have a number of doctors and I was lucky to have one of them, Gary Lourie, agree to be interviewed. He is also a big fan and his window into the sport of baseball is unique and his opinions are insightful. I know you will enjoy his perspectives on the sport.

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### Gary Lourie "The Doctor's View"

**Shear: Here we are with Gary Lourie. So, you grew up where?**

I grew up in Syracuse, New York.

**Tell me what your first memories were of baseball.**

Probably, growing up in Syracuse, baseball was not quite as prevalent sport as other sports like hockey and lacrosse were. So, actually I grew up playing football and lacrosse. I played lacrosse in college, but early on started to take a love for baseball because the Yankees' AAA team was in Syracuse, the Syracuse Chiefs. That was not far from where I grew up, and my dad was a physician, the team physician for Syracuse University, but he also helped out with the Chiefs. Actually, believe it or not, at that time Bobby Cox was our manager. Bobby Cox was the manager of the Syracuse Chiefs when I was a little kid going to games with my father, not knowing that probably 20-30 years later I'd be the team physician for the Braves with Bobby Cox right here.

**Really?**

That was one of Bobby's first jobs. He had played in the Yankee organization and decided to manage. If Syracuse wasn't the first, it was close to the first and that kind of propelled him after that. Going to those games back then, because Syracuse was a small town, basically it was Syracuse University football and Syracuse Chiefs, and just about every night we could get away, my dad was either working the game or I could go down there with friends of mine. That's how I got exposed to baseball first. I

actually didn't play it. I actually played lacrosse in college, but fell in love with Syracuse and fell in love with the Chiefs. At that point, just about everybody in that area loved the Yankees, so I grew up a huge Yankees fan. Interestingly enough, my father, who grew up in a tiny town in South Carolina, fell in love with the Yankees because at that time that's what they listened to on the radio. So he was a huge Yankees fan, ended up in Syracuse, ended up watching the Chiefs. That's basically where I found my love for baseball.

**Bobby Cox's pretty minimal major league career was with the Yankees.**

Correct.

**He played one season, maybe in the '60s for the Yankees. A really bad Yankee team. And he was a third baseman, as I remember. That may be wrong.**

No, I think you're right. I can remember that. He was a phenomenal manager, and even then he was very lively when he would manage a game.

**See, you got to meet him when he was ...**

Actually, I met him briefly more as a kid getting a baseball signed but never really had any kind of relationship with him until I worked with the Braves here in Atlanta.

**That's quite a circular route. Did you get to go out on the field when your dad was the doctor?**

They would not allow us to go on the field, not even in the dugout. That's pretty much still the rule today. When

I work the Braves here, they're very careful who is allowed into the clubhouse, and certainly not at all into the dugout. Sometimes in Orlando, during spring training, you'll have guests come in there, but in those days, these stands, these fields, were very small. Even like today, with minor league baseball, you can get real close to it, but there you got really close to it.

**You're really a specialist today, but your father was what kind of doctor?**

My father was a neurosurgeon, so he was really a specialist. But in baseball, that covered every aspect of the spine, the upper extremities, pretty much every injury you had ultimately could be somehow brought back to the back or the core muscles, like an oblique injury in a pitcher. And again, at that time too, even like now when I cover a Braves game being primarily a hand and wrist / upper extremity surgeon, we still cover every aspect of the body. Three of us cover the Braves that are orthopedic surgeons. Each of us kind of has our own specialty.

Back then, there were probably even fewer doctors covering more areas of the body. I'm sure you know the challenge in baseball, and the reward that comes with it, is that it's probably one of the most difficult sports to take care of in terms of injury because the injury spectrum is so diverse. Football – because I take care of the football team at Georgia Tech – it's pretty clear there's

see a player go in that way, because the management of an injury to a torn ligament in a thumb, to a dislocated shoulder, to a head injury, to a neck injury, and yet we push it and we push it and they say they won't do it and then they do it. In the heat of the game, that's going to be their chance to get on base more. It's a challenge to take care of baseball players, but it's also the most rewarding sport to take care of because the way you approach games, the staff you have, the trainers you have, it is an incredibly rewarding experience.

