

BASEBALL DIGEST



ALL STAR EDITION



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By Abe J. Shear
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Fay Vincent's entire career has combined passion and integrity. Certainly his time as Commissioner of Major League Baseball was no exception. Under very trying circumstances, Mr. Vincent followed Bart Giamatti and, however astute, his advice to the owners was hardly popular during his relatively short tenure.

Having visited with him in Florida, I suspect that this episode in his life is nonetheless remembered fondly as his decisions were made with great integrity, honesty and loyalty, both to baseball and to his dear friend Mr. Giamatti. Our interview was conducted in his wonderful library, a room filled with pictures of so many of his favorite players.

Mr. Vincent told me that I could ask him about anything but I stayed away from current issues. His keen memory and love for the game were quite remarkable and I am confident that you will enjoy his memories and opinions as much as I did.

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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.

Fay Vincent "For the Love of the Game"

Abe: It's my pleasure and honor to interview Fay Vincent. You have gathered so many baseball histories and so many baseball stories, why are they so important to you?

Well, my friend, Bart Giamatti, who was the Commissioner of Major League Baseball and my predecessor in baseball, used to say that stories are at the heart of baseball. Baseball is basically an oral tradition. People talk about it as much as they play it. The hot stove league, of course, is the quintessential oral part of baseball. So, I've always loved stories. I've loved people talking about baseball as I've listened to these people over the years. I thought somebody ought to preserve those stories so that when these guys are gone, the stories will be available.

What I've done for the Hall of Fame is basically go out and videotape significant ballplayers. I really took my guide from the Larry Ritter oral history books, "The Glory of Their Times", and I wanted to preserve the old Negro League players first and guys like Joe Black and Larry Doby and others who I knew were dying off. The first interview I did was of Larry Doby and it was magnificent, if I do say so, because I like Larry. We were good friends. We sat in his home for four hours with a production crew and I videoed and there you got the whole story. He wouldn't talk about the people who were nasty to him when he came up, but he talked about the people who were good to him and one of the great people who was good to him was Joe Gordon, who is just going into the Hall of Fame. I've done maybe 45

interviews, four hours each. Not all of the players are in the Hall of Fame. I've done Bruce Froemming, an umpire, some managers, Dick Williams and Ralph Houk and others, but they're mostly ballplayers and I started with the oldest. I wanted to get Tommy Henrich before the lights went out. I wanted to get Feller and Spahn and Larry Doby and Johnny Pesky and Dominic DiMaggio and all of those. The first book I did was guys who played in the 30's and 40's. The second book was guys that played in the 50's and 60's and I'm working on a book now of people who played in the 70's and 80's. It's been great fun.

What are your first memories of baseball?

Well, I grew up in a family where my father was a great athlete. He had been a wonderful baseball and football player at Yale in the 30's at a time when Yale was a big athletic power and my father played in the first football game between the hedges at Athens when they dedicated the ball park at the University of Georgia. Yale came down and played Georgia. Georgia, as you know, is a clone of Yale and that's why it's a bulldog. It's a spin-off of Yale. My father was a football official, a great player. He was a baseball umpire, so I grew up in a family where sports was very important to my father and to me. I remember playing catch with my father and having him tell me I was throwing side arm and ought to throw overhand and I had a very good arm. He was a wonderful hitter. I never could hit. I played baseball until I got hurt in college

but I was never the player he was. He was a magnificent fastball hitter, so even if you played softball, he had very quick hands. You could not throw a fastball by him, whereas a four year old could throw a fastball by me.

I doubt that, but what position did you play as a youngster, because I know you played a lot of baseball before you went to Yale?

He was a first baseman, so I grew up thinking Vincents were genetically first basemen, and at the first base position you have to be very big usually. I was big. Usually it's a hard hitting . . . He was a good hitter. I was not. I quickly figured out that I had a very good arm and so I ended up pitching. I played American Legion in baseball and I always pitched. I threw pretty hard. I'd learned how to throw a screwball as a kid and so there were very few kids right-handed who could get the ball to bend into a right-handed hitter and so I had some success, but my early memories are of going to Yankee Stadium with my father because he was so knowledgeable about baseball. He was always teaching me, "Watch the way the pitcher finishes. Watch the way his feet end up, squared so they can't bunt on him. Watch the way the catcher throws the ball back, it's always above the waist so the pitcher won't have to bend down". All the little things that as a kid I wouldn't have noticed. "Watch the way the first baseman shifts his feet". So, I grew up with an appreciation for how complicated, subtle and really beautiful the game was.

