

BASEBALL DIGEST



OPENING DAY EDITION



A Special Publication of Arnall Golden Gregory LLP

By Abe J. Schear
March 2020

* * *

I was walking through the lobby of our office and there was my former partner, Pete Wellborn, who motioned me to join the conversation he was having with Bill Curry. In fact, I recognized Bill immediately and there I was listening to his stories.

This is the 80th interview (plus a couple which I did for family remembrances). None came about any smoother nor was easier to edit. Bill has clear memories and talks in perfect paragraphs. And he is enthusiastic about each chapter of his life. How wonderful.

I made sure to stay on the baseball course but sometimes, and this was one of those times, there was more to talk about. Memories of Bobby Dodd, Vince Lombardi, Bart Starr (I made sure to give Bill a beautiful Bart Starr football card), coaching Georgia Tech and Alabama.

I asked Bill for 30 minutes and ended up with 37 perfect interview minutes which made for two extra pages of beautiful memories. Bill reminded me that humility and self effacing humor are valuable qualities, that taking yourself too seriously is dangerous and that being a gentleman is hardly under rated. If you have the chance to see Bill in person, take the time to lean in and listen to what he has to say.

* * *

Abe J. Schear is an attorney with Arnall Golden Gregory LLP and is a member of the firm's Real Estate Group. Contact Abe at 404.873.8752 or Abe.Schear@agg.com.

Bill Curry "Super Career"

So here we are. I am with Billy Curry and it is December 17, 2019. It is a pleasure to be here. I know you were born in College Park. What was it like to be in College Park in the 50's?

Well, I was actually born at Emory and it was during the war in 1942 and beds for the children were so scarce that the family tradition has it that I was put in

into the south?

Well, yeah, New York. It brought the mystic of the Yankees and I imagine what it might have been like to grow up in Greece, in the heyday of the Gods, and to think about Zeus and the assorted other Gods that lived on the mountains and fired thunder bolts. That's how it felt. Within a year or two, not only was

"We would play long, long baseball games."

a chest of drawers in the room with my 20 year old mom. But, we did live in College Park and it was that southern childhood that seemed idyllic to us, because we did not know that we were living in the middle of Jim Crowe, anti-semitism and anti-Catholic. We did not understand that until much later. But it was nice, it was fun for the most part. I had some very difficult things in my family, as most of us do. But it was a simple time to grow up.

What are your first memories of baseball?

(Laughing). We had this weird contraption at our house and it had little rabbit ear antennae and sometimes you had to put tin foil to make them work. It was a black and white, sort of motley screen. I mean this literally was my first memory of turning on that television to see Yogi Berra behind the plate with Whitey Ford on the mound in the World Series. I was transfixed, I was locked in. I was hooked really forever.

It pretty much brought the big cities

I watching baseball every time I could, I was playing baseball all day every day at the little park in our community. Sometimes it would just be two of us and we would play long, long baseball games.

Did your family teach you to play baseball?

My family was not interested in baseball until I became a little leaguer at age 10. I went over to the little league try-outs and I am not a natural athlete at anything. I need thousands of reps. The good news is I am willing to do the reps. I will do anything if I get to play. And, I will never forget being there with the manager. Somehow I got allocated to the Braves in the College Park Little League and I remember running after him and grabbing him. I reached up and grabbed his jeans and yanked and said "Mr. Parrot did I make the team?" He was walking away from me as fast as he could and he said, and he was kind, "Bill, no you are going onto the farm team." Then he gathered all the boys and sat on

the bank. I wasn't supposed to go sit in that group. I had already been told, but I did. I sat where I could get eye contact with him, with big tears streaming down

Oh sure, yeah. My dad and my uncle would take me.

They had streetcars that came to the park.

“It was the greatest day of my life.”

my cheeks just leaning into him. I will never forget the last name he called. He said “Bill Curry.” I got my first uniform that day. It was grey with a blue hat and blue socks. It was the greatest day of my life.

What position did you play?

