

BASEBALL DIGEST

★★ OPENING DAY EDITION ★★

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By Abe J. Shear
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Few players are more identified with the Atlanta Braves than Phil Niekro and likely no one appreciated being a Major League player more than Knucksie. What an amazing journey from his little hamlet in eastern Ohio to Milwaukee, to Atlanta and beyond.

With grit and determination, Phil had an amazing career, one which deservedly ended with his induction into the Hall of Fame. Known for his amazing knuckle ball, his career combined determination, fortitude, stubbornness and remarkable discipline – all while understanding that he was playing a little boy's game.

Phil's poignant memories will make you laugh (and perhaps cry) and will surely make you understand how, pitching for his family, he was determined to succeed, both individually and with his brother Joe. So too will you be struck by the fact that while growing older he never really grew up. I know that I was.

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Phil Niekro

“Knuckle Balls and Much More”

Abe: Phil you're really generous to do this interview and I appreciate it. Tell me please what are your first memories of baseball?

Phil: Oh, my goodness. Playing in the backyard with my dad and my brother Joe. Hitting the ball and playing catch with my dad and my sister, with my mother sitting up on the steps on the back porch until it got dark.

And your dad, was he a big baseball fan, a baseball player?

He was a coal miner, about 6'2". Hard as a brick house. Worked in the coal mine, a little place called Blaine, Ohio. He played for the team there. I've got stories of him striking out 17, 18, 19 guys a game. Big - threw hard, hard, hard. He was pretty well known in the Ohio Valley and held in high esteem. One day he hurt his arm while he was warming up to pitch and another coal miner showed him how to throw a knuckle ball. By the time I was old enough to start playing catch in the backyard, he was

next morning and go to work and come back and we'd be sitting on the front porch with our gloves and balls and he'd get out of the car and we'd go to the backyard and play until 9:00 or 9:30 again. That's what we did. And then when fishing time came, he took us fishing and planted the garden. Our whole life revolved around the backyard in that little portion of Ohio where I grew up.

Who taught your father to play baseball?

Oh, I have no idea. I guess back in those days, back there in those old coal mines, they didn't play football, they didn't play basketball, they didn't play tennis or golf. Baseball is what you did. They had coal mining teams. I don't know how my dad first got hooked up with it, but evidently he learned pretty quick and he was one of the star pitchers in the whole Ohio Valley.

When he taught you to throw the knuckle ball, was it mostly just to have fun?

“Our whole life revolved around the backyard.”

throwing knuckle balls to me and taught me how to hold it and that's all we did was play knuckle ball. When we got done throwing, he hit with me and my brother and my sister. Then we would go upstairs and my mother would have dinner. We'd all eat and do the dishes and my dad would lay on the floor listening to the Cleveland Indians. He'd get up at 4:00 or 5:00 the

I didn't know what it was. I didn't know a curve ball from a fastball or anything. We just played in the backyard. Once he threw something at me and it kind of moved around. I asked him what that was and he told me and he showed me how to hold it. Of course, I didn't do it right away, but as the months went by and the weeks, months and years, that's all we did

was play knuckle ball in the backyard and see who had the best knuckle ball. I never played Little League or anything like that. By the time it got to my town, I was one year too old so I couldn't play.

I grew up with a real good friend named John Havlicek who played with the Celtics. I guess he was a better athlete. We'd get a bat, he'd pick somebody and I'd pick somebody and we'd go to somebody's yard and play baseball. And then when I went to high school, I went out for the high school team and I made the team throwing a knuckle ball.

You threw knuckle balls in high school?

All four years, and then played for the American Legion team and any other team around there that I could play for. I played four or five games a week. I played for this coal mining team my dad played for. I might have played four games on the weekdays and then on Sunday I'd play for another coal mining team up the road. I was constantly playing baseball in the summer with maybe three or four different teams.

Were you able to find people that could catch the knuckle ball?

That wasn't even a worry of mine.

For many years, I played in the senior baseball league and a couple of times we had pretty good knuckle ball pitchers. Knuckle balls can be caught if you just let the ball come to you. The ball has to come to the catcher.