What players do you remember seeing at Yankee Stadium with your father?

Well, the first year would have been 1947, so I saw DiMaggio. I grew up in New Haven. My father was a Philadelphia Athletics fan because of Connie Mack. He grew up at a time when the Irish were really treated much like the Jews - no Irish need apply. My father was an Irishman from Connecticut. He went to Yale and they let down the barriers for Irishmen because of athletics. They needed to win in football and one way to do that was let these big Irish kids come in and so my father grew up very sensitive to being Irish. Connie Mack had managed in Connecticut. His real name was Cornelius McGillicuddy. My father was drawn to an Irishman and

so he followed Mack and rooted for Mack with Mickey Cochrane and Al Simmons and Lefty Grove and then when I grew up in New Haven, of course, it was much harder. I ended up rooting for the Yankees as a kid. So, we would go to see a double header, the Yankees against the Athletics. I rooted for the Yankees.

And when you went - I'm always curious about this because I think everybody remembers - do you remember where you'd sit with your father in the ballpark?

We always had a general admission seat, often in the upper deck, usually in right field. I can remember looking down from that enormous height and being dazzled by the color of the white of the home uniforms against the green and actually I remember BoJangles Robinson, the great black dancer who used to tap dance on the Yankees' dugout when someone hit a home run. They were wonderful memories. Connie Mack using the scorecard. He sat in the dugout in a dark blue suit and he used a scorecard to move people and direct them. It was a different time. Tommy Henrich was one of my great heroes and I later got to be very close to him. I keep a wonderful picture of him up there. He's one of my great friends in baseball. Joe DiMaggio was really very special. I loved Tommy Henrich, "old reliable."

Did you typically just go to the ballgame with your father or were other family members there?

My father would take me. I was the only son. We would always go to a double header because he was so cheap he'd want to see two games. That's a lot of baseball from 1:00 until 6:00 and then a two hour or three hour drive back to New Haven, so we would go, if we went, once a year, maybe twice a year. He was also an NFL official, so he usually had some friend who was working for the Yankees, who would get us in. He didn't pay and so we'd get to stand there and the guy would then wave us in and we would go into the ballpark.

Now, of your favorite Yankee teams when you were growing up, I'm sure you still remember the line-up don't you?

I do and I remember the line-up of the Philadelphia Athletics. Cute story. When I went to baseball as the Deputy Commissioner, a gentleman like you

came to interview me and nobody knew who I was. Bart Giamatti was the Commissioner and then Bart died and I became Commissioner. So, in comes a guy and he said to me, "How do I know that you know anything about baseball"? And I said to him, "How can I prove it"? He said, "Tell me something that's old and that you would know and that I would be impressed by". I said, "I'm now going to run around and give you the starting line-up of the 1952 Philadelphia Athletics". "If you can do that, I'll be impressed". So, I said, "Buddy Rosar, Gus Zerniel, Pete Suder, Eddie Joost, Hank Majeski . . ." He said, "Stop, I'm impressed". It was all because I went with my father and so I knew the Athletics.

How did you follow baseball? Was it newspaper or radio?

Some radio. I don't remember following it as a kid that carefully. I kept score on the radio and I remember that I learned how to spell "Schoendienst" because I had to vote in the All Star Game for Schoendienst and I can still spell it. It's a little bit like Mike Krzyzewski. I mean if you don't have to learn how to spell it, you'll never learn it. It was important to my father. He'd listen to the score every night on the radio and then one of my great memories is of rainy nights in Connecticut with thunderstorms popping around and my father trying to listen to the Philadelphia A's game on the radio from Philadelphia. Now, he could get it in New Haven maybe one minute out of ten, so we listened for a minute and then the signal would just disappear and my mother would go crazy. She said, "You are listening to static" and my father would say, "No, it isn't". He would come back and he had a cigar and he was sitting on the porch in pitch dark and it would be a summer evening and we would be listening to the Athletics' game.

As a preference today, if you were going to watch or listen to a game, would you rather listen to the game or watch?

I would rather watch and I often turn the sound off. The problem with the game today is not that the announcers aren't terrific, some are, but then there's the promotional material for all of the other shows. I mean, if you really stop and put a stopwatch to the amount of time that they're telling about other programs, it's

pretty bloody awful and I object to that.