Mostly on the bench. My second year I got to play the right field. This is where they always put the worst player in little league. I was 0 for the season. I struck out every single time I went to bat except once. I got a bunt down and got thrown out at 1st. I was so happy I had put a ball in fair territory. Small things you have to do when you are trying to fight your way into a lineup.

Did your family come and watch all those games.

Mom and Daddy came most of the time. They did not care about baseball, but they cared a lot about me. By the time I was 12 years old, a couple of really wonderful managers had said, you know what, you can throw the ball and they had taught me to pitch and so I became an all-star pitcher in the College Park Little League, which was by far the highlight of my life.

So, when you were little, 10 or 12, did you root for baseball teams or did you root for the Atlanta Crackers? Did you follow the Yankees and teams in major league baseball?

I followed the Yankees and, of course, we all pulled for the Crackers, we did not know what the name Crackers really stood for; but we loved them and we could go to Ponce de Leon Ballpark and actually watch Bob Montag hit the ball over the railroad track. And we could watch as people would drive the ball to dead center. There was a magnolia tree that set on a little rise in dead center and Country Brown would run up under the magnolia and Willie Mays would catch the ball when somebody hit it 410 feet. Again it was like seeing the Gods at Mt. Olympus.

And you would drive to the ballpark?

We went on a car but my dad rode the trolleys to Rich's Department Store. He was a coach at Georgia Military Academy (now Woodward) until I was 9 years old.

Right.

If you go to Woodward Academy today, to the weight room today, it is the Major Bill Curry weight room because my father built it.

I see.

He went to work for Mr. Dick Rich and he fell in love with the Rich family and they loved us and my dad had 23

“I bought them, ruined my teeth with Topps bubble gum.”

wonderful years. He was a sporting goods buyer at Rich's Department Store. You could get downtown on the trolley and maybe go from there to Ponce de Leon.

On the street car.

Yes.

Did you listen to the games on the radio?

No. For some reason radio didn't do it for me. I would list to music all the time. My family was not sophisticated in musical matters, but we had a great church choir. So, I was a boy soprano and I learned to love Mozart and Bach and those people. I still do. So, if we turned on anything it was those 78 records and we listened to music. We did not listen to sporting events, but we did watch Dizzy Dean and Pee Wee Reese on Saturday on TV. It was weekly baseball.

Did you read about baseball in magazines and newspapers?

I read everything I could get my hands on. My best friend was named Ronnie Jackson. We decided very quickly that he was going to hate the Yankees and I was going to love the Yankees and he was going to love the Milwaukee Braves.

We had everybody's baseball cards so if it was not raining, we would be playing. We would be up at the park. I would be the Yankees and he would be the Braves and if we could get a couple of snott-noses to join us, then we would have three or four per team. As little guys, we would choose up and we would play all day. The score would be 127 to 114.

You collected baseball cards? You bought them and you played with them?

I bought them, ruined my teeth with Topps bubble gum and played with those cards. Jackson, my buddy, invented a game we could do with dice; if you threw a 4 that would be a homerun unless he threw an odd number which meant somebody caught it at the fence and we would play inside or outside all day every day. It was just a wonderful time.

You would use the cards on your bikes and all that so they would make noise?

No, that would destroy the cards...we would use other kinds of cardboard on the bikes.

So you went to see the Crackers.

What was the first major league game you went to see?

The first major league game I ever saw was at Wrigley Field and it was the Chicago Cubs. I went to Chicago, to Evanston, Illinois, to play in the college all-star game in that other sport. It turns out the we got to the state finals my junior year in high school in baseball and I was the starting pitcher and we got beat by Rossville and when I couldn't throw strikes against Rossville High, I figured I might have a problem with the Dodgers later or the Braves so I started focusing on football and thank God for Bobby Dodd at Georgia Tech who took me in and taught me everything. I owe everything to Dodd and Georgia Tech. When I went to play in the college all-star game, several of us bought tickets and went to Wrigley Field and got to see Ernie Banks play baseball and that was a great thrill.