**It's a long season, too. In some cases you've got time to get people healed and get them back on the field, I imagine.**

It's incredible. You're right. There are 160+ games, plus there's a whole spring training going into it. The problem with it is you have a lot of time to get them back, but any injury you have in baseball – for instance a blister in a pitcher can be incapacitating. You can spend two or three hours going over it and they miss a start. Whereas if you have that injury to a catcher, you basically put a band-aid on it and they'd be playing. So the injury they have is really dependent on the player that it occurs to. Every time they have an injury, even if it's a simple fracture like Mallex Smith has right now, you have the fracture and then it takes a long time to heal. During that time, all their other baseball related muscles really get out of shape. So once that

the injury pattern can be. They do listen to us. That's not to say it's difficult if the player is in a contract year versus a non-contract year. There are a lot of factors that come into it and how they do it, including the agent they have. In the end, they realize that they can't come back until they're healthy. And most of the time in baseball they try to come back when they're not healthy. If you take somebody like Wisler last night with maybe an oblique injury, you have to be so careful because if they try to come back too quickly, it can only prolong the recovery. So they do listen to us very carefully.

**When I grew up, I didn't even know that pitchers and players had oblique muscles. I never heard of that injury until – who was it that injured their oblique some years ago that was out for so long? Chipper Jones or somebody injured an oblique, and that was the first time I knew that that was a muscle.**

It's a tough injury. It's called an abdominal strain, an oblique, an intercostal. But in a pitcher, it's incapacitating. It could be twelve weeks out. And in a position player, it's probably a little bit less. I definitely think there's been an epidemic of obliques. I think you're right. And I don't know if we're just recognizing them more, diagnosing them more, or there's something different in the way the game is being played. You just can't believe a simple oblique muscle, how it can really drop somebody to their knees.

**While we're on this – I want to drop back to when you grew up a little bit – but if a baseball team like the Braves is looking to trade for a player or sign a player, and that player's been injured previously at whatever team they were on, do the doctors participate in an analysis of what they might expect from that player?**

Absolutely. 100%. If we think we're going to draft a player, if we think we're going to trade a player, this starts early – two to three months before spring training, we're already reviewing medical records for players that they have their eyes on for the draft. So all that stuff gets brought in to us. I take care of Georgia Tech baseball, so I see it from that side too. Every injury I

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**“I think that you're born with a certain amount of pitches that you can throw.”**

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an injury, there is a collision, there's something that comes out of it and you have to take care of it. They pretty much have to get back and play right away. But baseball is incredibly different because the spectrum of injuries is so are different, the positions it happens to are so different, so it's a whole other challenge getting that patient back based on the injuries that could occur.

You had talked earlier about the hands-first slide into bases. Well, as a team physician, you cringe every time you

injury is healed, even if it's a fracture, it almost takes that same amount of time to remotely even get them back. So you say you have a long time to get them back, but boy you need it. You need the full season, you really do.

**Do the teams listen to the doctors more and more as the years go on?**

They do. I think they do. I think they've realized that baseball has become such a huge sport in terms of contracts, in terms of the whole business of baseball, that they've realized how important an injury is and how complex and involved

have to a college player is now well-documented, and it's all computerized. We have a whole process, a whole system in Major League Baseball. And every injury that they ever had is part of the examination and we look at these players and we list them as a low risk, high risk or moderate risk.

**So if the Braves are looking to sign a hard-throwing pitcher, would the Braves evaluate his technique and determine whether he stands a higher than average or lower than average chance of getting injured?**

All the time. I'll give you an example, because you know as well as I know, we're seeing an epidemic of serious ligament injuries to the elbow. I am seeing a huge increase in failed reconstructions where the reconstructions are blowing and people are starting to look back and look at the factors. If there certain things that may have set that, or the player was more predisposed, then certainly when we're looking to draft them or trade them, that's exactly what we look at. We look at if they've been on the DL, if they've had surgery.

