

BASEBALL DIGEST

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By Abe J. Shear
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Senator George Mitchell “Wonderful Memories”

Senator George Mitchell was incredibly gracious in allowing me to interrupt his busy schedule. As you will clearly see, his baseball memories are illustrative of how and why baseball played a critical role in American history in the mid-20th century. I think you will enjoy hearing about a time when it was not important how well you played, rather, it was important that you played, that you learned teamwork, that you learned to win and lose.

From an undistinguished sandlot career, Senator Mitchell has emerged as one of our most highly-revered attorneys and negotiators. His willingness to take on extraordinarily difficult and complex issues, be they peace accords, legislation or even baseball related issues, is inspirational. Without question, his ability to deal with these complicated issues without becoming the central character in the discussion is a true lesson on leadership.

Not surprisingly, our conversation went by far too quickly. Few in the last forty years have accomplished more and asked for so little. All of us are in so many ways indebted to Senator Mitchell, and I know you will enjoy his stories as much as I did. A special thanks as well to my friend Jay Epstien, Senator Mitchell's partner at DLA Piper, for graciously helping to set up this interview.

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Abe: Senator Mitchell, what are your first memories of baseball?

Senator: I grew up in the small town of Waterville, Maine in a large and very sports minded family. I had three older brothers, all of whom were very prominent athletes in our community and later on in college. The principal sports that we all played were basketball and baseball. I very early realized that I didn't have the athletic skill of my brothers. I've often told a joke, which is true but funny, that I became known around our small town as "Johnny Mitchell's kid brother, the one who isn't any good" referring to my athletic ability, but I tried and I played basketball and baseball as a young boy pretty much around the clock.

We had a Boy's Club in our town and every evening in the fall and winter, in the late afternoon and evening, a group of us went there and then in the spring and summer, a group of boys went out and played baseball. It started out with pick-up baseball. Although it wasn't called the Little League then, it was sort of the local equivalent of Little League. I began playing at a very early age and began to cope with the reality that I was not as good as my brothers. In fact, one of my brothers joked that I wasn't as good as anybody else's brother. We also followed professional sports. The Red Sox and Yankees were a rivalry then, perhaps not as much as now, but that was in the era of Ted Williams and Joe DiMaggio and so I followed Major League baseball very closely and played a lot of sports.

Let me drop back and pick up a couple of little things if I could. What

positions did you play?

I played second base most of the time. Occasionally short stop or third but mostly second base.

I read in some of the materials what a terrific athlete your brother Johnny was.

Johnny. Yes, he was.

I'm guessing that it was your brothers that taught you to play?

No, there's an age gap. I had three older brothers. My brother, Paul, is about 8 years older than I am. Johnny about 7. Then, my brother Robbie, who has since died was a few years older than me. I played mostly with my brother, Robbie, and other boys of my age. My two older brothers, Johnny and Pauly, there was an age gap and so really I didn't play much with them.

I know that your parents were incredibly hard workers. Did they follow baseball?

Not at all really. My mother was an immigrant from Lebanon. She came to the United States at the age of 18. She could not read or write English and could just barely speak it. Her speech was very accented with a lot of mispronounced words and she knew nothing at all about sports, but she knew her boys played and so she was an avid fan who went to a lot of games and cheered even though I don't think she ever understood even the concept of baseball or basketball or football.

My father was the orphan son of Irish immigrants. His parents emigrated from Ireland to the United States. His father was born in Boston but he never knew his parents. His mother died shortly after

his birth and his father couldn't care for the children, so my father and his siblings grew up in orphanages in the Boston area and my father, after several years, was adopted by an elderly childless couple from Maine. He never went beyond the 4th grade. We are not quite certain when, but he left school and worked all of his life as a laborer. My father was similar to my mother in that he really didn't know anything about sports. He literally worked

campus was in the downtown area. My parents never owned a car when I was a kid. Colby since moved to the outskirts, but at that time it was in the downtown area and we would go out onto the Colby College field, the baseball field, which was a ten minute walk from our home and we would just literally play all day. One kid pitching, one kid batting, one kid fielding and sometimes there would be pick up games as we got a little bit older, 8, 9,

took a trip to Boston. As I said, my parents didn't own a car and we really hardly ever went anywhere, so it was a big deal just to go to Boston, period.