Ernie Banks put a smile on

everybody's face. He loved baseball. When you played baseball in high school and when you were recruited to go to Georgia Tech, how big were you then?

No. I never thought it would be fun to be a manager. I'm not sure why. We got a kick out of Casey Stengel and all of his antics and some of his great stories like Don Larsen and the perfect game. He

"I remember being crushed because they took Ernie out."

I was about 190 pounds, 6 ft. 2, I was the offensive center and the middle linebacker. Everybody had to play both ways in those days and I was big enough in that day and time.

So you were at Wrigley Field. Do you remember where you sat? What are your favorite seats?

I think we sat behind the catcher, but I can't swear to that. I remember being crushed because they took Ernie out and put Donny Kessinger in at shortstop. Why did they take Ernie out?

So who were your favorite players when you watched the Yankees and the other teams?

I loved them all. Of course we loved Yogi and my high school manager wouldn't let me catch because I was the second best pitcher on our team. Tommy Fields was our star and gosh was he good. I would have probably done real well as a catcher, but coach Harris would not let me. We had a couple of great catchers so I pitched most of the time and I played wherever we needed to play the rest of time. I played shortstop, first base, sometimes in the outfield.

You clearly learned to hit.

Just barely well enough to hit sixth (laughter), I never became a real good hitter and certainly wasn't a great pitcher. I could win in high school. I had a good enough team. We could win with me pitching in high school and we got to the state finals with one great pitcher and a semi decent pitcher. We couldn't win it all because he had to pitch the earlier game that day but baseball became an all-consuming passion. If I had my choice it wouldn't been close, I would have chosen baseball.

Did you ever look-up after the career you had in football which, we will talk about in a little bit, and say it would have really been fun to coach or manage a baseball team?

wasn't expecting to pitch that day. I'm sure you know the story. He goes to the ballpark hungover, still half drunk and Casey put the ball in his shoe which is how he found he was going to pitch. I loved all that stuff. But it never made me want to be the manager, I just wanted to play. I could have played baseball all day every day.

Did you think that maybe you could play at Georgia Tech?

Until it came down to spring football practice and I was informed that I was going to spring football practice (laughter).

Tell me, I will drop back into a little more baseball, but how did you come to the attention of Coach Dodd and what was it like to go to Georgia Tech?

I was a reluctant football player. I was out there because that was what all my buddies were doing. If I could play football, I could get a date...in high school. I wanted to be one of the guys and I'll never forget how much I hated it. I hated the locker room, I hated the smell. The CDC could have done studies of the cultures that were growing in that awful room, no air conditioning. I mean the heat the discomfort and then you put this nasty sweating stuff on your body and you go out on the field and if I could stand 60 ft. and 6 inches from you and throw something at you, why would I want to run into you and injure my little puffy, chubby body. I was chubby, slow and got the daylights knocked out of me every day and I started thinking why am I here? Screaming, profanity, whistles blowing and no water. If you thought about water that was a sin. The concussion matter, why everyday was what we called "blind stagger". "Curry's got blind stagger, hit him again." That was the culture. I just thought I'm gonna do what I always do, when it gets hard I'm gonna quit but I had a problem with

the quitting thing because my father lived at our house and you didn't quit anything. Now he worked at Rich's Department Store and there was a culture of you treat everybody wonderfully but you don't back down and you don't quit on the principles, you don't quit on your teammates or the people that you work with and my dad didn't make me go out but I was not going to let down my buddies. That was the greatest lesson that football taught me early, that I was stuck, so I decided that I might as well go ahead and try.

I want to pick-up another baseball question. So when you went to the stadium to see the Crackers play, I know we talked about the magnolia tree which is still there. And Sears was across the street. What was the whole environment like going to the Crackers as a 10 year old boy?