Looking at Georgia Tech and growing up in Atlanta, you know as well as I know that East Cobb baseball is one of the biggest productions in the country for young youth baseball. But we're starting to see now that – and I'm not insinuating that East Cobb over-pitches them, but I'm just trying to say that a lot of these kids as they're growing up – and you talked about it earlier, because you played ball – if they're a good baseball player, they immediately get selected out to pitch and maybe catch. Those two positions, and put in combination, and they're really throwing too much. Those are guys that, I think, are going to end up going to college or being drafted early, almost already pre-injury status.

When we look at it more and more now, you can see common denominators. If you talk at guys like Smoltz and Maddux and Glavine, the key thing every one of them always says is that kids should be playing different sports, not playing baseball the whole year. You should not play baseball 100% of the time. And I think, certainly, with pitchers that's been a huge problem.

I think that you're born with a certain amount of pitches that you can throw. And there's certainly technique, there's no question. There are articles that are coming out monthly now on technique that you look at – you've heard that if you're too early throwing a curve ball, and then other people think that maybe the curve ball is not a problem but the way you throw it might be a problem.

**“To watch guys like Smoltz and Glavine and Maddux and Avery – it was an incredible experience.”**

Certainly technique has something to do with it, and certainly over-throwing at a young age does too.

**I had a child – really nice kid – and he, at the age of 9, was absolutely the best pitcher in our league. And, at the age of 9, he had a growth plate injury. I asked his dad what he did between practice and the dad said they went out every night and threw a hundred or a hundred twenty pitches. I said at 9 years old, why don't you just leave him alone? He never pitched again. He had a nice baseball career, but never again did he pitch. Let me back up just a little bit, we sort of got ... So, did you play baseball as a youngster?**

I played baseball through probably junior high – league baseball, little league baseball.

**What position did you play?**

I played third base and short stop.

**So, you stayed out of the way of having to throw the ball and injure your hands.**

Yes. You know what? They knew early on that I probably didn't have the skill to be a pitcher. And now it's funny – my son plays baseball in college in Memphis and he and I throw ball. I can't even throw with him anymore. It's ridiculous how I thought I could do it at one point. I don't know if it's because I became a lacrosse player, but now when he throws bullpens with me, I just get out of the way. He laughs at me. I was pretty good – he'll laugh if he ever sees this. I was pretty good up until about ninth or tenth grade. As I said, lacrosse was so big, and there were other sports in New York that were a little bit bigger than baseball.

But now, baseball is universal.

**Did you follow baseball by listening to it on the radio or TV?**

I listened to most of the games. Again, I grew up in New York, so the Yankees were huge. Even when I was growing up, the Yankees were on just about every night. If we were going to a Chiefs' game – and remember, that's AAA Chiefs, so a lot of the players were

there like Ron Blomberg, he played in Syracuse with the Chiefs. A lot of them would be on their way up to the Yankees. So you knew these guys on their way up to being in the big house, the big show. So you'd listen to them on the radio, you'd go to the games. But at that point, it was kind of like the Atlanta Braves here years later with Ted Turner. The Yankees were on just about every night in New York.

**Who were your favorite players?**

Even though he was a little bit before my time, Mickey Mantle for sure. If you look right up there on my shelves, you'll see about three or four biographies on him. He was just huge growing up for me. And then pitcher-wise, certainly Sandy Koufax was huge. My dad really loved the game of baseball. He understood it a lot more than me. So I learned a lot by watching the games with him and the players that he liked. The catcher for the Yankees, the one that died in the plane crash.

**Thurman Munson.**

Yes. I remember the day that happened, it was such a terrible thing when you're a kid, growing up. I remember the day that Jim Brown retired because he played football and lacrosse at Syracuse. The Yankees were huge. And to go down to New York City, the few times that we did to watch them, was a monumental experience.

**I actually saw Jim Brown once play in Cleveland in a preseason game when he played against Gayle Sayers. It's a long time ago, and I remember it like it was yesterday. It was really something. Jim Brown was a phenomenal athlete.**

**Did you collect baseball cards when you were a child?**

I did. And you know what's funny, after my parents passed away, I looked for them and couldn't find them. Then my son took over – as I told you, he plays baseball at college – he was a huge baseball collector too. He's got a good collection at home right now.