That's right. In those days, I didn't have the knuckle ball that I had as I grew older. I got stronger and bigger. I didn't know there were knuckle ball pitchers in the big leagues. I didn't know there was a knuckle ball pitcher ever, other than my

that I knew of who threw the pitch. It was something that I could do.

Tell me about hitting in high school. Who taught you how to hit?

Usually in high school, when I wasn't pitching, I was playing second base, third base or first base. I don't know, I guess probably from being in that backyard playing pepper. I just learned to hit. Hitting was not really as important to me as pitching. I'd get out there and just swing. That was the biggest thing in my mind. When I got the bat in my hand, I figured I was a hitter.

“When it got dark, you kind of sat in the house and counted tomatoes.”

And I'm guessing you and Joe were real competitive?

I was a few years older than Joe so we had different friends. As long as I can remember, I can never remember having a fight. He never swore at me, of course, not in our family. We were just the best of friends.

What about Havlicek? He played on the baseball team I'm sure. What position did you play?

He played whatever position he wanted. He was drafted by the White Sox. Havlicek played college football and basketball. He was the best basketball player probably in the state. I was one year older than John. I wanted to be able to play basketball like John or kick a football like John. I wanted to play baseball like John. The only thing I knew I could do better than John was fish and I could kill more squirrels and rabbits than he did.

“I'd get out there and just swing.”

dad. That's how I could get guys out in my hometown.

Was being a knuckle ball pitcher a disadvantage to signing a pro contract? Were they looking for fastball pitchers?

There weren't as many scouts around as there are now. I was in my senior year in high school and then I started realizing that the scouts were around. I don't know what they're looking for. I'm the only one

It's really funny hearing you say that. I grew up in Dayton and I can remember many a night when I watched Ohio State play with Jerry Lucas and Havlicek and Siegfried, Mel Nowell and Bobby Knight. I couldn't wait for them to play. They were bigger than life. Of course, they played against Oscar Robertson. They were amazingly relevant to the community in Ohio in the early 1960's. You lived for that.

I know.

Now, you grew up rooting for the Indians and not the Reds?

Probably the Indians. Cincinnati was so far away, a different country. Pittsburgh is about 70 miles from home. Where I came from, you were either a Pittsburgh fan or a Cleveland fan.

And who were your favorite players growing up – your favorite Major League players growing up?

A guy named Hoot Evers and I don't know why.

Right, right.

My relatives knew a lot of people up in Detroit, so we'd go up there once a year. When Evers came up the whole place went nuts and yelled “Hoot, Hoot, Hoot”.

Who were your favorite players for the Indians?

You had Feller and you had Al Rosen and Bobby Avila, Early Wynn, Larry Doby. Never saw them, never met them. Every night I'd hear the games on the radio.

Did you watch the games?

Listened. Havlicek had a television.

Would you take the radio with you if you were going fishing?

We didn't have transistor radios, my family didn't. There's one that I have, it's in the house now, a Zenith that my dad used to listen to. I'd lay on the couch and listen. There weren't too many games on television.

Would you listen to the games with your whole family? You and Joe, your sister and your mom and dad?

I remember my dad 'cause he was the one who turned on the television every night. There wasn't a whole lot to do where I lived. When it got dark, you kind of sat in the house and counted tomatoes or pickles or something and put the radio on at 8:00 at night. There wasn't any homework in the summer.

What did you think of the Indians park, a really big park?

“Mistake on the lake.” That's what they called it.

I never heard that. It was really big. It had no personality and it was cold. It

was huge.

I can remember starting the summer there in '86. I looked at the lake and it was frozen. The whole lake was frozen. It was cold and snowing.

Did you follow the statistics of players?

No.

Did you know who was in the Hall of Fame?

No. I didn't know there was a Hall of Fame.

Did you collect baseball cards when you were a youngster?

Not really. They cost money too much money and my family didn't have money to spare.

What was it like to see your face on a baseball card?

My dad got one of those baseball cards with his boys on the card in my hometown, that area right there.

I've got all of your Topps cards at home, every single one of them. You signed with the Braves in 1958. They then won the World Series. You must have felt like you'd made a pretty good decision?