Of the ballparks, the older ballparks, which were your favorites?

Well, my favorite was Yankee Stadium because I went there most, but one of the things that I think isn't pointed out or at least isn't talked about enough is how mammoth they were. I mean, Yankee Stadium and left centerfield was simply enormous and DiMaggio, a right-handed hitter, hit the ball out there and he only hit, what 320 home runs or something? Had he played in Yankee Stadium today, he would have an entirely different story. I don't like the ballparks the way they're built now. I like the fact that they're not all sort of cookie cutter alike and I like the fact that dimensions are varied, but I don't like the fact that they're so small. In the new park in Cincinnati, one where left field is just way too small for my taste. I mean, it's not a fair game any more, but guys are hitting home runs when they miss the pitch.

When you grew up, did you read baseball books or baseball magazines?

Ah yes, Sport Magazine - there was no Sports Illustrated. I read Sport Magazine. I was split because my father was so prominent in football and Yale football was important to me, so I grew up very much devoted to football as well as baseball. I was very taken by the Browns - Marion Motley. I mean, we forget that for all the talk about baseball, Paul Brown integrated football and had black guys playing in the NFL in the late 40's and nobody ever paid any attention to him. I mean, it was just really quite remarkable.

Did you collect baseball cards?

I did. We flipped cards. I never really got into it in any serious way. I think my father was much more committed to me playing. He didn't want me sitting around clipping pictures and listening to games. He wanted me out playing and he was pretty aggressive about me getting out and I was inclined to play. I loved playing and I was big. I was about 6'2 and weighed about 190 when I was 14 years old, so I got to play.

When you look around your house - you obviously collect baseballs and signed photographs - do you still collect memorabilia that you like?

I only have pictures here of people that I liked and admired and basically knew.

Every picture here is of someone that I knew. Well, they're all signed, so up there is Berra and Ford and DiMaggio. Now, those were three guys that I knew very well and still do, except for DiMaggio. Over there is Feller, Larry Doby, Elden Auker, who lived here, Tommy Henrich, Joe Black, Dale Murphy, a good boy from Atlanta, a good fella.

We like him in Atlanta, almost a Hall of Fame career.

I got the Pope over there and a few others who bust in and are not baseball people but because I ran the movie company and baseball and because I was very lucky, I really got to meet all sorts of wonderful people and these are pictures of people that I like and worked with.

It's a nice room and you feel like you're with friends. When you were at college and then at law school, did you follow baseball?

Yes. I graduated from college in 1960, so Mazerowski and the Yankees were coming to the end of their run, but I wasn't as addicted because I got involved in doing other things and I think we all get busier with our lives. My baseball addiction fell off. I remember watching Maris in 1961 and Mantle with great intensity. I mean, that for me, was the equivalent of McGwire and Sosa. It was a wonderful summer. Of all of them, I think I admired Whitey Ford because he was so cerebral and one had the sense that here was this little guy at 5'10, 170 pounds, and he just made a mockery out of everyone. The ball seemed to do whatever he wanted it to. The word "crafty" always applies to a left hander. You never say someone was a crafty right hander. I thought he had the best pick-off move I've ever seen in baseball and I teased him about it, so his picture up there says to me, "For Fay Vincent, our Commissioner, I would never have picked you off".

(Laughter) Now, after Yale, you went to Washington and practiced law for awhile. Did you go see the Senators play then?

I did, but not much because they left. I didn't go to the ballpark much and so I don't have strong memories of baseball in Washington. I have strong memories of reading Shirley Povich because we all read Shirley Povich and he loved baseball.

Amongst other things that you've

done, you spent some time running the movie studios. Tell me what your favorite baseball movie is.

Well, my favorite baseball movie is not one that we made. We made "The Natural" while I was at Columbia. It was actually made for TriStar which I started. My favorite movie was "Bang the Drum Slowly." Giamatti and I agreed, it's really a wonderful, serious movie. I like "The Natural" but by then I was running a company and to me a good movie is one that makes money and we lost money on "The Natural," but Redford did hit the ball out. We used the stadium in Buffalo and he was a good left-handed hitter and we thought we would have to fake it, but he actually, at the climax of the movie, he actually hit the ball out of the stadium. He was very proud of that.