**I still have my cards. My mom never threw anything out.**

I can remember the first time my dad took me to Cooperstown, because it was not a far drive from Syracuse. You've probably been there, but that's a place you can go to once a year for your whole life. It was an incredible experience.

**Well, we went to Cooperstown when Glavine and Maddux and Cox were all inducted into the Hall of Fame, and it was really great fun. It's a place any baseball fan should go once or more. It's just great.**

And those guys – that's when I first started with the Braves – to watch guys like Smoltz and Glavine and Maddux and Avery – it was an incredible experience. My only problem was when I joined with that team I thought that everyone was going to be like that forever, and that was a special group of players. I'll never forget watching Maddux pitch, first bullpen down in Orlando. I was standing behind the plate with Joe Chandler, our main physician. Joe was the one that got me involved with the Braves and now is our emeritus – watching the technique of Maddux was like an artist, really like a surgeon.

**I'm pretty confident that Maddux could throw today, could probably get out on the mound today and get people out just fine. He understood how to pitch. Surreal.**

He was so smart. He would be able to alter his pitches. Of course no one could replicate it. Just by moving his fingers a little bit, he would tell you before the pitch how he was going to do it. And then I learned later from guys like Smoltz or Tommy, sitting in the dugout, that Maddux would sit there and was a huge mentor to a lot of these pitchers. And he would be able to tell you about three batters from then how things were going to work out, based on how it was going right now. I think there's no doubt he could probably go out today and

do the same thing, because he was so smart. He knew how to locate. Trying to locate at a time now where kids are self-selected if they can throw 95 on a cold night in August when they're in high school playing football, and then they go to a Showcase. It's totally different – you know, when you talk to guys that pitched at that time. There are great pitchers now, there's no question. But these guys really would teach how to pitch rather than just throwing hard. I think that's a real problem still and why we're seeing more injuries now. I really do.

**I thought it was actually interesting last night. Wisler pitched a really nice game, and as he came off the field, he**

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“Their reflexes, their ability, and their intelligence to play the game is great.”

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**had thrown about 106 or 107 pitches, and the announcer said he set a career high tonight for 10 strikeouts (he didn't talk about the pitches). But I think that when you looked at Glavine – particularly Glavine and Maddux – they didn't really care if they struck anybody out, they just wanted to get on the field and off the field. I mean, in 6 innings, Maddux rarely threw more than 80 or 85 pitches, but oftentimes he threw 9 innings and threw well under 100. So, 106 pitches for 6 innings, Maddux would say is probably inefficient. To your point, there are only so many innings and pitches that you could throw. That would not have made Maddux happy, and to strike out 10 guys, he'd have said he just wanted some ground balls and go sit down.**

I think you're right. Two points you forgot – because I covered last night. I watched that whole game with Wisler, and when he came out, I didn't even realize he had struck out 10 because I thought he's had some struggles this season, but I thought he threw a beautiful game and he got people out.

I'll tell you another thing about Maddux. When you talk to the other people who used to work the field like Jeff Porter,

they used to love when he was pitching a game because they knew (a) they'd be getting home early enough to see their kids, and (b) if they're at an away game, they were already making plans for where they were going out to eat that night because he would be done in two hours. It was incredible how efficient he was. And you're right, it wasn't a lot of strikeouts. It was just he knew how to pitch these guys, he knew how to get them out, and he was so efficient. He would be done quickly. It was amazing.

**What was the first major league baseball game you went to – the pro game? Do you remember that?**

It was a Yankee's game in Yankee Stadium.

**A really big ballpark.**

This was the old park, too. I believe it was right around the World's Fair. Whenever the World's Fair was in New York.

**'64 maybe?**

Right. It was around that trip that we went. But you know, you grew up going into a little stadium for AAA, which was still a lot bigger than A. And then you go into Yankee Stadium – I'm sure you've been to Yankee Stadium – and it's almost like a religious experience. This is when Billy Martin managed. He was always getting in a fight and he was a Yankee player, too. It was amazing to watch that whole experience when he would manage a game. You could see him going onto the field.