I really didn't know too much about the Milwaukee Braves even when I was a senior in high school. I knew a couple of names - Hank Aaron, Eddie Matthews. The only time we saw them was when the World Series started. I remember in the school library, they would show some of the games, Yankees and Braves - Mel Allen and all those people. And if you were good and it was quiet while you were in the study hall, they let you watch the game - the black and white television version. I can't remember sitting down in anyone's house and watching the World Series. People didn't have televisions.

How did you decide to sign up with the Braves?

I went to try out camp. There was an article in the paper that the Milwaukee Braves would have a try out camp in Wheeling, West Virginia. It was about 8 miles from my house. So I got my glove and told my dad I was going. I hitched a ride to the camp and when I got down there I'd never seen so many young guys in my life. Where the hell did they come from? I knew some guys that I played with down there. When it was over and I was leaving, Bill Maughn, who was scouting

the Braves, he walked up to me and said, "What's your name, where do you live and what's your phone number?" And I gave it to him and I walked away and I hitched a ride home. By the time I got home, my dad told me he was coming out tonight to talk. It started to make a little sense. For two, three years of high school I was a pretty good athlete. My name was bouncing around there and everything. My mother hurried up and fixed up a Polish dinner, sausage and sauerkraut. He came out and after it was all over, me and my brother and my sister, mother and father and my coach for the baseball team were there. He said the Milwaukee Braves are interested in signing me to a professional contract. My dad looked at me and I looked at him and he said, "Oh, man, this is big". This guy looked at my dad and he said, "How does \$500.00 sound to you?" And my dad, his eyes lit up and he said, "\$500.00 bucks! Okay, we'll sign it". So, I signed it. It was a contract for the Class C League, with \$275.00 a month and the guy wrote a check for \$500.00 to my dad. There was a guy that had a sporting goods store and he gave me a brand new glove, a Hutch glove, I remember that, and I had a new pair of shoes and the next year I got on a train in Wheeling, West Virginia, and went to Waycross, Georgia, in the snake pit down there, down in the swamps. There were about 300 kids down there from all over the country and they also had ten, eleven, twelve minor league teams, so I just . . . went for it.

You got off the train and there you were and you knew nobody.

Well, they picked me up and took me to the camp.

But, you knew nobody?

No one. Actually, it was the first time I was away from home. And they had these barracks. We didn't live in a hotel. We had tepees that would sleep our teams. It was like an army thing with the beds everywhere. And the manager had a little room up in the front and I was assigned to a certain tepee and it had a big old chow line and everybody after practice would go in the chow line. And I stayed there for, I don't know, until it was time to break camp. I made the team in Roswell, New York, a D League team, which was the lowest league at that time. So, we all got on a school bus, without air conditioning,

I guess about 24 or 25 of us on this school bus in Waycross and went there to Roswell, New York. I don't know how long it took us to get there, straight through, and when I got up there, that was basically the start of my baseball career.

What was your favorite minor league city that you played in?

I played in the minor leagues for a few years. It really didn't matter to me where I was playing. I was kind of on my way to being a big league player, so towns didn't matter to me. My feeling when I started was I don't know how I'm going to do it or if I can do it, but I'm going to get in the big leagues. So, I guess they're going to take my picture with a big league uniform on, they're going to put it in the local paper and everybody back in the valley is going to know that I'm in the big leagues. A Milwaukee hat on and a uniform. That was my goal. At least I could say that I played in the big leagues one time.

And what was it like to go to spring training with the big league team the first time?

Well, we had Spahn and Matthews and Aaron and Logan and all those guys. It was just like . . . I guess they think you're a pretty good player or you wouldn't be here. They were the greatest ballplayers in the world, and they knew everything there was to know about the game of baseball. Here, I'm coming from Lansing, Ohio with about 800 people and a player in the minor leagues, and now I'm standing and walking next to these guys? What am I doing there? You know, these things are not supposed to happen. I went to work. All these big players come from Chicago and New York and L.A. and all of the big cities. And everybody knows where those places are. Nobody knows where Lansing, Ohio is. Nobody knows what coal mining is. I thought I was kind of different because not many people know where Lansing, Ohio is unless you're from Mutton Hill or Tinkle Town, those little towns right there. Nobody knows where Lansing, Ohio is. How am I going to make it?

You sure were allowed to be a bigger character then than today. I mean, you mentioned Matthews and Logan and Spahn. Those guys had a lot of personality.