But the movie somehow didn't work for me. It was too artificial. The problem with baseball movies is - for those of us who love the game - the guys who are throwing always seem to be the kids who would be playing right field. There's something about a legitimate baseball pitch that can't be done artificially. Either you do it or you don't but when you try to fake it, it never works.

If you could have played with one player from one team, who would it be?

Well, either DiMaggio or Williams, I think, because of their intensity. I asked DiMaggio once about Gehrig. I said, "He was the leader when you came up. How did he lead? How did he get you, all of you, to respond?" And like you, I tried to lead him. I said, "Did he ever talk about things?" He said, "Oh no, he never said a word". So, I said, "How did he do it?" He said "He did it by example." He said that he busted his ass every play, every time. If he went for a foul ball, he said, he really made clear that you knew that he was going to get it. Every play was important to him and DiMaggio said he learned from him. He sat next to him in the locker room and after a game, he would come in and he'd sit down there and he'd be pouring sweat and he'd have a cigarette. Now, I didn't know Gehrig smoked and DiMaggio said, he would sit there with him and we'd have one cigarette and then he said, we had another cigarette and then he said, we might have had four cigarettes - Gehrig

never said a word – and then he'd get up and go in and take a shower – he wouldn't have said a word – but DiMaggio realized that Gehrig was annoyed at the way the game had gone and he might have gone 0 for 4, and if he went 0 for 4, the process of unwinding was so intense, he couldn't just go in the shower, he had to sit there and think bad about it for a while and DiMaggio said that really sunk in with him. There aren't many guys you can talk to anymore who can tell you about DiMaggio and Gehrig and that for me was the great joy of what I was fortunate enough to do – to talk to Henrich about DiMaggio. I talked to DiMaggio about Gehrig or to talk to Alvin Aucher about Ted Williams. Those are very special memories.

Well, I think the players today, there's so much more distraction, my guess is and it's only a guess, when the game is over, they shower and get out of the locker room as fast as they can.

Well, think about it. I think Henrich made this point. He said, "We didn't have cell phones, we didn't have agents, we didn't have contracts." He said, "We didn't have anything. We didn't have stockbrokers. All we did was play baseball and talk about baseball, plus we took the train. You get on the train and you have a long trip from New York to Chicago and what are you going to do? Play cards. But we talked about baseball and we were always trying to get an edge". He said,

"The kids today . . . , they get out of the game. There are 25 different cabs at the clubhouse door. They get in 25 different cars and they disappear."

I think that the one player that is in the present who could have played on any of those teams was Greg Maddux.

Or Jeter. Warren Spahn told me something about Maddux that I never realized. Spahn said he would go out before every game and watch batting practice of the other team and just sit in the stands. He said he learned something, every day. He said, "There's only one pitcher in the big leagues that watches batting practice of the other team. You know who it is"? And, of course, I didn't know. "It's Greg Maddux" and that tells me a lot. I mean, Warren Spahn and Greg Maddux. You can't get much better than that. Yogi Berra is a genius in baseball terms and I think Maddux and Spahn were geniuses. Spahn may have been the smartest baseball person I ever talked to about anything.

What is it that you think has made baseball so special over the years?

Well, you know, I think better men than I, and better women too, have been grappling with that. It is a magical game. I think there are a variety of things, all of which are combined. One is it's played out by and large at the best time of the year. Secondly, there's no clock. Third, you're not trying to take territories. There's

almost no violence and it is visually so lovely, but more than that, I think it's so connected to the American character and to the American soul. We all grew up playing it. It teaches us failure because most of us have failed and it's important to learn how to deal with failure and I think for a young American boy, baseball is the first recognition that their life is not going to be what they dreamed. We all dream of being Mickey Mantle and Henry Aaron and Willie Mays all wrapped in one and at around 12, we realize it's just not going to happen. But I asked these great ballplayers, "Did it ever occur to you that you weren't going to be a great ballplayer"? And from Frank Robinson on, they would say, "Well, why was that? We could always play. We were great". Frank Robinson at 14 was playing American Legion ball with eighteen year olds. Playing right field to be sure, but he was hitting. You couldn't throw a fastball by Frank Robinson. Well, when I say a four year old could throw a fastball by Fay Vincent, that meant I had to confront the fact that there had to be other things to do. I could love baseball but it didn't love me back and I think that's an important part of the culture.

Well, I don't have any more questions.

Oh yes you do.

Yes, but not for the tapes. I'm very appreciative for your time.

Fay Vincent
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