**How did your dad get interested in baseball?**

Really, growing up in St. George, South Carolina, in a very poor family, in a family that had a radio, they'd listen to the Yankees. That's clearly how he grew up, loving it. But I'll tell you he grew up in a teeny little town, and his parents were merchants. It was all the radio.

**He had Red Barber and those guys.**

I also have books that he gave me from Red Barber too. Those early guys, they knew the game so well. It was amazing to read their analysis of players.

**One of the things that's always interesting is when you go back and talk about the great announcers from back in the '40s and '50s, – Mel Allen, Red Barber, Waite Hoyt and Ernie Harwell – they were all southerners and they all grew up knowing how to tell a good story. When it rained or whatever, they just had to stay on the air. But if you go back and look at pretty much all the great announcers from back in that era, they were pretty much slow-talking, smooth, silky storytellers. Certainly Red Barber and Mel Allen and the rest were that way.**

**How do baseball players today differ from football players and other players in terms of their attitude, their injuries? Do they take better care of themselves? Do they listen to the doctors?**

Certainly when you look at a football player, whatever position they are, you can almost tell they are a football player. They're usually in top shape, sculpted in muscles that would be very suited for football. But baseball players, it's amazing, to be a phenomenal baseball player, you don't always have to look like the phenomenal athlete that plays football. So there are all body types, and it's amazing with some of our pitchers, they will take off their shirts and they're out there throwing 95, they can throw a complete game and they take off their shirts and they look like you and me (Editor's correction: They might look like Gary). And you go, oh my gosh, how can they do that? Well, it's amazing – I don't think there's an athlete other than a baseball player like that because they're incredibly coordinated with incredible muscle activity and muscle coordination and that's what allows them to star on the field in whatever their role. I don't care if the ball is going down third base and the fielder picking up the ball with his bare hand to throw across his body. Their reflexes, their ability, and their intelligence to play the game is great. But unfortunately, that comes with a tremendous capacity for injury. It really does. Because as we've talked about previously, there's no other sport where you're just standing there on third base and then suddenly you have to lunge for a ball going in the gap between

short and third. There's no other sport where you've got to dive into a wall or slide or swipe, so the different parts that make you a good baseball player are vulnerable. Unfortunately, that is a real problem and why there's such a tremendous injury pattern that occurs.

I think for the most part certainly the medical staffs, the trainers, the care of these players is incredibly developed and refined so that when these patients/players have injuries, the trainers' ability to decipher and diagnose and begin a treatment plan is very advanced, at least at the Major League level. As part of the Braves organization, we also take care of every Minor League team. So every night we get a report from all over all our Minor League teams, so our trainers at every level from rookie to high-A, low AA, double- and AAA, they're all really on the same goals, same treatment plan. **When you're not at the game, would you rather watch the game or listen to the game?**

Even when I cover a game, I'll be honest with you, we don't always get to watch it. We're usually downstairs in the clubhouse seeing players that are on DL, seeing players that are coming back up again. But, if things get quiet, it's fun to go upstairs and sit in the stands and watch the game. I get a whole different viewpoint. It's fun to watch a game with somebody like Jeff Porter or someone that understands the game and it's their whole life, because you get a whole different understanding and appreciation of the game watching it. You think you understand the game, and I think I do, but I watch it with Porter or somebody walks in like Terry McGuirk and then

chance I have to get to watch – that's why spring training is fun because it's a little bit lower key and you really get to see the whole thing. So you have Fredi Gonzalez and Bobby Cox and even Snitker now – these guys are fun to watch a game with when they have the time to talk about it. Obviously in the middle of the season you can't even get close to them. We never go in the dugout during the game.