It was magic. It was people playing baseball and getting paid to do it. Oh my gosh, there is Frank Torre, Joe's big brother and then there's Joe Torre. I didn't know he was going to be "Joe Torre" later. There are Junior Wooten and Frank Di Prima. It was magic. I couldn't get enough of it. It was wonderful. I went to one clinic the Crackers had for the kids. I had thought when my dad took over the sporting goods department at Rich's that I was going to get a lot of free stuff, but he made me buy whatever I wanted. I had a \$12 glove which was a fortune and I had saved up my paper route money to get that glove and it got stolen at the Crackers' clinic and to this day I have this ache (laughter).

I have a pile of old gloves at home. I have some that look like they are 100 years old.

Don't you just love them (laughter)?

So you went to Georgia Tech as a reluctant football player and Bobby Dodd was there. He must have been a pretty good coach and pretty good analyst of what people do and you got to play for Bobby Dodd. He had to have thought something of you because you played there. How did he convince you that you were a good football player? I guess you didn't try to convince him that you were a good football player based on what you've said.

I was just really immature. I was 17 years old when I went to college and he said basically two things to us in the first meeting every year. “Young men if you are not a good football player that’s not your fault; it’s my fault because I invited you here. I think everybody in this room is good enough to play, but we are not going to run you off if you happen to not be a good enough player. We are going to love you and keep you here and you are going to go to every single class and you are going to graduate from the Georgia Institute of Technology”. I’m quoting him now. He said he was an All American quarterback at Tennessee with a record of 27 wins and 1 loss and a second quarter sophomore at the University of Tennessee and 53 years old. That is not going to happen to us. You are not going to help us be winners here and not get the reward of this diploma because it will be the greatest thing that ever happen to you. This is the second thing I want you to know. You can remove yourself from our team and our school by cutting class and not behaving yourself, so that is your decision. I pray you will go with our rules and go to every single class and sit on the front row, take notes, and you will find a part of yourself you didn’t know was there. That was exactly what happened to me. It was also fortified because I did cut one class, chemistry, my freshman year and I thought how can they catch me, there are a hundred kids in the class. The next day my name was on the bulletin board. Bill Curry report to Grant Field 5:30 am Wednesday morning in your running gear. I ran those stadium steps until I was gagging and sobbing and decided after the 50th up and down those stadium steps, that chemistry at 8:00 in the morning was a wonderful thing. I never cut another class because my football coach loved me too much to allow me to self-destruct.

Did you play center at Tech?

Yes, center and linebacker, by then I was probably 200-205 and by the time I finished I was 220-225 something like that.

You were playing two ways?

Everybody had to play both ways.

In college?

Yes, because the substitution rules were

such that you couldn’t swap after every change of every possession. You could only swap once every 7 to 8 minutes in a game. Every player literally had to be able to play a position on the other side of the ball.

How many assistant coaches did you have back then?

We had a lot of assistants and one in particular saved the day for me because I did not start a game at Georgia Tech until the 4th game of my 4th year. I was very slow maturing; same as before. The first thing that blew my mind, I was going to see a friend at Georgia Baptist Hospital, I don’t even remember who it was, and they had a newspaper. Whoever it was said I had to see this paper, it was during spring practice and it was a headline “Dodd said Curry can be great”. I thought, I better get going if that’s what coach thinks. He had a lot to do with it and there was one notable assistant, John Robert Bell, who was of great encouragement.

So I know I usually talk baseball but there are too many things that interest me about what you did. So you were drafted in 20th round. Did you think you were going to get drafted? Was that a surprise?

“I ran those stadium steps until I was gagging and sobbing.”

I didn’t know they had a draft. I didn’t know there was a draft. Not only did I not expect to be drafted, I didn’t know they drafted people. My brother-in-law called me early one morning and said “Hello Green Bay Packer”. Now I was a junior in the fourth year (Note: Georgia Tech did co-op programs) at that time, one could be drafted in their fourth year, and almost everybody stayed and played their fifth year which I did, and I needed to. But my brother-in-law called and I think I hung-up on him because he’s always messing with me and he called back and said I’d better get a newspaper, the Green Bay Packers had drafted me in the 20th round. I never got a letter from the Green Bay Packers and Lombardi had turned to his personnel man, Pat Peppler, who loved to tell this story publically. He had said something like

“Look, its 2:00 in the morning, we’ve drafted 19 players, I’m exhausted, I’m going to bed, do something humorous with the 20th selection”. So they did and that’s how I ended up in Green Bay.