A lot of personality.

You could fill five books with Eddie Matthews stories.

Yeah.

But we'll not do that. I do have just a few Major League questions. I know you hit seven home runs. I know you don't talk about it much, but what was the most memorable home run you hit in the Majors?

Oh, it was San Diego. We went on a West Coast trip, three games with San Francisco and then three games in San Diego. I remember pitching the opening day in San Francisco. I can't remember where we were, but we were two or three games out of first place with the Dodgers and I shut the Giants out, and I think we won the next two games. Now, we're going into San Diego. They were about 30 games out. I mean, they were way out. That was in '82. We've got a chance to get the race but we have to win all three games. I was pitching on a Friday night. We're all around the batting cage right there and their players just kept telling us that they didn't like the Dodgers. "We will try to kick your ass, but we would rather see you guys win than them win." And then the game started and I'm sure there weren't many fans, but this was maybe one of the bigger games I had pitched in my career and I'm shutting them out. Top of the 7th, two outs and Glenn Hubbard on second. One or two more runs wouldn't hurt. Eric

that game 3-0. A blind man could probably hit it and I just got lucky.

Well, you got lucky six other times. I know you also had one triple.

Yes.

Do you remember your triple?

The outfielders had to run into each other or something. No, I think it was in Atlanta and I hit the left field line and the left fielder went to get it, the center fielder stayed there and I think it just kicked around and rolled into left center field.

That's funny.

Yes.

And I looked up your statistics and they said you were caught stealing one time. Do you remember that?

No. But I did steal a base.

I didn't know that.

I stole lots of signs and I did steal one base in the American League.

You did? How did you get on base in the American League?

There is one thing I had never done in baseball. I had singles, doubles, a triple, hit home runs, but I had never stolen a base. Well, I get to Cleveland, it was the end of my two years, it was the end of my contract, and I thought, I don't know if I'm going to get signed after this. I've never stolen a base in my life. I wondered how I could steal one and I told Pat Corrales, the manager, what I wanted to do. First, I told Brook Jacoby. Look here, I got a plan.

then he looked to second base and I'm halfway between, three quarters of the way to second.

And the pitcher still has the ball?

Yeah.

(Laughter)

And I'm about to slide head first and I remember it was muddy and I didn't go very far and I reached out and I touched second base and the shortstop got the ball down and the umpire said, "You're safe" and said "You're damn right I'm safe. I'm the pinch runner!" and I picked the bag up at second base and I ran off the field with it.

In the middle of the game?

Yeah, in the 7th. I knew I was going to get thrown out of the game. I knew that.

You couldn't have cared less?

No, no, but I was going to steal a base and, of course, the umpire threw me out of the game. I stole the bag and I just took it and went in the clubhouse and threw it in my locker.

Do you still have the bag?

At home, yeah, and I got the picture with the mask on carrying second base off the field.

How many times did you get thrown out of the game?

That one time. It was worth it. I stole the base.

That's a great story. What is it about baseball you think that you just find to be most appealing?

When the batter, he's got that bat in his hand, and he's looking at me and I've got the ball in my hand and I'm getting paid to get him out and he's getting paid to hit and I'm looking at the catcher and he puts down the knuckle ball sign, that's the biggest thrill for me in my life. But even before all that, it's walking into the Braves' clubhouse, or the Yankees', or Cleveland's. It's walking in there and putting on a Major League uniform. Watching Hank Aaron, and Spahn and Matthews and Dale Murphy put on sanitary socks, their shirts and hats. The spikes and take your glove and walk out to take batting practice. There's a hell of a lot of guys that would like to be doing this right now. A lot of guys would like to play in the big leagues one day, have one at bat, throw one pitch to a guy in the big leagues and here I've got, you know, 18 or 20 years or whatever I did, I'm saying, "Man, I'm pretty blessed

"I stole lots of signs and I did steal one base in the American League."