That was a long trip then. There were no Interstates. There was no Interstate 95 or whatever it is.

That's right. In fact, we stayed overnight. I remember the three of us slept in a hotel bed together.

Did you drive or take the train?

My brother would have driven. I don't know whether he had a car then or what. My brother would have been then in his 20's somewhere, probably out of college by then and working, but I can't remember the details of the trip except I do remember it was a Red Sox/Yankees game and that we couldn't afford two rooms so we stayed in one room and it was a rather small bed and it was kind of crowded and my brother and his wife kid about it to this day that nobody got any sleep that night.

Oh, that's funny. What do you remember about the game, about where you sat, and what you thought about going to see these big, mythical teams play?

Well, of course, I had no concept then of a good seat or a bad seat, just being in Fenway Park for the first time made an impression. What I do remember ironically is that Joe DiMaggio hit a very long line drive down the left field line that just barely went foul. It would have been a home run but for the fact that it went foul. I remember the crowd heaving a sigh of relief and then I remember on the very next pitch, he hit one over the left field wall, a long way from there, but near where the flagpole is in Boston, so no doubt about that one. I do remember that. I can't remember the year, but as I said, it would have been after the war when both he and Williams were playing, probably sometime in the latter part of the 1940's.

That's a great story. I know that things like baseball cards were not collectible in the era that you grew up, particularly in the ages that you would have been, because there weren't any from 1939 essentially to 1948. Did you collect anything from baseball when you were a child?

No, no, really we were more into playing than anything else. If it were a choice between playing a game or

"I began playing at a very early age."

all of his life but, in addition, he was not particularly a fan. He did not go to many games and, as it turned out, he really was a perfect father for me, because I struggled for years with feelings of inferiority and my father kept consoling me by telling me that, "None of this stuff mattered". He said, "If you study hard and go to school and work hard at school, you'll do just fine. Don't worry about this baseball and basketball stuff". There were other kids who had parents who, of course, were at every practice and so forth. My father was perfect from the standpoint of my life and athletic ability in comparison to that of my brothers.

I suppose that growing up in the late 30's and early 40's, baseball was very much America's game, something to do that was just very, very much a part of the culture.

Well, it was really part of our life, although my parents really weren't deeply involved. My mother worked nights in the textile mills all of her life and all of my growing up life, so she would have gone to the local high school games but really not to the pick-up or to the Little League or the games like that and my father really didn't go much either. In terms of active family interests, basketball really was the number one sport. My brother, Johnny, went on with a basketball scholarship to the University of Rhode Island where he made all New England. He was a very good player, but in terms of baseball, what I can most remember is that at a very young age a couple of kids and I, literally every summer, would get up in the morning and walk to Colby College, located in Waterville, Maine, and at that time the

10. As I said, it wasn't called the Little Leagues then but it was the functional equivalent of a league. The local stores would sponsor a game and I played for a team that was sponsored by a local store. We'd play around in the morning and then in the afternoon and early evening, we would play the games.

That's great. Do you remember what color jerseys you had?

They were dark colored. I can't remember. I remember the name of the store. There was a man named Russell Squire who was the mayor of my small town and he owned a retail store and he sponsored the team, Squire's, and I remember I played for Squire's team for about 4 years between the ages of 8, 9, 10, 11, right in that age bracket.

That's great. Now, you said that you followed the Red Sox. Did you read about them or listen to them on the radio? How did you follow them?

I'd read about them in the paper, followed them on the radio and talked about them with the other boys, yes. We didn't have a television at that time and I didn't know much baseball. I guess the first baseball television was in the 30's but I don't recall it at all then, but I remember the first time I went to a game in Boston. It was quite a bit later. It would have been after the war, so I would have been in my teens, probably 14 or 15 and in high school, and my older brother, Paul, and his wife took me to Boston to a game – and it was a Red Sox/Yankees game – I do remember that.