Did the Packers ever call you or did you brother-in-law just send you to Green Bay? (Laughter)

We got the newspaper and sure enough it was true. They still didn’t call me until the next season and then as we neared the end of the season I was informed that a guy named Red Cochran who was the backfield coach for the Packers ... great guy...I was told he is going to be at my last game. They were not going to interfere with me...they had promised the college coaches they are not going to get the guy’s head all messed up. But when I finished my last game, then Coach Cochran is going to contact me and would like to see me and Carolyn. So we are at Sanford Stadium and we got beat 7-0 in the rain and mud, a painful loss and I’m coming off the field and there stands Red Cochran in real life ... I was stunned... he said after I showered to walk outside where he would wait to talk with me and Carolyn and he would like to drive us back to Atlanta, take us to dinner. The next morning we had

reservations on Delta airlines to fly to Dallas where the Packers were playing the Cowboys in the Cotton Bowl.... wow ... so what could I say to that... we accepted.

So they signed you for millions of dollars?

Yeah, I didn’t have an agent, I had no idea, I had a good friend that was a sports writer who shall remain nameless and he said to me they are paying more money ...this is before Namath got his big bucks like two weeks later. I was sick but not that I thought of asking for anything like that. My buddy sports writer friend said if I got a \$12,000 salary and a \$12,000 bonus, I would be the highest paid linemen ever as a rookie coming from the south. Sounded like a fortune to us, so Carolyn and I go to the football game, the Packers trounced

the Cowboys. Carolyn sits with Marie Lombardi. Pat Pepler takes me down on the field in the 4th quarter and I'm standing next to Paul Horning and Mr. Lombardi and then I walk off the field into the locker room with Coach Lombardi who turns to me and says "So Bill would you like to play for the Green Bay Packers?" (Laughter) Yes sir... what do you say to that? So I couldn't bring myself to say 12 and 12. They sat me in a room with Pat Pepler and a guy name Tom Miller, wonderful guy.

wasn't afraid to hit him, I wasn't afraid of the physical confrontation; if you had that fear you are gone after 10 minutes of the first day. I was anxious to mix it up with the greatest in the world. I couldn't begin to actually be effective against him or Henry Jordon or the rest of them. So I made a decision, I had to make a decision, do I want to keep hitting this guy or not because if I didn't, I would be sent home, and I could not bear the thought of that. I wanted desperately to fit in, this is already being called the

those guys.

I was going to ask about a couple of things but you already answered them, but the one question I want to ask is about Bart Starr. So it's a close game, let's say it doesn't matter where it is in the season...but you're in a close game and he's in the huddle. Is it fair to say that if he says something in the huddle, everybody just knew that was what they were going to do?

The voice of God...do your job, the play is properly called. I mean ...no plays were sent in from the bench, there were no signals from Coach Lombardi, there were no ear pieces in the helmet. Bart called everything and when he called it, it was executed with great conviction just because he called it.

And nobody ever questioned him?

Never.

I thought you might tell me that. So then I have a couple more questions, I could ask a hundred but I'm going to ask just a couple more. While you were not done with football, but well into your career in football, and I guess you became the President of the NFL Players Association? What was it like, that everybody had the confidence in you to do that? I guess you were the first President of the NFL Players?

No, the first President was John Mackey. When I went from the Green Bay Packers, I was on the expansion list and claimed by New Orleans Saints and immediately traded to the Baltimore Colts. Coach Shula was ahead of his time in special teams and Bobby Dodd had taught all of us to play special teams. I had been trained as a long snapper. Coach Shula called me and

“The first year we won the National Football League Championship.”