Show, who had a really good slider, was pitching. Pitchers don't hit those. I walk up to the plate and the first pitch he threw me was belt high right down the middle of the plate and it caught me by surprise. Well, I thought a slider was coming and I looked at him and he looked at me like "Can't hit that one, try the next one". So, I opened my left foot up a little bit. If he throws a fast ball, I'm going to really try to hit it hard and he threw it the same place, just a little bit more inside and I was looking for it. It was like, "Here Niekro, if you can't hit that one, try it again". And then I hit the ball into the left field stands for a home run. We wound up winning

Here's my idea. He said, "What?" I told him if he happened to walk or something, as soon as he gets to first base, I'm coming out of the dugout. He walked and I ran onto the field. I had this mask on, a mask made with a black napkin. I looked like the Lone Ranger. And as soon as he gets to first base, I was there. I told Pat I was going to do this.

What was the score? Do you remember?

Oh, we were getting blown out. We were out of it, basically. We were playing against Seattle, I think, Ken Langston. When he got the ball, I just took off to second. Langston wasn't looking... And

to be able to do this”.

You loved every minute of it, didn't you?

Oh yeah. I'm representing the Atlanta Braves. I'm representing the New York Yankees and I'm representing this town. I've got this hat, this shirt. I'm pretty fortunate to be able to do that, because I've always said to myself, when I walk down the street and tell 100 guys what I do, pitch for the big leagues like the Braves or the New York Yankees, that they'd change jobs with me. But if these 100 guys walk down the street and ask me the same question, I would say, "Nope, I'm sorry". And I never was hurt. I always stayed pretty healthy and then I've seen so many young kids come to the ball park in wheelchairs and crutches. They would like to. I know they want to play, but here I am, so I don't want to take this

she said, "Well, bring your black suits". That's basically what it was. So, I told Steinbrenner what the situation was and we got on a plane in Newark through to Pittsburgh, rented a car and drove down to Wheeling, West Virginia, which is about an hour's drive and he was laying in the hospital and I walked in the room there and I didn't recognize him. He was big and strong and he was down to, I don't know, 130 pounds and tubes everywhere. We just lived in the room for four days and we just really were debating what to do, whether I should go back and pitch, looking at my dad laying in the hospital, and I don't know why Joe said, but he says, "You know, I've heard that when people get in that situation, they can hear you, but they can't reply. And I said, "I hope he hasn't heard everything that I said in the past four days though." So, Joe looked

"Man, I'm pretty blessed to be able to do this."

for granted.

I know the answer to this but how many knuckle balls did you throw in the game for your 300th win?

Honestly, only one.

My dad was my biggest fan. I mean, I adored my dad, as probably most athletes do, because he was my inspiration there and I guess I was maybe pitching in his shoes because they said if he hadn't hurt his arm, he would have played in the big leagues. It was me, my face, but inside it was really my dad out there pitching. So, I'm with the Yankees and I've got 299 wins and me and Joe are roommates and I win my 299th game, get in the car back to the Loew's Hotel in Teaneck, New Jersey. About 10:30, the phone rings. I pick it up and it's my mother. She starts talking and she can't talk, she starts crying, but my dad was sick, really ill before that, and a lady gets on and says, "This is Teresa" (a nurse who lives across the street from my parents who is taking care of my dad). She says, "I'm here with your mother and Monsignor is here. A couple of nuns are here and your dad just got his last rites. Could you come home now?" And I said, "Well, we can't come there right now, but I will come in the morning" And

at my dad and he walked over to dad and Joe said, "Dad, if you could hear me, blink your eyes" and my dad blinked his eyes. My dad's laying in the bed and Joe said, "Do you want to write something?" Then he looked at my dad and he says, "Dad, if you're gonna write something, can you blink your eyes? My dad blinked his eyes. We find a piece of paper, a little hospital paper and I found a pencil and took that little pad and put it in his left hand because the pencil was in his right hand and he moved his hand a little bit. Finally the pencil fell out of his hand. He wrote two words, WIN HAPPY and I said, "Okay, Dad, I know what you want me to do, so I gotta go now I got a ball game to pitch." I hadn't pitched in four days.

We get to New York and Joe said, "You're going to get your rub downs, and I'll take care of press." I went in there and I don't know how many times I read that note. Well, I'm going to the bullpen, walking out to the bull pen first and I'm throwing maybe five pitches, and the game starts. Anyways, we played the game and I lose. The next day, we got on a plane and went to the hospital and walk in. He hasn't changed a bit. A few days later, I said, "Dad, I gotta go and win my

game", but we got beat again. I was in New York or some place. My fourth start, we got beat again. I just lost four in a row. My dad's waiting for me to win that game. I can't go back. I got to do something.