And you went to Boston just to go to the game?

With my brother and his wife, yes. We

watching a game, most of the guys I grew up with would rather play a game. We occasionally went to the college games, Colby College, which as I said, the field was not very far from where we all lived. The Major Leagues were really kind of a distant thing. We'd call it up on the radio but it wasn't as much a part of life as today with television, and now, of course, "Baseball Tonight" on ESPN, and check the box scores every morning and so forth. Following it then was really kind of different than now.

Did you have favorite players when you grew up on any of the teams?

Well, yeah, yeah, I think most of the kids were Ted Williams' fans. Everybody sort of had this kind of respect for Joe DiMaggio but we were Ted Williams' fans first, but respected Joe DiMaggio, so I would say those were the two that were most discussed.

Now, some years later, you went to law school in Washington at Georgetown. Did you go see the Senators play then?

I did. Oh, yes. I can remember, gosh, let me think a minute. I can remember going to Griffith Stadium. I think it was late in the season when Williams was in a competition for the batting title with Billy Goodman who was then the first baseman for Boston.

Right.

I would have to go back and look at the records. You would have to check and see, but I remember they played the series in Washington late in the season and it was interesting because the two of them . . . I think Goodman was batting second and Williams third. I'm not sure of that but I think that's the case and so they were competing for the batting title. I also recall much later, because I went to law school there and then I stayed and worked in the Justice Department and then, of course,

The Senators had Pascual as their star and they had another guy, Pedro Ramos. Anyway, on Williams' first time up he hit a long home run into the centerfield stands off Pasquel. I remember that. That would have been an opening day in Washington, but I can't remember which year.

Do you remember who threw out the opening pitch on the opening game?

No, I don't. No, I can't remember that.

It used to be the President that did that most every year.

I wasn't involved or much interested in politics then. I do remember the home run. I can remember the guy I went with in fact. He was a great guy. He ended up living just outside of Atlanta. He was a lawyer, became a lawyer later. When I went to law school, I went at night, because I went on the GI Bill and I worked full time as an insurance claims adjuster, and the guy I went with worked in the same office. He was a supervisor. His name was Bill Elsey and he eventually ended up in Cartersville, which I think is a suburb of Atlanta, isn't it?

It's going to be pretty soon. It's about 40 miles north of Atlanta.

He ended up there practicing law. He was a great guy.

Of the older ballparks that you went to, what were your favorites?

No, really; I haven't been to that many ballparks. Since I've been in New York, I've gone to Yankee Stadium many times, and to Shea Stadium. I've been to Wrigley Field a few times. Those are the ones principally that I've gone to. I've not been to a majority of the Major League parks. I don't think I've ever seen a game in Atlanta, for example. I have been to Dodger Stadium and to the Padres new stadium and to Candlestick Park. In fact, I was just trying to think off the top of my head. I didn't really have any particular

always seems to me that good baseball and good government both involve teamwork, good teamwork. I'm curious as to which players or managers that you followed seemed to have extra leadership qualities?

Well, I lived in New York for the past 10 years which corresponded with Joe Torre's tenure with the Yankees and I think he handled himself really well both in terms of his leadership with the players and the way he handled them and in terms of his dealings with the press, the public and management. As you know, I have been involved with the current ownership group of the Red Sox which coincides with the time that Terry Francona has been the manager there and I have much the same feeling about the way Francona has handled things.

You mentioned teamwork in baseball and government. Well, I think that's true in most of life, actually, the ability to get along with, work with, and if you are in a leadership position, to inspire, to lead others. Obviously, every aspect of our society has changed and baseball has changed dramatically and the skills that were necessary for a manager when I was a kid growing up in the 30's and 40's, I think are very much different nowadays given all the ways that baseball has been revolutionized, particularly in terms of the relationship between the players and the owners and the management. I think managing a baseball team now takes a high level of personal skill and leadership ability and the ability to understand and deal with a varied group of people. There's much more diversity now. There's obviously a dramatic change with free agency and players moving from team to team, so it takes a whole lot of skill and the ones that I've most closely observed are the ones I mentioned who I think are outstanding at what they do.