**The players that have played the longest – you know, like Chipper Jones, Greg Maddux, Tom Glavine – is there a correlation between players that play a long time generally and players that understand their bodies and take better care of their bodies?**

Yes. They went through all phases when they were younger, to think they're insurmountable, that they can play any game they want. Chipper was that way and he had some injuries. But he took care of himself. I mean, he was such a smart player too. Certainly they understand the longevity of the game. Like you said earlier, 160+ games – when Freddie Freeman played all those games that one year, then he went out with an injury, which was a hand injury the next year. You really get to realize the wear and tear on these guys. Even if it's not a tremendously physical game, all the warm-ups that they have going into it, then the game itself, and everything they put in before it – these guys get so little time off. When they get a day off, it's all they can do sometimes just to relax and get a little bit more sleep. I think a lot of them sometimes are happy if they don't make the All Star team, just because they can get four or five days off. It's a grueling schedule. It's

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**“I don't know how catchers can have the length of careers they have.”**

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you realize, oh my God, I thought I understood what was going on here, it's a whole different level. That's why it really is such a thinking man's, a thinking woman's game. It really is. It's an incredible game to watch. And the more you understand it, the more you want to keep watching it. Whatever

amazing that people have the length of careers that they have with the amount of games they have to play each year.

**Do you think with the pounding that the catchers seem to take now from the really hard throwing, one pitch right after another, you've got the sixth inning pitcher, the seventh, the eighth,**

**the ninth – do you think that a catcher today could play as long as they used to? I mean, you see such a fall-off of like Brian McCann, it's not just innings, it's that they're catching such a high speed all the time. It seems to me, as a retired catcher, that it was really fun to catch a pitcher – just a guy that understood how to throw the ball over the plate and let the batters hit it, but it was awful to catch throwers and the throwers just wore you out.**

It's grueling. I don't know how catchers can have the length of careers they have. I think Brian's done very well. I keep in touch with him. It's amazing how those guys can get by. Don't forget, they'll be catching a 90-degree game, 8-9 innings. They lose so much weight during the game, and they get beat up so much. I totally understand why a lot of them end up going to first base, or just end up trying to do different positions. But, you know, I think any position has got its tough parts in baseball. Certainly pitching and catching – and catching is tough. When you see these guys and you examine them, and you see them night in and night out, you really build up a tremendous sense of respect for what they have to go through.

**It's got to be harder and harder to just be a catcher today.**

You talked about last night with Tyler

Flowers – he's had some hand injuries this year, so I've gotten to know – I knew him when he was with the White Sox and when he was with the Braves the first time – but the beating they take. If you look at the hands of a catcher, it's amazing the bone spurs they have. Ross, when he was with us – he was even young then. It's amazing what they have to go through. To be a great catcher, not only do you have to be able to stop that stuff in the dirt, you've got to call a great game, and then you've got to get up and hit. It's tough.

**It really is tough. I noticed that Gattis caught last night for the Astros. He's likely just too big to do that.**

He's a great person, but he's played through a lot of injuries even when he was with us.

**So during the post-season, how many doctors do they have down there at the game?**

At any game, there's always an orthopedic surgeon, and then there's a medical doctor, so there's always two of us there. Whenever we're covering a home game, we cover the other team. So every night, like last night, I went over and saw Christian Bethancourt – Bethancourt used to be with us, and now he's with the Padres. So I was taking care of the other team. When the playoffs come, it's usually about double that and we travel with the team no

matter what. So wherever we go, we're bringing our doctors at that point. So it's a lot more to it. We have trainers, we have about 3-4 trainers and a physical therapist. The staff is expanded now. More and more, I just started, we have Jeff Porter, Jim Lovell, Andrew Hauser, and a physical therapist.

**And how did you happen to get to be with the Braves?**

The way I got to the Braves was because I operated on their top physician, Joe Chandler, for a bad hand injury. He didn't know me and I didn't know him, but he was referred to me and I took care of him. We struck up a friendship and at that point I was primarily doing work with the Falcons, and I still do Georgia Tech. He kept asking me to be involved and at that point I had been with another medical group and it was probably best not to be involved. Joe stayed on and I got involved through him. He retired; he's our emeritus. And then we went to a model where we had three orthopedic physicians, and each one of us covers games. So it's myself and two other guys that I work with.

**This is all fascinating and I know it's going to be wonderful to read. Thanks very much. I really appreciate it.**

I appreciate your taking the time. Thank you.

“A Doctor's View”  
Gary Lourie

\*\*\* 70th EDITION \*\*\*  
BASEBALL DIGEST

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