Now, we go to Toronto's ballpark on Sunday. We win Friday night we're two games out. We get beat Saturday and now, this is maybe my last game I would pitch, at the end of my Yankee contract. I don't think anybody's gonna sign a 46-year-old pitcher. And if they do, I'm gonna have to wait until next spring and then I gotta go through spring and hopefully I make the ball club. So, actually, we stayed up all night until it got daybreak, spent the night having iced tea, but we were figuring it out. We talked about the whole situation. It's daylight and I said, "I've got to get a couple of hours sleep". We go to bed, get up, and the bus leaves for the park. We go out to the ball park, the game starts and I told Joe the night before, I said, "If I win my 300th game, you're gonna come in face one batter." When they look in the book, you and I will be together. We shook hands. We're gonna do it. The game's going on, not knowing the fact that Steinbrenner had installed a relay system, for my parents, and my mother was listening to the game on the radio on the phone at the hospital bed. She is reporting to my dad every pitch, every home run, every out. She's the play by play announcer for my dad. So, I come to the ninth inning, and we are way ahead. About the fourth inning of that game, Willie Randolph is playing second base and says to me that I haven't thrown one knuckle ball. I said, "I don't need to!

You can't pitch a game without that.

So, we go back and as the game's going, we get more runs and I'm making up pitches. I'm just making them up and I'm winning. So, I ain't gonna change it. It is the ninth inning and we are winning 9-0, and Joe's gonna get in this inning. I looked in the bullpen and Billy Martin had every pitcher left down there warming up. Every pitcher is warming up with a nine run lead in the last inning. He's laughing, it's a joke. So, I get two outs, there's a man on second and Billy calls time out. Here comes Joe out of the dugout and I said, "Why is he coming out here?" So, I take my glove off and I said "Here. Could you hold a nine run lead with two outs?" He

said, "No, I'm not gonna do that." I said "We talked about it. We shook hands" He said "You are going to pitch to this batter cause we just heard that if you pitch a shut out, you'll be the oldest guy in the history of baseball to throw a shut out." I said "You're kidding me?" and Joe said, "No." Then he walked back to the dugout. I told myself "I've got a chance to do something here". Now, I've got Jeff Burroughs at the plate and while we were talking, we look at Burroughs and he is going "Now, pitch to me." We had been teammates.

Right.

So, I threw him the fast ball or something. I don't know. He pops it up and I got two strikes on him. Got him 0-2 and the catcher, Butch Wynegar, calls time out walks to the mound.

He comes out and tells me to throw a knuckle ball. I can't think of a better way to end the game and all the players know what is going on with my dad. So, he gets back there and calls the pitch, and it is about a foot outside and Burroughs swings and misses. Everybody comes up to me. Joe's running out to me. He's the first guy out there and he gives me a hug and he said, "I have something to tell you about Dad." We walk off the mound and

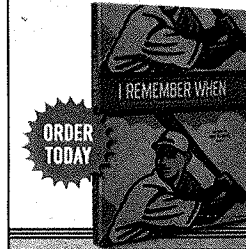
we are sitting in the dugout by ourselves and he told me about the relay phone message. I'm waiting for the worst, and he told me about Mom reporting to him and Dad woke up and said, "Look at my son. He's pitching a great game!"

After the game we flew back to New York, we got a flight to Pittsburgh and he's still in intensive care, he's laying in the hospital bed by himself smiling from ear to ear and I couldn't believe it. I took the Yankee hat off, and gave him the ball. "Dad, this ball is yours as much as mine." The doctor comes in and said, "You guys really amaze me. He's been up all night waiting for you guys." Then we left and he was in the hospital a couple of more days and then he was home.

He could say that two of his boys made the majors. Then, as you know we wound up with the most wins of any brothers.

Sure. Well, that's a great place to end. That is a one of a kind story and my face hurts from smiling so much. I love your stories. You're a great ambassador of the game.

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.



All profits will be donated to BAT ("Baseball Assistance Team")

Phil Niekro
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and Much More"

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