Now, if you compare your life in law and in government to baseball, what position would you play or would you say you were more the manager?

(Laughter)

I'm not sure how to answer that. I've been involved with positions where I've had to manage, supervise and direct a lot of people. I was the Senate Majority Leader. Most people think of that as just another Senator, but the Majority

"I think Joe Torre handled himself really well."

went back years later, but I can remember going to an opening day game and I remember Williams was older then and there had been some talk in spring training that he'd lost his power. I remember still that Camilo Pascual was pitching for the Senators. He was a very good pitcher.

favorites except that Wrigley Field is of course a very beautiful place and a great place to watch a ballgame.

Well, I only have a couple of other sort of eclectic questions. I'm steering far away from anything current but I am curious about a couple of things. It

Leader is effectively responsible for the management of the entire institution and the operation with the Speaker of the House of the entire Capitol function. It involves thousands of people and budgets of hundreds of millions of dollars and then, of course, it involves managing an enterprise that deals with the federal budget which is now in the trillions. I was Chairman of the Board of the Walt Disney Company for a period of years and I chaired peace negotiations in Northern Ireland. Just kind of a whole diverse range of activities which lead me to believe that leadership skills in whatever capacity involve gaining the trust and confidence of those that you are attempting to lead and you do that by being open and candid and recognizing that each person is an individual, each individual is unique and you have to try to reach each person and try to figure out what is the best approach with each person. I think the most skillful managers are those who figure out that Player A responds to one set of incentives, Player B maybe to another and that some players may require disincentives. I mean, it's all understanding how people think and act, treating them as individuals and with respect and gaining their respect and trust in return.

Well, I happened to have been at your presentation at the U.S. Open at

Torrey Pines where I got to listen to you speak and I'm not at all surprised with your analysis. You answered a lot of questions that night, and I think you deflected every single question away from yourself and basically talked about your firm or its attorneys or somebody else or some other things. The questions were clearly about you but the answers were never about you. It was a very interesting 45 minute session on leadership that you provided that evening and thoroughly enjoyable I have to say.

Well, thank you. I appreciate that.

I have one other very quick question. Going back to baseball, if you could hit against one pitcher, being the second baseman that you are, what pitcher might it have been?

If I could get a hit?

No, if you could just get to hit against one pitcher. Just stand there and get to look out and somebody would be pitching! Who might it be?

I've always kind of admired Bob Feller. I don't know about him personally. He had a real good fastball, it would be a great accomplishment, but I really haven't thought too much about it. Most of them, I think, I would probably think in terms of not wanting to face them!

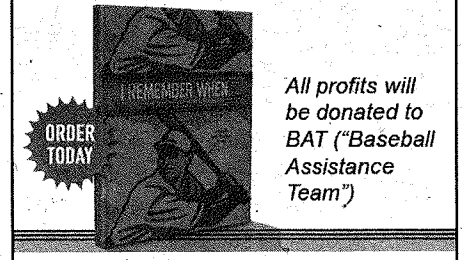
(Laughter)

I batted left handed and the one thing I wouldn't want to do is face Sandy Koufax or someone like that.

I think I would like to get hit by a ball thrown by Sandy Koufax, even if he pitched at his age now, I would be happy to just let him just hit me with the ball. I think that would be great. Well, I'm out of questions. Thank you so much. I've really enjoyed our conversation and I appreciate you allowing me to intrude on your day.

I've enjoyed it as well.

I Remember When is a beautifully designed hardcover coffee table book, including the first 35 Baseball Digests. The book is \$19.95 (plus tax and shipping) and can be purchased at www.irememberwhen.org.



Senator George Mitchell
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