Very good cop/bad cop deal and they kept trying to get me to say numbers and finally about midnight I blurted out 12 and 12 and I thought they might throw me out or laugh at me and I'll never forget Tom said "How about 12.5 and 12.5?" I signed that thing so fast and ran back to the room and we wept. Carolyn and I wept cause we thought we were set for life.

So the first year?

greatest team of all time. So I decided that I would hit him with all my might every play, all day, every day until I could play like Ray Nitschke. Now that never happened but what did happen, and it took about 5 years, I became the best player I could be and that's all there is. That's what football forced me to do. At the same time I had never been in the huddle with an African American person. Vince Lombardi not only would

“To try to block Ray Nitschke on the practice field was impossible.”

The first year we won the National Football League Championship. There was no Super Bowl and then..

And then the next year, the first Super Bowl?

The next year was Super Bowl I.

Which you won, you got that little ring on your finger. So the two questions are what was that like and after you had won the Super Bowl, what could you have imagined would be next?

Well first of all what it was like was an odd combination of terror and exhilaration, because to try to block Ray Nitschke on the practice field was impossible. Nobody could block him in the games so I didn't think about that, I just knew I was getting murdered every day and everybody was looking at me strangely. I couldn't block him. He broke my facemask, he broke my nose, knocked me out and all this was legal. I

not tolerate prejudice, he went out of his way to make it clear that if you said one racist word or were judgmental towards anybody in that locker room you were going home. That was a stunning revelation to me and I thought these big old African American guys, when they

“The voice of God...do your job, the play is properly called.”

hear my southern accent, they are going to hurt me and send me home. I didn't know what to do with that. But that's not what they did, they embraced me, they loved me, especially Willie Davis. He took time with me, taught me how to behave and changed the course of my life with that simple lesson. "Love your neighbor as yourself" and I owe it all to

asked if I would play for Baltimore, would I play on all special teams, was I willing to do that? I said Coach Shula, I will walk to Baltimore and I will play anything you want all day, every day, and that's what happened. So I got to be friends with another group of very powerful African Americans, not just great players, but John Mackey still

remains and everybody acknowledges the greatest tight-end of all times. Well he adopted me and maybe he talked to Willie Davis, maybe he didn't, I don't know, but we became very close and his wife still comes to Atlanta and stays with us. We lost John in 2011, God bless him. But he was our greatest President and he was the first and he announced to me and everybody else that I was next and I said no I'm not. I fought him on that, I did not think I deserved it, but it happened. Everything you read about Colin Kaepernick was written about me in 1974 except the flag was not involved. But we were communists, we were no goods, we were going to kill the golden goose ... we were ungrateful ... our average salaries were so high, like \$25,000, something like that and all we were asking for was a little pension help

and a little bit of relaxation from what we called the Rozelle Rule and that's a long discussion. But I was honored to do it.

You did it for how long?

Two years.

So you are still a fan of baseball, your family a fan of baseball?

I'm the only fan in our family that loves baseball. Our son loved it when he was in little league. But I didn't want him to play football and he laughed at me. This is an 11 year old. Oh, you don't want me to play it ... well excuse me dad, what's the sport you're coaching at Georgia Tech. He played all the way. He started 47 games in a row for George Welsh at the University of Virginia as a long snapper (laughter) after I didn't want him to play, but he liked baseball for a while. I'm the only one that when

it is World Series time, I'm allowed to go watch all the games.

If there was something you could change in baseball, if you were the Commissioner of baseball, what would you change to improve the game?

The irritating thing to me is the designated hitter thing. Why not standardize the leagues? Why screw-up the World Series? It ends up having some kind of impact because one team is used to hitting and others not, it seems stupid, artificial.

I made it through all my questions.

This is perfect, this is beyond perfect, this was awesome so I'm going to turn off all the tapes and I know everybody is going to love this just as much as I did. Thank you.

Thank you Abe.

“Super Career”

Bill Curry

*** 80th EDITION ***

BASEBALL DIGEST

Arnall Golden Gregory LLP
171 17th Street NW
Suite 2100
Atlanta, Georgia 30363